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**Subterranean Passages from *The Ogre* to *Lola*:
The Influence of American Film Noir on Greek Cinema**



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Until the appearance of film noir in Europe after World War II, friends of cinema had seen plenty of police or mystery films. What mainly interested the cinephiles was to find the clues that would show them the path to discover the perpetrator (“whodunit”) and impress their friends. However, in film noir this problem is of minor interest. Classic police films were dominated by the rationalist way of individual thinking and acting. In film noir there is not a “hero” in that sense. Here we see a wandering man who, driven by desire, is convinced by an ethereal woman to kill her spouse. We see a detective who “smokes like a Turk” and drinks whiskey like a thirsty sailor and has fallen for the eyes of two charming women. He is either against them or conspiring with them. He scrambles with other fortune-hunters for a cheap statuette that is made of “the stuff that dreams are made of”. We also see, during a hot night, an insurance salesman seduced by a beautiful housewife. For obvious reasons, he decides to murder her husband. Furthermore, we see an ex-Nazi who hides in a regional town of the country he hated the most and is about to marry the cute daughter of a powerful member of the political system. Unfortunately, he pays with his life for his unheard-of transformation from a “butcher” into lamb. Or, we see a humble and scorned bank employee persecuted in the place of someone else, thanks to the power of image and the need to gain fifteen minutes of notoriety as the “leader” of the underprivileged. It is a “world of darkness and violence, with a dominant figure whose motives are usually greed, lust, desire and ambition, and whose world is seized by fear”.

FILM NOIR

In order for a film to be considered a film noir, it has to display some or all of the following essential characteristics:

- a. A “femme fatale”, for instance, is a charming, fascinating and seductive woman. She lures and captivates her lovers through irresistible desire, and often drives them to submissive, dangerous and fatal situations. In literature and in art this is an archetypal character.
- b. In contrast, a “morally compromised” detective who fights “in the name of the law”. He often has his own moral laws that repeatedly clash with the civil code and the official law. He is always showing that, what is legal, it is not necessarily moral.
- c. An urban setting with slums, ghettos, and buildings brightly lit by neon signs.
- d. Narration in first person (voice-over).
- e. Complex, convoluted plot structure.
- f. Low-key lighting (chiaroscuro) for contrast.
- g. Skewed framing.

Some of these same characteristics may initially be found in the films of mid-war German expressionism (e.g., *The Cabinet of Dr. Kaligari* by Robert Wiene, *The Blue Angel* by Josef von Sternberg) and French poetic realism (e.g., *Hotel du Nord* by Marcel Carné, *The Human Beast* by Jean Renoir).

During the 1930s, immediately following the 1929 Crash and the effort of the working class and poorer strata of people to organize in trade unions and political groups and parties, a stream of “gangster films” (e.g. *Scarface* by Howard Hawks starring Paul Muni, *Little Ceasar* by Marvyn Leroy starring Edward G. Robinson) began to emerge. In addition, “social problem” films, such as *Grapes of Wrath* by John Ford, and more “dark” pictures, those that would be called “film-noir”, began appearing on movie screens. The 1929 Crash had crippled the “American Dream”, namely, the predominant culture dictating that any person could use all kinds of opportunity, enjoy freedom and prosperity without belonging to traditional ruling classes regardless of color, religion, and national origin. Thus, through film,

we have the beginning of a generalized but indirect criticism of a socio-economic system which leaves people at the mercy of some “dark” forces and leads them to crime.

Films that constituted a turning-point for film noir include:

The Maltese Falcon, directed by John Houston (1940) and inspired by Dashiell Hammett’s book by that name. Most critics thought that this film featured all the clichés of the genre. Through a series of permanently mixed-up situations, where the people involved deceive and mislead each other in a fight for survival and the acquisition of the notorious statuette-treasure, known as the “Maltese Falcon”, private-eye Spade (Humphrey Bogart) manages to convince the “institutional representatives of the state” (the cops) that they are useless and hands over to them the offenders clearing all suspicions against him. All this happened, however, for a fake statuette, “the stuff that dreams are made of”, something they don’t seem to understand since they belong to the repressive state apparatus and not to the implied ideological one. While criticism of the methods used by the police officers (e.g., lack of search warrants) is explicit, criticism against the values of the socio-economic system is oblique and disguised through the use of the fake statuette as an expression of commercialization. In 1941, in a world dominated, on one hand, by the military machine of the Nazis wiping out millions of people, and on the other hand, by the capitalist classes despite F.D. Roosevelt’s welfare policies, the fight against authority takes various forms. As a result, Spade’s character is bi-dimensional, simultaneously anti-authoritarian and greedy, just like the society he criticizes.

