

*the night responds to my complaints*  
Κωνσταντίνος Παρθένης, 1932

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## **From the archives of Oblivion: the first female Greek director Maria Plyta (1915-2006)**

I

*"The film crew is admirable,  
the script is wonderful;  
the only black spot in this film is its female director."*  
Filopimin Finos

Maria Plyta's films are almost completely forgotten today despite the continuing popularity they enjoy when screened on television. There is something parochial and paradoxical in them that ignites more bewilderment and confusion than acceptance or enthusiasm. It is interesting to note that after so many decades of intense feminist film criticism there is only one significant study of her work by Eliza-Anna Delveroudi which deals with her contribution as the first female director. Consequently, we do not possess a digital remastering of none of her films, which circulate in bad and incomplete versions.

Plyta belongs to the forgotten generation of early pioneers in global narrative film-making who were for a long time overlooked and disregarded, simply because of their gender. Indeed one could claim that she was part of a world narrative visual tradition because of the universality of the central theme of her work, the representation of a gendered understanding of reality. Historically, Plyta stood at the very beginning of the most creative and prolific period of cinematic production in post-war Greek history. Her work, like those of Lois Weber, Dorothy Arzner, Germaine Dulac and most

significantly Ida Lupino during the same period, articulated a distinctly *feminine* visual perception of identity, history and culture, giving direct priority to a woman's desire to speak in the first person.

Greek cinema, as every other national cinema in its institutional organisation, could think of a feminine presence only in front of the camera but never behind it; women were the passive recipients of the male gaze, as Laura Mulvey has argued in her well-known study. They existed as women only because of their "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey, 2009: 26). As Mulvey argues women "are being turned all the time into objects of display, to be looked at and gazed at and stared at by men. Yet in a real sense, women are not there at all," (Mulvey, 2009: 13). The cinematic female gaze itself was always orientated towards the eyes of *the* Man next to her: only through his assertive self-sufficiency, expressed through his dominant and direct frontality, her existence could be meaningful. Consequently, her very referentiality made her complete; the subliminal image of her submission was the ultimate representation of the direct correspondence between social normality and individual identity.

Furthermore, the feminine image was the site on which female spectators could renew and consolidate their identification with passive models of self-understanding and self-definition. The main genres of the period, melodrama, comedy or costume drama, were structured around narratives of masculine power as the central focus of meaningful behaviour. Female characters lacked agency and psychological complexity; there existed only one place for them—the private sphere of domesticity. They moved from the kitchen to the salon and from the basement to the bedroom: outside their closed reality of walled boundaries, they could only be prostitutes or nuns. Socially, they existed only as married wives; their very life was the act of getting married and accepting the submission to their husband. In certain Greek films before World War II, like Filopimin Finos' *The Song of Separation/To Trayoudi tou Apohorismou* (1939) the image of a powerful and successful woman was associated with the moral corruption of masculinity. In Yorgos Tzavellas' films, as for example *The Agnes of the Harbour/I Agni tou Limaniou* (1952), also the fallen woman becomes the symbol of an ideal domestication process in which heterosexual consummation becomes the central narrative for a woman's self-realisation.

Plyta's films unfold a completely different cultural and social agenda about gender representation. In them, the cinematic feminine struggles to articulate its own language and construct its visual mythography, usurping from dominant androcentric visual regimes, iconographic and narrative patterns, necessary for the production of her films. Her early films during the fifties focus on strong-willed, determined and uncompromising female figures, fighting against social structures both in rural and urban environments; indeed the relocation from the rural to the urban is one of their main subplots. Some touches of the Italian Neo-realism in an uneasy coexistence with the French Poetic realism can be easily detected in her films of this period. One could claim that the first family drama from a female point of view, *La Souriante Madame Beudet/The Smiling Madame Beudet* (1923) by Germaine Dulac, can be seen as the background of Plyta's attempt to construct a visual space for the female perspective.

