

## **A Girl in Black, Part I**

Michael Cacoyannis, Dir. (1956)

*Please note:* In writing our photo-stories, we aim for a fluid, standard Italian, albeit at a high intermediate level. Then we write an English translation – which is naturally at an intermediate level of English – to match it. At times, the English translation retains a little of the Italian syntax, to give students a feel for the Italian language. This translation document is not a literary translation of the photo-story. It is a tool to assist intermediate-level Italian learners understand the text.

For our Italian and English language films, we write the dialogue verbatim. For films in other languages, we are at the mercy of the subtitlers! While transcribing the dialogue from *A Girl in Black*, we noticed that the subtitles sometimes didn't sound quite right. And there were times that the characters' lines were not subtitled at all. So we decided to hire a Greek translator. Our translator not only corrected inaccurate subtitles, she also identified songs and translated lyrics for us, enriching the story for our readers. She also let us know when the formal or informal "you" is used. Sometimes it's obvious, but at other times – you'll see! – the filmmaker has made a subtle choice and we wanted to respect that to be true to his intent.

The images are an important part of the photo-essay. Each paragraph refers to specific images. Even if you don't understand Italian, please read this translation alongside the Italian version on the blog, so that you can have context for the words. Consider as well that these visuals help us to know the movie better: they not only enrich the story, but they also show camera movements, editing, the symbols chosen by the director and thematic ideas. You will also have access to the links to other references in the blog itself. Note that an underline in the translation document indicates a hyperlink in the cineraconto on the blog. Please see the blog for more information about our translation philosophy.

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### Photo-story summary:

Two Athenian men go on vacation to the Greek island of Hydra. They stay in the dilapidated house of an unhappy family: Marina, a young, unmarried woman; her mother, a disgraced widow; and her brother, angry and obsessed with family honor. Marina lives a constricted life, controlled by the judgements of those around her, but a shocking event forces her to take a stand.

Under blazing sunlight, a man stoops and unties a cable from a waterside post: a ship is setting sail, headed for the mountainous island of Hydra. Its decks are thronged with passengers. As music plays in the background – accordion, [bouzouki](#), and guitar – the film's title appears over a shot of the quiet sea. Male voices sing a Greek folk song "Boat Little Boat."

*With you, my boat,  
I've traveled all over the world.  
Tunis, Barbary, East and West.  
Oh, boat, my little boat, set sail,  
Let's go to the beautiful island where a maiden awaits.*

The ship stops briefly at a bustling port. Children chase each other on the dock, while the grownups stand and wait, each with a black shadow. On the ship, passengers look out to watch the scene. The men's voices off-screen sing a different song now, the traditional "A Little Fishing Boat Sets Sail".

*A little fishing boat full of brave men  
is sailing over from the seashore of Hydra  
to go to collect sponges, black coral, and pearls.*

Then, over the loudspeaker, a crew member announces the disembarkation for Hydra.

Back out at sea, the camera singles out two passengers, Pavlos (Dimitris Horn) and his friend Antonis (Notis Peryalis), both Athenians.

The ship approaches shore again. White houses fill the bottom of the hill. It's Hydra, the men's destination; they're on vacation. Fishermen sit on the dock repairing their nets.

Disembarking, the passengers must climb into a small rowboat, which rolls and tips as small waves slap against the sides.

Frowning, with a cigarette between his lips, Pavlos observes the town, a cluster of rectangular white stone buildings with flat-roofs. In the middle is a tall tower by the water. In the background we hear the song "Bratsera," a traditional song of the Greek islands, most common in Leros. Women's voices sing:

*When will we set sail?  
To sit at the steering wheel,  
to see Leros' mountains  
will take my pains away.*

"Don't you like these barren rocks? Eh?" Pavlos says, gesturing with his cigarette as the boat rises and falls on the water. "This land! You feel as if everything is exposed to the light. Nothing remains hidden."

"Not even men's sins," replies his friend.

At this port, too, children run and play. A packhorse waits to be loaded. A white-bearded priest, in black robes and a boxy black hat, sits at a table, waiting to observe whatever might happen, if something does. It feels as if we have stepped back in time.

Rowboats bob in the water at the dock, where a contingent of sailors has gathered.

No sooner are the friends ashore than a man approaches, saying, "You'd be better off in a house. They'll look after you and clean up for you."

“What do you think?” Pavlos asks his friend.

Antoni is unimpressed: “A hotel’s more comfortable.”

“But the dull people one meets.”

“A few sour looks and they’ll keep away.”

But Pavlos seems determined: “We could split up if you want...” Does he sense that this is destined to be?

The man assures them, “I’ll get you fixed up nicely.”