Double Indemnity, directed by Billy Wilder (1944), inspired by James M. Cain’s book by that name. Here an intelligent, cynical insurance salesman succumbs to the appeal of the femme fatale (an excellent Barbara Stanwyck) and together they plan to execute the perfect murder in order to collect the double indemnity “beating the system”, i.e., the insurance company. Once more, we observe the elements that make up signs of dark

prospects and moods of the era and of a widely spread idea of what the “insurance policy” represents. This film has all the elements of a film-noir. Shadow fighting scenes and chewed up camera angles strengthen the sense of a threatening atmosphere. There is a hard and cynical “counter-hero” who also has some “soft” sides, and pursues “illicit profit”, collaborating with a femme fatale whom at the same time he fights. Moreover, it is the first time that criticism is raised against “Taylorism” as a form of work organization in a workplace of the tertiary sector of economy while up to then only Charlie Chaplin in his splendid dramatic comedy *Modern Times* practiced such criticism of the industrial sector.

The Big Sleep, directed by Howard Hawks (1946). This is an exceptionally complex film based on the novel of another great crime story writer, Raymond Chandler. Although the film follows the “whodunit” rule, it throws us in a rather “absurd” plot and it uses many - but not all – elements of the noir characteristics. We have the private detective (Philippe Marlow), misleading clues, unforgettable dialogues, smart lines, strange and risky characters, the essential femmes fatales (the two girls of a dying millionaire with one of whom he falls in love), scenic violence and, of course, nights and fogginess. However, there is neither voice-over narration nor flash backs, and there aren’t any particular expressionistic scenes.

Sorry, Wrong Number, directed by Anatol Litvak (1948), with Burt Lancaster and Barbara Stanwyck in the leading roles. Here too we find certain characteristic noir traits: flash backs, nocturnal takes in Manhattan, use of deep chiaroscuro, threatening shadows, circular movement of the camera intensifying the sense of mystery. In this film multiple narratives and viewpoints are used, literally driving the protagonist crazy and making night horrifying, whereas ambiguity and multiplicity of undetermined meanings put her at risk to face forces that she cannot see or feel.

GREEK CASES

O Drakos (The Ogre), directed by Nikos Koundouros (1956), signaled the start of the short life of Greek film noir that created some excellent films that critically assimilated aspects from the American film noir as well as German expressionism. *The Ogre* also follows the rules of ancient Greek tragedy, creating in my opinion the best Greek film noir. In the first day of 1956, a bank employee will see the last dawn of his life, a dawn so different from all others. On Christmas Eve, Thomas is the last one to leave the bank where he works. He leaves alone, depressed, and in a heavy mood. He is a humble and scorned man whom everyone pushes around in the bus. No one knows him, nobody cares, and no woman approaches him. And suddenly there he is: front page in all newspapers as an “ogre” who rapes or kills women. All of a sudden everyone is staring at him and he trembles. He looks like the “ogre”. Is it him? He goes up the steps of his neighborhood in order to go to his house. The owner’s family’s heads are behind the window; they have a teenage daughter and they are terrified. The father scolds him. The police and the crowd are searching for him. He escapes through the roof and comes out in the street, running down an empty lot. The circle is closing in on him. As the sun goes down and the night falls, he finds himself somewhere on a street where men and women dance. The people stare at him. When a constable recognizes him and calls with his whistle other constables, the chase starts again. He finds shelter for a while in the courtyard of an old type block of flats where he meets a “woman of night” (Carmen) who leads him to an underground cabaret. The “boss” is “Hondros” (“Fatty”) who understands the situation and the opportunity that he and his group of outlaws are given by using Thomas - without still knowing his real identity - as the leader who will lead them victoriously to the battle of “big trick” which is to steal pieces from the Temple of Olympian Zeus and sell them to American buyers. This is a manifestation of the mentality dominating the post Civil War years and opening the way for bribing and appropriating parts

of the national heritage by the new superpower that longs to acquire the brilliance of Ancient Athens.