During the sixties, her films depict young women trying to become employable and adjust themselves to the capitalist order of the petit bourgeoisie while suffering sexual harassment and constant assaults by their bosses and male colleagues. There is always a benevolent father in these films who becomes the *deus ex machina* solving the most complex situations. There are also lethal *femmes fatales* or malicious step-mothers who want to malign and undermine 'pure' young girls but in the end repent and transform themselves into positive role-models. Most significantly however the depiction of female friendships becomes one of the central thematic threads of her work. Young girls form strong bonds with each other which last for their whole life, and save each other's life in critical moments. There is something uniquely *modernist* about her later melodramas, which although finish with the formulaic happy ending, leave always some striking narrative and continuity gaps, which indicate the struggle with both the producer and herself to visualise female experience and articulate the social agenda of her filmmaking. One of the great admirers of her work, the female director Tonia Marketaki, pointed out that the two periods of development in Plyta's work can be better described by her use of camera in two different ways:

*"Before the sixties, the audience wanted social realism; therefore, long shots. After the sixties, they wanted melodrama; therefore, close-ups."* (Marketaki in Kyriakidis, 2008: 66).

In her remarkable conversation with Gay Angeli in 1979, Plyta tried to articulate her own approach to filmmaking in terms of her empirical engagement with the technical aspects of cinema or her personal preference for editing and montage. As she never studied cinema or was never involved in theoretical discussions about its nature, she stressed her decision to do the montage herself and the fact that:

*'I prepared everything myself to the smallest detail. I had a working notebook which I called 'the log.' I designed the settings on paper. I found the locations and placed the position of the camera. I prepared everything and my great martyrdom was to wait for the technicians to turn the lights on. The truth is that I was always fighting with them; but in the end what I wanted was done. We didn't have the necessary means. When shooting on location, we waited for hours for the sun to come out. We were working with reflectors. Travelling was a big thing. The railing never fitted properly. In many occasions the camera 'chewed up' the film; and it was as expensive as now. Then the studio was so primitive that on its roof raining made such a noise so much that we stopped the synchronised recording and we were shooting silently'. (Angeli, 1979: 140)*

Together with her struggle to master the technical ability to make films, she also pointed out a significant feature of her style:

*'My early films had an ethnographic character [social realism]; but then I made melodramas. [...] the melodramatic element didn't only exist in the whole story but also in the mise-en-scène. For example if a character was angry, I depicted it through a close-up of a clenched fist'. (Angeli, 1979: 142).*

This is an important device of her directorial style: each frame, especially in her mature melodramas, was a *synecdoche* of a missing larger continuum. Her *synecdochic* *visuality* omitted elements that could not be framed but they had to be within the frame. In *The Duchess of Plakentia/I Doukissis Plakentias* (1956) she depicted the moral and physical endurance of the main character by presenting what men failed to do: masculinity was absent from most male characters and, as a positive activity, it could be found in both genders. The same can be seen in her other films, as female characters take initiatives to redress imbalances and injustices, which the viewer normally expects to be taken by men. In the hilarious comedy *I am man and I will do whatever I like/Eimai Antras kai to kefi mou tha Kano*(1960) the

central female character dresses up as a man in order to find employment: a special haircut becomes the visual metaphor for gender. In her melodramas, unhappy marriages are also depicted through fragments of missing unities: submission is expressed through new clothes, coercion through discreet camera glimpses in the bedroom, finally self-alienation with intense domestic chores.

The most obvious example also can be found in her superb melodrama *The Little Shoeshine Boy/O Loustrakos*, when the two youths embrace in passion ready to have sex, then suddenly a cross appears hanging on the wall, symbolising the sanctity of marriage that could make sexual intercourse possible.



*The Little Shoeshine Boy*: snapshot taken from the DVD

As N. Roy Clifton calls synecdoche 'a special case of metonymy' which 'is more adjectival, adding a quality... [...] The close-up functions most of the time as a synecdoche' (Roy Clifton, 1983: 173). Although Plyta's camera does not foreground these signs, they appear at specific moments in the story: the synecdochic sign becomes also a matter of temporal rupture in

the story. It reminds its audience of the invisible existence of a reality outside the film that defines and dictates their own reception of the cinematic image.

Plyta developed a complex network of conceptual and visual metaphors, especially indirect, in order to dramatise in front of her camera the obvious but not visible ideological enframing of female presence. The most important aspect of such visual synecdoche is the complete silencing of all sexuality in her films. Although gender is the central organising principle of her *mise-en-scène*, sexuality is glaringly absent: whenever it appears it acts as an aberration, of a momentary lapse of self-control. It is also depicted, in her later films, as harassment or even rape, without ever being explicitly enunciated; it is always presented as an aberration, a fault of character, a mistake. In her films she doesn't seem to associate gender and sexuality: men are mostly passive, women are mostly active. Such reversal of roles implied an ideologically framed conflict between the expectations of the audience and the political agenda of her films.