But Antoni really just wants to stay in a comfortable place. “Please, Pavlos...”

While the friends confer, the man calls out, “Marina!” A woman walking in the street turns to look.

There’s no traffic. The street is empty. A cat sits next to the woman.

The man explains, “They have one of the big old houses. How about it?”

Pavlos nods. “Fine with me.”

But Antoni is not so sure. He puts his hand on the man’s arm, saying, “Just a minute.” He turns to his friend. “Shall we toss for it?”

Laughing, Pavlos agrees.

The man calls out to the woman, “Wait!” Marina (Ellie Lambeti), dressed in black, wears no makeup; her hair is pulled back in simple fashion. She gazes at them with an expression of weary disillusion. Finally, deal made, they walk to her. The man leads the way, carrying the luggage.

“These gentlemen are here to relax for a few days,” he says. “They’d like to stay at your place.”

She shrugs helplessly: “Well, I don’t know if...”

He insists, “Your mother asked me to try... for the upstairs rooms.”

“Did you explain that the house is old and rather dilapidated?”

“Who cares? They’re young.”

Pavlos asks politely, “May we see it?”

“Yes,” she replies.

She turns and leads the way as the folk music resumes. After a while, she turns her head slightly, as if to make sure that they are still following.

Partway up the road, she stops. “Excuse me,” she says, and then walks on ahead as they wait politely.

She stops to talk to a group seated at a table at the top of a flight of stone stairs.

The man leans in to the travellers and says, “She’s telling her brother Mitso.”

“Not very talkative, is she?” asks Pavlos.

“A bit stand-offish... You see, her late dad was a sponge merchant, one of the island’s rich people, and provided them everything they needed. Then came the war and that was the end of that.”

“When did he die?” asks Pavlos.

“During the occupation... The mother is different. She is more sociable.”

Just as the great Italian filmmakers fill their sets with italianità, so director Michael Cacoyannis creates a vivid sense of time, place and people by showing the touchstones of Greek culture: the whitewashed walls, the tiled roofs, the flagstones of the narrow street. As she talks to the men on the porch, a young boy passes on a donkey.

Marina turns to the visitors and nods her head. Apparently, her brother has given his permission.

She sets off again, and the men follow, greeting her brother as they walk by. Behind them trails the man with the luggage, a bulky case in each hand and one more under his arm.

The road becomes a narrow staircase as they ascend the mountain. At the top, they cross paths with a little boy leading a black baby goat.

They arrive at the house and she enters; the door is not locked. Antoni tells the man to wait outside with the suitcases, then goes inside with Pavlos.

The man tips his hat back and wipes his brow. He's overheated from the effort. A neighbor leans out her window and gestures, "Who are these strangers?"

"Lodgers!"

Ah, this could be a village in Sicily, where neighbors watch from behind curtains, observing everything. And just wait, there is more.

From the second-floor window, Antoni calls out, "Come on up!", then he admires the view with a contented smile.

To Pavlos, he says, "In fact, the view is wonderful." Over his shoulder, we see white houses with tiled roofs that climb the mountain; a bit of sea; and more mountains in the distance.

"Didn't I tell you?" replies Pavlos.

Pavlos goes into the other room and tells Marina, "It must have been a beautiful house."

"It was," she affirms.

"I really like these old houses. They do have a certain feeling."

The camera slowly pans around the room, revealing Pavlos' tact: the wallpaper is peeling everywhere.

Referring to the portrait over the bed, he asks, "Is that your mother?"

"My sister."

"You have a sister?"

"She's dead."

Just then, the man arrives with the suitcases and Antonis asks, "What do I owe you?"

The man answers, "Whatever you feel like."

Marina turns and leaves, saying, "If you need anything, mother won't be long. She's out on an errand."

Antoni gives the man a tip; as he leaves, the man promises, "I'll drink to your health – and I'm always at your service!" We notice the ragged state of the man's shirt, which contrasts with the elegant vacation wear of our travellers.

"Great!" says Antoni sarcastically. "We left Athens to relax, have fun... and we wind up in this house of gloom and mourning."

Pavlos responds, "You've become so picky... but then success does that!"

Framed beautifully in the doorway, bag in hand, Antoni says, "That's nonsense, it's just that I didn't come here to be depressed."

Pavlos flops down on the bed and asks, "You still find me amusing after all these years?" The camera looks down on him, creating a composition of diagonals, his face looming in the foreground.

Antoni has opened the window. “Very. Except when you get all worked up and make stupid cracks about success, etc.”

“At least I’ve no illusions about myself. That’s something, isn’t it?”

Leaning in the doorway of Pavlos’ room, Antoni asks, “What are you asking me for? You know what I think.”