Thomas's acquaintance with the young singer who is Fatty's protégé and is called "Moro" ("Baby") by Fatty will be fatal. "Baby" is a sui generis femme fatale. She may be pushing the situation to an extreme point in order to escape from her past. She wants to join respectable society, lead a normal life, and get a day job like everybody else. She cannot escape, though, because Thomas has been incorporated in this structure. He is arrested by the police, who initially believe he is the ogre. When the officers realize their mistake, they symbolically deprive him of his identity by having him stand in his underwear and making fun of him. At the same time the assembled crowd cries and ululates for the arrest of the person that humiliated the oppressive and corrupted government mechanism. When Thomas returns home together with "Moro", he is kidnapped by a group of the outlaws, brought back to the cabaret, and «crowned» as a leader of the gang. Fatty is the only one who knows about the «hoax». Both the outlaws and the poor and repressed people see in the face of the «leader» a savior. Of course, everyone understands «salvation» differently, as it is made clear during the preparations on the eve of the «big trick». A «mad feast» is organized like those used by warriors in ancient Greek military campaigns. Suddenly, though, everything changes. Someone arrives at the cabaret and «whispers» to the outlaws that the «leader» is not who he seems to be, but an «other», a «foreigner» who is poor and alone. As a result, one of the members of the gang goes crazy and stabs Thomas the infidel, who is both doubting and doubted and who must not be trusted. Thomas goes out to the public road and breaths his last breath under the first light of the dawn. His body is picked up by a small truck, and a member of the gang (Thanassis Vengos) denies having known him. Hence we see that, together with elements of the film noir, this film includes the logic of ancient Greek tragedy. The director himself in an interview to a Greek newspaper said: «*The Ogre* is a coded movie.

We could not speak. All kinds of censorship, direct, formal and informal, surrounded us firmly. Kambanelis and I wanted to make a film with successive codes, the same ones used by the prisoners, with one, two, three strikes. »

Mia Zoi Tin Echoume (We have only one life) (1958), with the unforgettable Dimitris Horn, directed by Giorgos Tzavellas who also wrote the script. Director Antonis Kalogridis, who produced the play version in theater, stated that this was “one of the film noirs of Greek cinema that I liked”. The film could also be titled “I have even met happy prisoners”. Kleon feels cheerful in the prison because he worries about nothing; he eats and sleeps for free. The night guard thinks that the prisoner sings like a little bird in a cage. Kleon, a poor and humble cashier of Emporopistotiki Bank (once more a bank employee is the leading role!) is suddenly in a quandary about what to do with a virtual surplus amounting to 1,101,101.10 drachmas after he closed out at the end of the day. His colleagues (mainly, the character played by Panagiotis Christoforidis) have the opinion that, just like the refrain of a popular song of the time said, “we have only one life” that each one should, on an individual basis, “hit the jackpot”. This is contrary to the collective effort of the outlaws in *The Ogre* who are satisfied with humble dreams, such as the purchase of a tractor by one of them in order to plough the field of his father. The dialogue between Kleon and Christoforidis a few minutes before the first hands in the till money with the virtual surplus is indicative of this attitude.

There is a “closed” sign on Kleon’s cashier’s desk window and a customer counts his paper-money and leaves his cigarette on the desk. The cigarette falls off the desk on Kleon’s side. He picks it up saying “New cigarette discarded: 3,5 dimes”. His colleague (Christoforidis) tells him: “You know the theory of the mandarin? If you are told here in Athens to press a button and in China 3,000 mandarins will die, would you do it? But you would become rich”. Kleon is puzzled. “Each mandarin is worth one gold pound. Once again I would think about it”. Kleon is treated in an obviously pejorative manner by the others but