In the *Little Shoeshine Boy*, she was the first mainstream director to depict a radical feminist character, ready to incite other students to rebellion, while digressing into long speeches about the equality of people irrespective gender, class or ethnicity on the basis of their common mortality. The same character bursts into a long rhetorical diatribe, obviously censored, when responding to the question: 'Why do people wage wars?' 'Because the rulers of this world are male, rapacious and ambitious,' she preaches. The film leaves the central character in abeyance, in a neutral or neutralising space between social classes; on one side his poor mother, standing at the periphery of institutional power, as expressed by the imposing university building and on the other his mother-in-law, representing the upper class, standing firmly at the entrance of the institution, suspicious and ambivalent.

Indeed one could claim that her popular melodramas are parables of ambivalence framing a profound divide between classes and class consciousnesses. For Plyta, at the centre of that divide stood the young generation of the sixties crushed between the old and the new, unable to articulate a language of their own and at the same time keen to be incorporated to the dominant symbolic order. All her later films, until the last in 1970, delineate her gradual assimilation by the Symbolic Order of the Father, as she gradually seems to incorporate more 'positive' depictions of paternal figures and more benign depictions of the family institution, as the only safe haven in

an age of rapid capitalist expansion. As Jacques Lacan has indicated: 'It is in the name of the Father that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law,' (Lacan, 1997: 67).



*The Uphill Road*: snapshot from the DVD

In her last films, which indeed exhausted her visual language and her effort to articulate a mythography for the feminine presence in the social sphere, one-dimensional representations overpower the political potential of the story and the subversive framing of her camera. In *The Unknown Woman of the Night/I Aynosti tis Nihtas* (1970) ambivalence and synecdoche were replaced by strong contrasts of black and white character development, impossible dilemmas and stylistic mannerism. By then however a new chapter had begun in the history of Greek female cinematographers with the first short film *John and The Road/O Yiannis kai o Dromos* (1967) by Tonia Marketaki, her heiress apparent, and in 1973 with her magisterial film-noir political thriller *John The Violent/Ioannis o Viaios*, a film that recalibrated the visual practices and the thematic morphologies of Greek cinema. The Fathers had won the cultural struggle of the day, but a number of rebellious daughters were preparing their revenge.



II

*Woman is a specific category of being;  
she is human plus something more.  
And this 'plus' can be an obstacle  
if you want to use a female presence  
as the symbol for humanity.*

Tonia Marketaki

Unfortunately, nothing has been written on Plyta's work despite her pioneer and promethean work as director, screenwriter and editor, during the most productive and prolific period of the Greek film industry. The first film historian who talks systematically about her work, Aylaia Mitropoulou, tries to do justice to the pressures and compromises that a woman had to endure in order to produce films after the war. Mitropoulou stresses:

*"Free from the syndromes of inferiority vis-à-vis men, as felt by most women of her generation, as well as from the obsessive idea of destroying by all means every male privilege which bedevils the contemporary generation of women's liberation movement, Maria Plyta became openly a director and fought against her male colleagues with their own weapons. Her era demanded sentimentality, love for children, in a neo-realist fashion. Maria Plyta, going beyond her male colleagues, never found refuge in melodramatising the inferior position of women [...] searching on the contrary for strong female role-models." (Mitropoulou, 2006: 358).*

This is true to a certain degree but Mitropoulou fails to study specifically the very unsettling subtexts Plyta infused her characters with, while adopting the 'weapons' of her male colleagues. Such subversive, somehow awkward, elements can be seen in most of her films as over-inflated sentimentality frames feminine images which look more like fantasies or suppressed male desires and less like believable or probable characters. In Plyta's films there always exists an *implied incongruity between camera and story*: the story is actually dictated by the producer's demands to make a commercially successful melodrama, while the camera works through peculiar angles to reveal emotional subtexts which were not immediately visible to the spectators or were explicitly contained in the script. For example,

the female gaze unabashedly objectifies the male body, especially in *Eve/Eva* (1953), or renders it totally angelic, pure and desexualised as in the late melodramas, like, *The Prodigal/ O Asotos* (1963), *The Winner/ O Nikitis* (1965) and *The Little Trader/ O Emporakos* (1967)—the so-called social trilogy. The important thing is that the director herself constructs a pictorial space in which the female perspective dominates the visual field and makes the spatial arrangements that impose a different order of things, emotions and expectations. The female perspective asserts itself through an implied but distinct feminisation of men. Masculine figures lose their inflexibility and authority and are changed and transformed; while women are the victims of prejudice and exclusion, men become also victims of their class—either poor or wealthy they are equally *impotent* in coping with the pressures of society. Through such reversals, the aggressive and domineering male figure shrinks and makes room for an equally assertive presence, embodied by the female character. Within the production of the period, her style seems that have inaugurated an interesting conversation between her and other filmmakers, expressed through the way that she used the same actors.