“What?”

“That you’re making up excuses. You can afford not to work, so why bother writing? It’s not as if you’ve no talent, damn it!”

Annoyed, Pavlos says, “So I wrote two novels by age twenty! Big deal!”

“You can’t be a child prodigy forever.”

Pavlos opens his suitcase and takes out a shirt. “Some child! With gray hair. If I had it in me, I’d have it made.”

“Antoni...” he says as he takes out a cigarette.

“Hmm?”

“Seriously... if you prefer to go to a hotel...”

“Know what I think? You’re trying to get rid of me because of the girl.”

“Light!”

“You smoke too much.”

“I drink too much, too. It’s my right. I left my mother; shall I have you as my guardian?”

“Here!” Antoni tosses him the lighter.

Pavlos opens the curtains and the light floods the room, forcing Antoni to squint. “How about a swim?” Antoni suggests. “The cold water will do you good.”

Pavlos considers a moment before agreeing.

Pavlos and a young boy are splashing around in the water, the boy is enjoying himself immensely and laughs.

Suddenly we hear a shrill voice, “Mimi! Come out, you bad boy! You’ll catch cold!” A woman is watching from behind an old stone wall on shore.

But Mimi just laughs. She warns him, “Okay, wait till we get back to Athens! No movies, no ice cream! You’ll see!”

Mimi ignores her and continues splashing around with Pavlos and Antoni.

Up on the stone wall, the local kids start teasing, “Mimi! Mimi!”

“Get out of here, you bums!” says Mimi’s mom, and they scatter.

“Mimi!” she calls again.

The camera turns its attention to four other boys as they clamber up the rocky mountainside. They obviously know their way around, and they move quickly and with confidence up the slope. One of them sings the second song from the beginning of the film, the traditional “A Little Fishing Boat Sets Sail.”

Finally, two of the boys arrive at their destination. Peering down from a ledge of rocks, they strain to see a man and woman hidden in the bushes. The woman hears the children and is seen peeking out. The boys congratulate each other with a slap on the head.

They report back to the two older boys and the four take off downhill. On their way, they pass some fishermen repairing nets.

One boy stops for a moment to report what they have seen. The fisherman listens and then calls his wife: "Antigone!" She comes out to hear what he has to say: "Up in the castle!" The boys run through the village, yelling and making noise, to spread the word about the couple hiding at the mountain top.

The boys gather others as they go and the group gets larger and larger. A woman hears the boys' story and runs across the street to tell her neighbor, who is sweeping her steps, "Froso again... in the ruins." The neighbor drops her broom and takes off after the boys, calling, "Yorgo! Yorgo!" She's dressed in black, with a white headscarf.

The throng of boys has now become a mob. Yorgo's mother can't catch up to them. Out of breath, she stops and yells, "Yorgo! Come here at once, you bad boy!" A neighbor joins her and she explains, "It's her son, Mitso. I'm afraid of what he might do. Remember the last time?" "Serves her right," the woman replies. "She was asking for it. The slut!"

Yorgos' mother is more compassionate: "We weren't widowed at age 32!" "If she needed a man, she should have remarried." "With all those debts and three kids? That's unheard of."

When the rowdy boys reach Marina's house, her brother Mitso (Anestis Vlachos) is sitting on the front step, leg stretched out, lazily reading the newspaper. The children stop and watch Mitso, waiting for him to notice them.

Standing in a line, they laugh and start to clap their hands. Finally Mitso looks up. "What are you staring at?" he asks. "Scram!" The kids begin to taunt him, "If you want a kiss or more, go knock on a widow's door." They're very excited, and – adding to the agitation of the scene – some are banging cans.

Finally, provoked, Mitso gets up and charges into the crowd of unruly youngsters, grabbing one by the ear. "Speak up or I'll pull it off!" The boy winces with pain. "Ask your mother!" one of the boys tells Mitso. "What? Ask what?"

Just then the shutters of the second-story window open. It's Marina: she stands at the window, looking at the scene. Mitso has quite a grip on the boy's ear. The close-up – shot from above – conveys the child's pain: his head in the center, under Mitso's knuckles, and his straining torso fills half the frame.

Finally the boy speaks up. “They caught her with a man, at the castle, in the ruins.” Mitso lets go, and the boy runs off.

Still bent over from twisting the boy’s ear, Mitso seems almost paralyzed.

The camera zooms in as Mitso stands upright in slow motion, like an old arthritic man.

We see Marina at the window, behind iron bars, as if imprisoned. Certainly the bars cannot keep the family safe from what she has just seen.

At last, she closes her eyes, as if in pain, and closes the shutters.