above all by the general manager of the bank (Christos Tsaganeas). The manager's fancy piece, Bibi (Yvon Sanson), who at the beginning is drawn to rich and powerful men, regards him as useless and stupid. At some point, Kleon, being under intense pressure, decides to "misappropriate" the surplus money in order to impress Bibi, who becomes his femme fatale. Hence he starts living his "dolce vita" days. He rents a suite in a luxurious hotel, hangs out with Bibi at deluxe night clubs and restaurants, bets large amounts of money in auctions "in favor of philanthropic goals", and lends money to "dark" businessmen. All this time he feels powerful, and the others recognize him as such. He is taken to jail where he recounts his whole story (voice over) to the night guard (Vasilis Avlonitis). Apart from the use of narration, another element that recalls film noir is that he lived a "dolce vita" at the instigation of the femme fatale whose life got meaning only from counting the lines of pearls on her very expensive necklace. Contrary to the *Maltese Falcon*, here the pearls are genuine. However, the criticism is the same: whether lead or pearl, the American Dream shines but is not gold. No matter what Bibi says to Kleon after the first display of money he spends at the first night club, his objective is "to surprise the crowds". After all that, Kleon takes the ocean liner to go live in America with his relatives but when Bibi awakes to the dangers of the life she lives and tries to go on board, it's too late. Moreover, the images of the big city with the slums (populous and badly maintained blocks of flats) and the luxurious buildings establish a sense of class polarization.

O Anthropos tou Trainou (The Man of the Train), directed by Dinos Dimopoulos (1958), with Giorgos Pappas, Anna Synodinou and Michalis Nikolinakos, takes us to Epidaurus, Bourtzi and Mycenae in order to reflect not only on the past but also the present, that is to say, the postwar reconstruction in the midst of ruins that a whole decade of wars had left behind. A woman traveling to the ancient theatre of Epidaurus catches through the window of a passing train a glimpse of a man who she believes is the national resistance

fighter she loved and who, after the first night they spent together, was riddled in front of her with bullets of Nazi secret policemen's automatic rifles. Fifteen years later, he or his ghost appears in front of her under another name as a civil engineer who is a member of the new petty-bourgeoisie that is supporting the modernizing middle class of the post Civil War period. She becomes hysterical as all of her old feelings for him come flooding back and she is possessed by the idea to leave her husband and children and follow him again. Instead, he is the one who leaves once more, as suddenly as he had appeared. Here we do not have a classic femme fatale; another kind of a film noir character has appeared, that of the psychologically tortured woman, due to the lesions of the past. A typical example of such a character in American film noir is, as we saw above, the role of Barbara Stanwyck in *Sorry, Wrong Number*.

Eglima sta Paraskinia (Murder Backstage), directed by Dinos Katsouridis (1960).

The script is based on the crime novel by that name by Yannis Maris. Rosa Delli (Efi Mela), a famous leading lady at the National Theatre, is murdered and simultaneously one of the actors, Aris Dimitriadis, disappears. Police detective inspector Bekas (Titos Vandis), along with newspaper director Makris (Alekos Alexandrakis), seek the solution to the puzzle and hunt down the murderer. In the search of the murderer's traces the plot is getting complicated as almost all the men and women actors of the company have plenty of reasons to get rid of Rosa, either for erotic reasons or for reasons of competition etc. It becomes obvious quickly that the case goes back to the years of the German occupation of Greece when Roza had married a black marketeer and collaborator of the Nazis, a marriage that she never announced and had kept a secret since then. This blackmarketeer, having killed an unknown person with the help of the Nazis, pretended to be dead and used a new identity after the end of the occupation, making a living by practicing "dark professions". Together with actor Thalia Chalkia (Zorz Sarri), who was the swing arm of the dead protagonist, he blackmailed and

extracted enormous sums of money from the industrialist Karydis, who secretly from his family maintained an erotic relation with Rosa. Are they, however, the murderers? A Greek police officer expressed an interesting opinion for detective Bekas in an essay: “He has infallible intuition, ‘smells’ the gaps, and recognizes that things are not as clear as they appear. He is the bearer of an absolute moral and square perception of life, and infiltrates the corrupted world of the bourgeois class. He is a candid person, honest, spontaneous and a bit ‘primitive’. He wins without being a characteristic type of a police officer and shares a lot of sensitivities of a familiar male type. The Greek police officer approaches the solution of a mystery and succeeds by doing mental work and arduous research for items and details, which combined lead to the truth. His dynamic action (weapon use, man-hunt, bodily violence, etc.) is limited in only a few scenes, usually when ‘everything is over’ and the perpetrator or the perpetrators has been revealed.”