*The Prodigal*: snapshot from the DVD

In her film *The Neighbourhood Girl/To Koritsi tis Yitonias* (1954) for example, the Mediterranean archetype of virile prowess and sexual phallicism, the actor Yorgos Foundas who distinguished himself as the irresistible macho lover in Cacoyannis' *Stella* (1955), starts signing a melodious, 'feminine' and soft operatic tune during his engagement party, creating thus a psychological antithesis to his usual cinematic persona. Plyta did the same with other sexualised masculine stars of the period, like Andreas Barkoulis, Kostas Kakavas and Dimitris Papamihail, rendering them innocuous, soft and 'pure' even when they are visiting a brothel, in order to save as many fallen female souls as possible.

In her most accomplished work *The Shipwrecks of Life/Navayia tis Zois* (1959), she depicted for the first time in Greek cinema the problem of drug addiction against the background of a looming crisis within the patriarchal structure of Greek family. Another theme that seems to have preoccupied her in at least three films is the fear of a sexual contact between brother and sister. The sexual psychodynamics of families appear and disappear in an almost regular pattern throughout her work. Furthermore, from *The Shipwrecks of Life* till her final movie, she introduced a peculiar style of narrative unfolding of the script; instead of focusing on one or two central protagonists, she intermittently refocused the narrative centre from one character to another, changing periodically the central point of narration, and dividing it between all characters.

However, through her subtle interventions in the plot and the characterisation, her main centre of attention was the female presence and her ability to be introspective and self-reflexive. In her adaptation of Alexander Dumas' novel *The Lady with the Camellias*, under the title *You Came Late/Irthes Arga* (1961) she creates a confronting melodrama about the cost of female submission to her environment. Margarita says in the film: 'He loves me and he is pure. I am only a lost human being.' The romantic juxtaposition between fall and salvation, purity and sinfulness, becomes at time so excessive that it must be deliberate. In most of her films, self-contradiction becomes the only way that the feminine consciousness can reclaim individual presence. 'Self-contradiction' is the only way that women could define themselves in a society that had already 'normalised' and 'naturalised' them. Luce Irigaray observed that 'a woman is divided into two irreconcilable "bodies": her natural body and her socially valued, exchangeable body,

which is a particularly mimetic expression of masculine values.” (Irigaray, 1985: 180). Such ‘division’ characterises most the story-lines of her scripts; a woman falls into sin while maintaining her innocence and her dignity. Even the female pimp, and in all her films they are all female, maintains a saintly element and a redeeming sense of humanity. Despite the money they have ‘invested’ in their business, they know what they must do—and they let the innocent girl go back to her family.

In comedies like, *Jeep, Kiosk and Love/Tzip*, *Periptero kai Agapi* (1957) and most significantly *I am a man and I will do whatever I like/Eimai Antras kai to kefi mou tha Kano* (1960) Plyta even reverses the roles having her main character changing gender so that she can find employment; in this film gender becomes social performance, a matter of expectations based on clothing, vocal tone and appearance while the story oscillates between heterosexual titillation and homosexual innuendos, as the central male character is attracted to his ‘male’ colleague, while being confused about his own feelings’ ‘They are something wrong about you,’ he says. “Why don’t you take shirt off to show me your chest?” The laughs produced by this confusion are in reality an indirect commentary on male presence expressed as degenderised and desexualised subjectivity.

In another series of films, *Only for One Night/Mono gia Mia Nihta* (1958), *Shipwrecks of Life* and *You Came Late*, she deals with the visual depiction of personal defeat. Her central characters are women fighting against the fierce reaction of a patriarchal family to accept their freedom—but in the end they are all defeated. The story of a woman in search of her freedom belongs to the untold and unwritten invisible presences in cinematic history constructed around and by male directors whose work spoke on behalf of women and was considered emblematic of the female experience. However Plyta’s films marked the beginning and the end of that unique period in film production in the country and are the markers of what was significant and simultaneously dysfunctional in the industry.

In her work she struggled to articulate a feminine gaze through the representational codes of a patriarchal and male-dominated industry. Her later films are about women or about fatherless children trying to come to terms with a society of invisible structures established, imposed and interpreted by powerful and ubiquitous but remote and distant paternal figures. Within the world of the Father (and eventually the Son),

every female character is a male fantasy, a strange depersonalised space in which masculine narcissism, insecurity and aggression converge in order to construct a feminine presence without agency, subjectivity and interiority. All male directors of the decade fantasised about femininity and constructed representations about how women were dependent on men in order to develop their identity, sense of belonging and moral conscience; women were either mothers or seductresses, fallen angels or dignified Penelopes, victims or dangerous challengers. In other cases, they were the female personas of closeted gay directors who found in the female mystique an oblique and inconspicuous reference to their disguised homosexual gaze. With her work, the feminine presence reclaimed a space and a language that undermined the male gaze and its expectations, indeed subverted its epistemological regimes of visibility and its implied hierarchies about what could be visually articulated about the female presence and experience.

Most of her films were produced by medium-size or small production companies, AnZervos mainly, or other independent studios (Kominis Films, Leon Films, Novak Films), as the main studio of the period, that of Finos Films, in the emerging but still small film market of Greece, never accepted her as a director and all her projects were rejected by the mogul of the period, Filopemin Finos. Despite such adversities, Plyta made in total seventeen feature films for which she also wrote the script, did the editing, the montage and chose the cast, starting in 1951 and releasing her last film in 1970, when the studio system collapsed by the rising competition of television as the popular genres were deconstructed by the emerging New Greek Cinema as spearhead by Theodore Angelopoulos, Pandelis Voulgaris and others. Her development as a director expressed the strictures, the potentialities and the inadequacies of an inordinate explosion in cinematic production. Most of her late films in the sixties were not successful commercially: her melodrama *The Little Shoeshine* had only 38.000 admissions while *The Prodigal* had 208.375 and the *Little Trader* less than 160,000 (Rouvas & Stathakopoulos, 2005: 269, 302, 453). Her last film *The Unknown Woman of the Night* had fewer than 12,000 admissions (Rouvas & Stathakopoulos, 2005: 566), a decline that was indicative of the gradual demise of the commercial cinema of the sixties after its competition with the newly introduced television.

However, despite the dominant prejudices and the moderate success, Plyta worked with some of the best colleagues in the field, such as the

composers Mikis Theodorakis, Manos Hatzidakis, Yannis Markopoulos, Mimis Plessas, the cinematographers Prodromos Meravidis, Kostas Theodoridis, Grigoris Danalis, Aristidis Karydis-Fuchs and some of the best actors of the period, both well established theatrical performers, Rita Myrat, Eleni Hatziaryiri and Voula Harilaou, and young faces coming out of the primitive star system of the studio era, Andreas Barkoulis, Kostas Kakavas, Yannis Fertis, Kostas Karras and Dimitris Papamihail.

In the fifties, films were increasingly becoming the cultural sites of intense renegotiations of social practices, gender perceptions and ideologies, as urbanisation, industrialisation and emigration restructured the social, political and imaginary landscape of the country. However as the system became extremely successful and was organised along industrial lines, film-making gradually lost its innovative urge and ended in stereotypical and formulaic sellable products which, although commercially successful, became obsolete when a new perception of cinematic representation broke out in the late sixties, with its new funding models, production practices, acting methods, distribution networks and iconographic patterns.

Plyta used a number of young actors who were not trained in the theatre and provided very solid education in acting in front of the camera: indeed one could claim that she was the first director who understood the camera as an active participant in the story itself. In her comedy *Jeep, Kiosk and Love*, she dealt with the filming process in a jocular, self-conscious manner, as if she was euphorically exploring the potentialities of the medium. In order to enhance the comic relief, she rewinds the film, makes the actors talk directly to the camera and places it on the actual body of the character in order to establish distinct points of view, or indeed distinct visual angles. This film is a unique experiment and an important social text recording the rise of technological modernity which had started replacing the old traditional world of exchange and communal interaction based on honour and shame.

Each film is a social text but at the same time embodies a unique textualisation of individual responses to the cultural anxieties, formal investigations and social emotions as experienced at specific temporal intersections. The task of the historian is to localise such intersections, point out their dynamic, investigate their semiotics, interpret their formal construction and finally link them through a plausible and intelligible narrative. Especially if the work studied has been neglected, ignored or overlooked for reasons

beyond its cultural value or constructive cohesion; it is imperative that new narrative configurations are to be suggested in order to include what has been marginalised, incorporate what has been bypassed and emphasized what has been obscured.