Efialtis (Nightmare), directed by Erricos Andreou (1961). Voula Charilaou plays the rich inheritor Anna Margo who lives alone in a hotel and is a case of “split personality”. She receives a phone call from an old friend of hers and feels that it represents a particular threat against her. She calls her lawyer (Michalis Nikolinakos) in order to tell him that she is threatened by her old friend. The lawyer begins searching and goes from surprise to surprise. In the meantime, Anna’s brother and former spouse of Evi is murdered. Once more, we notice the pattern of the “psychologically tortured woman” due to situations of the past, as in *The Man of the Train*.

Lola, directed by Dinos Dimopoulos (1963), starring Tzeni Karezi as Lola, Nikos Kourkoulos as Aris, and Dionyssis Papagiannopoulos as Stelios. The two men carry their fight to extreme over “the eyes of the femme fatale” at the great cost of the death of the “bad guy” and the integration of the “good guy” in the society. Aris, a former henchman of Stelios, is discharged from prison and is searching for those who betrayed him, sending him

to prison, and asking whether Lola had played a part in the “snitching”. Lola wants to escape from the tyrannical subjugation to Stelios and follows Aris, who is famously brave and with whom she is still in love. On the contrary, Stelios, who is a coward, despite the opposite impressions, launches a man-hunt in the night-time all around Athens, sending cutthroat “Black” (Spyros Kalogirou) against Aris in order to kill him. When Aris asks him why he has accepted to play this role, Black answers with the well-known line: “It’s a lot of money, Aris”. According to one opinion, this film signifies the end of a cycle of Greek film noirs as the “good guys” (rebels, partisans, guerilla fighters etc.) are not recognized as “outlaws” anymore. The final victory of Aris against “evil” Stelios, even though it is carried out through a representative – since it is the warden, who is also Lola’s father (Pantelis Zervos), that kills Stelios – signifies the slow emergence of a new era. Besides, it is dawn when everything is over, and Aris and Lola exit as a couple from Stelios’s cabaret. Later, as a result of the electoral victory of the Centre Union (1963 and 1964), censorship relaxed so much that social and political films became more openly critical until a group (“junta”) army officers overthrew the “sickly” democracy, leading those who wanted to make films back either to “allegorical scriptwriting” or to the history of past years in order to speak of the present (Theodore Angelopoulos in *Days of '36*).

CONCLUSION

This was the short life of the first but essential cycle of Greek film noir influenced by issues and classic elements of American film noir and included elements from older schools, particularly those of German expressionism (especially in the case of *The Ogre*), and selective issues taken from socio-political events and the criticism of mentalities and structures of Greek society. We note that violence plays a less decisive role in the Greek case. The femme fatale does not die; she is punished by being deprived of what she desires mostly, as in the case of Bibi who loses both her pearls and the man who “taught” her an

alternative moral attitude to life. On the contrary, Lola stands by Aris and earns a free life, becoming a femme fatale for Stelios who represented the old and noir face of Greece under Nazi occupation and civil war. Those differences in facing the various issues and roles reflect wider cultural differences that have possibly Protestant and Orthodox dimensions. *The Ogre* was deprived of all ways out and had to die but *Lola* was presented with a way out because the conditions were changing. In the American case, violence has been present in the socio-political agenda since the communities of the first settlers fought against Native Americans in order to open, to extend and to maintain open paths to the West. In the Greek case, violence is not constitutive but is expressed momentarily in moments of collective social crisis, such as the civil war; in *The Ogre*, this is pointed out by Fatty who loudly wonders why the Greeks do not reconcile with each other.

These notes may open the way to a thorough study in terms of historical breadth (films noir during the periods of dictatorship and regime change/*metapolitefsi*) as well as issues and style. In his book *In dark streets: Film noir in Greek cinema*, published for the 48th Thessaloniki Film Festival on the occasion of a related series, Alexis Dermetzoglou stressed that Greek film noir depicts the dark side of people, their sentiments, utopias and their lost wishes while under terrible social and political pressure. Its directors combine elements of melodrama and social criticism (something particularly obvious in *We have only one life* in parallel with the comical element) to promote liberal and progressive ideas through indirect allusion.

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