With the work of Plyta the case is rather obvious; as the producer Finos stated, talking about one of her films: *'All is really good with this film; the only black spot is its director, a woman.'* (Angeli, 1979: 173). As the most important mainstream producer of the industry Finos wanted only female film-makers who would reaffirm traditional roles, structures and expectations. Plyta was an actual threat to his way of understanding the significance of cinematic images, the nature of the industry and the socialising function of cinema. Her work was an open provocation to the perception of women as passive recipients of the male gaze, with its distinct social hierarchies and ethical valorisations. At the moment she reversed the expectations and constructed her own images of the self, society, history and memory, her work was looked upon with suspicion and negativity. However she continued undeterred and in her mature works she produced what might be called a strange variety of 'demotic melodrama' focused around illiterate, dispossessed and marginalised working class heroes, as opposed to the 'urban high-class melodrama' that was developed and promoted predominantly by male directors, with, Yorgos Tzavellas, Vassilis Georgiadis, Dinos Katsouridis and Gregoris Gregoriou, focused on middle class married couples and their emotional entanglements.

The latter, having solved their financial circumstances, are represented as experiencing instability and conflict mainly through the arrival of a stranger, male or female lover, or the revival of a past memory. In Plyta's *demotic melodrama* less sensational events are taking place: unemployment, homelessness, inability to adjust to the capitalist commodification of human relations, reluctance in accepting the new codes of behaviour that the rising petit bourgeoisie was imposing and legislating. Finally they are permeated by a deep sense of injustice, alienation and exclusion as they struggle to construct 'a room of their own' with their own voice and identity. Plyta's demoticism was a humanistic reaction to the social depersonalisation and urban anonymity that were becoming dominant forms of self-definition and class consciousness during the sixties. Her historical position disrupted the male fantasies about feminine presences as constructed by the closeted

gay sensibility of Michael Cacoyannis and the heterosexual confidence of Nikos Koundouros, the two central figures of the nascent Greek national cinema in the fifties.

Furthermore, her films refocused the epicentre of dramatic tension from the actions of powerful men to the bodies of energetic, assertive and sometimes eccentric women. From the first film of her own *The She-Wolf/Lykaina* (1951) to her last *The Unknown Woman of the Night* (1970) the epicentre of narrative action became the resolute, strong-willed and passionate female presence which disrupts the expectations and the habits of the spectator.



*The She-Wolf*: snapshot taken from the DVD

In her *Eve* (1952) and her flawed but unique *The Duchess of Placentia* (1956), Plyta attempted the radical redefinition of the representational stereotypes of the period about women. The same can be said about the rather neglected film she did between them, the underrated experiment of *The Neighbourhood Girl* (1954), based on one of the most successful Greek operettas by Nikos Hatziapostolou. The film survives in a very bad copy with some of its most important scenes missing; yet a careful reading of its structure shows that Plyta explored through its strong class juxtapositions the transition from the old organic unity of the neighbourhood to the



expansive urban reality of capitalist modernisation. The film is about a young girl tempted by the allure of modernity, cars, risky life, and sensual pleasures. She doesn't give up, or feel victimised, or even regret her actions. "You are afraid of the city," she says to her fiancé, "the world, life, youth, people—you are a coward. I want to live. [...] I suffocate in here, in these narrow streets, these low-ceiling rooms, these moulding walls, this humble life, the past, old age. Let's escape away from here. Let's escape to the big city."

In this film, technology and modern capitalism are associated with money which is the central symbol of masculine power and domination. As long as you possess money then you are under the sway of patriarchal existence. The discontinuities in the structure of the film, as the scenes are frequently interrupted by songs, show a very interesting formula tried before by Plyta, to depict the conflict between tradition and modernity through sounds, instruments and contrasting sonorities. Based on such visual polarities, the film becomes the bridge to the most successful and popular, 're-working' of the same motif, with Michael Cacoyannis' *Stella*.

In most of Cacoyannis' films, with *Stella* as its most obvious example, women have to submit themselves to the metaphysical identifications of a patriarchal order that denied them subjectivity and agency. The only agency we find, especially in *Stella*, is the decision to surrender or die; the female desire for submission was expressed through the inability to present a feminine subjectivity defining her under conditions of freedom. Cacoyannis' female heroes have internalised their abjection and inferior status: they belong to a social order that has relegated them into receiving their meaning as individuals and cinematic texts through the signifying practices of a masculine centrality, indeed of phallogentric dominance. The narrative centre of Cacoyannis' *Stella* is the endangered phallus, not the desire for female liberation. Very few films questioned or challenged the male-centred signifiers that ascribed specific roles and patterns of behaviour to women.

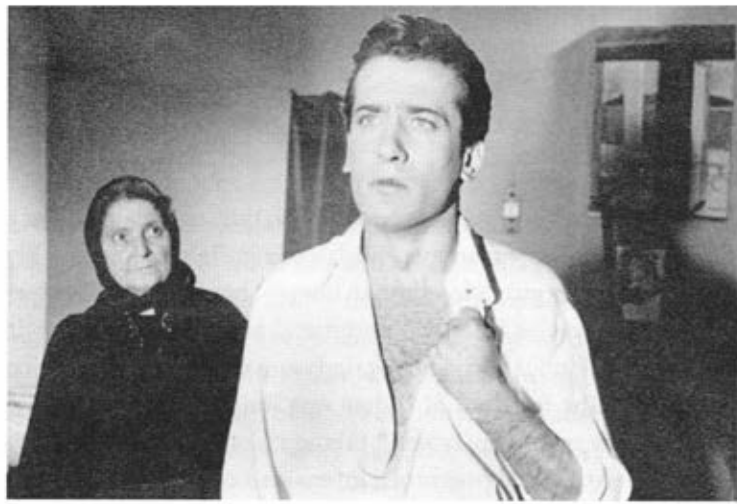
In Plyta's films women make choices, fight back and react: they are conscious of their identity, body and sexuality as women within a world dominated by values that predetermine for them specific roles and social functions. With very discreet and indirect indications, because of the conservative audience and her cautious producers, her female characters are

also full of sexual energy, take sexual initiative, especially in her early films, and know to provoke reaction. By also being the screenwriter Plyta worked with a certain margin of freedom to liberate her female characters and feminine centred stories from the peripheral and subordinate position which the patriarchal industry had relegated women in its dominant iconographic stereotypes. The freedom of course was limited as the industry itself was dominated by men who avoided taking risks with the medium while having to deal with social pressures, intensified censorship and the producer's demand for profit.

However, for the first time in Greek cinema, female characters, instead of simply being mere "actants" for the unfolding story of the male protagonists, develop their own moral conscience and struggle to acquire rational mastery over their body, social presence and individual destiny. Plyta attempted the gendering of the nation and its narratives, by elevating the female experience to the centre of a symbolic re-writing of national history. Her *Duchess of Placentia* starts and ends with an invocation by Plyta herself to her forgotten hero: 'Tell me all your secrets, which history never recorded and I will resurrect you!' It was an invocation about the history of women which had been seen as only subservient to the stories of legends of the great men who established the nation.

We have talked elsewhere about the extreme risks that Plyta took with her first mature film *Eve*. The film is probably one of the most confronting presentations of women as desiring bodies: they are not desired by a man but they desire them, they provoke their sexual drive and torment their body. As we indicated in another study: "*Eve* was a "problematic" film and the first major breakthrough in gender representation in Greek cinema, with realistic dialogue, convincing characters, and rhythmic narrative, paving the way for Cacoyannis' *Stella*." (Karalis, 2012: 61). With that film Plyta 'problematised' the representation of women and depicted it not as something given, 'natural,' but as something constructed and self-invented. Indeed the first character which invents itself in Greek cinema was that of *Eve* in Plyta's film.

The same can be claimed about *The Duchess of Placentia*; Eliza-Anna Delveroudi in her very insightful approach located an autobiographical element in this film about the strange foreigner who found refuge in the



Eve: snapshot taken from the DVD

primitive Greece of the 1840's and the pioneering character of Plyta's female presence in a male-dominated profession:

*"I do not infer any feminist assumption, Delveroudi says, but an implied autobiographical manoeuvre: The Duchess is an exception, and the position of an equal partner, with which she administers her own affairs, refers only to her and it does not permeate the surrounding milieu, or become a model or bring profit to other women around her. Something analogous happens with Plyta. She was a woman—her colleagues present her as dynamic, while she admits that only through conflicts she managed to impose her views on the film crew members unable to take heed of her instructions; a woman who conquered a male-dominated profession, but without functioning as an example, as long as conditions remain the same. She was an isolated case, an exception." (Delveroudi, 353)*

The image of a feminine presence in search of her self-articulation recurs persistently in all her films. It is obvious that all of them belong to one genre, the melodrama, which was the most successful and most sellable product of the period. However, she manages to invest its conventions and codes with some incomplete yet unsettling sub-texts about female sexuality, maternity, female friendship, sexual attraction, morality and social etiquette which have been underestimated. The usual story of a naive woman standing firm in her beliefs to maintain her innocence and her virginity until she gets married sounds extremely conservative and silly today. Yet it has to be seen against the background of the usual representation of women as easy prey and victim to the overpowering male sexual aggression.



*The Duchess of Placentia*: snapshot taken from the DVD

It seems that Plyta in order to confront the stereotype of women as fallen angels in a brothel or a night club, waiting for a strong man to liberate them from their inability to freeing themselves, went the other direction and constructed the idealistic and completely super-human image of women as unfallen angels, as angels who could not fall and would never allow themselves to be 'saved' by the grace of their husband. Certainly this image was the outcome of a long process within the representational codes of the industry; it was the ultimate construct of her films in the last years of her productivity, especially in films like *The Uphill Road/O Aniforos* (1964), *The Winner* (1965) and *The Little Trader* (1967), melodramas in which the female protagonist carries the burden of the story till the end and frames the complexities that make the script unfold in unexpected narrative twists and turns.

In the film, for example *The Uphill Road*, (which was an obvious response and rebuttal to the most successful melodrama of the period *The Downhill Road/O Katiforos* (1961) by Yannis Dalianidis), Plyta constructed an unstable narrative, relocating centres of action from one character to another in a very eloquent and innovative manner. In *The Winner* she questioned the family structure based on money and social hierarchy: 'If a family oppresses the individuals it is made of, it is better to be dissolved,' the main female character declares. Indeed in most of her films there are many subversive statements and images about the fluid nature of the patriarchal family and about societal institutions pertaining to the female presence in the social sphere. In her comedy *I am a Man and I will Do whatever I like*,

the handsome boss, who seems alarmed by the sexual attention of women, reveals to the girl who pretends to be a boy in order to find work: 'All women are so annoying! If I had my way, I would have sacked them all and send them home. Only men should work.' Plyta's comedy is a tale of sexual ambivalence, visualised through stereotypes and articulated through stock-images which configured an extremely destabilised representation of gender—and gender representability was the main concern of her camera both in comedy and melodrama.

### III

*By indirections find directions out*

William Shakespeare

A pioneer of Greek cinema, Gregoris Gregoriou, whose work in the forties and fifties paved the way for the success of popular narrative cinema, wrote in his memoirs about the problems of making films after the war: "Inevitably, in that early age, the best director was not the person with the best ideas but the director who had those ideas which could be potentially realised in the best possible way." (Gregoriou, 1996: 117). This observation about the art of film-making as practiced in the 50ies should be our guide in understanding Plyta's directorial efforts, flaws and successes. Her attempt to construct a visual language for the depiction of female presence was hindered by both the material culture of the day and the existing dominant representations. There were no films in which female presence was the central focus of the narrative; all women characters were essentially male desires in disguise, sometimes overtly or most frequently unconsciously, negative desires of frustration and repression.

With Plyta the effort to construct a language with its own specific semiotics was obviously intense but was never really completed. In her work we see the distinct effort for a feminine perspective which was not necessarily a feminist one: the stereotypes of dominant representations and the censorship of the industry made impossible the establishment of a totalising perception of womanhood. Her work coincided with the political emancipation of women in Greece who were given the right to vote in 1952

and exercised it for the first time in the elections of 1956. However no real radical feminist movement developed in the country until the late seventies. Plyta's work reflects the genteel and bourgeois feminism of the 30ies, a feminist movement endorsed by the liberal state in its constant tendency for compromises between social agendas. This explains why in Plyta's work there is no mention of the historical adventures of the country, not even of the Civil War that had ended quite recently, in 1949. Only in passing there is only a single reference to the beginning of the Second World War in her best comedy: in all her films, characters are almost ahistorical, with structures of consciousness focused on class and gender but not on history or culture.

Local idiolects and the irregular use of language employed in the scripts she wrote make her films significant social documents recording the transition from the poly-dialectical cartography of diverse rural communities into the common urban vernacular, following the standardised monolingualism of a centralised educational system and its hierarchical order. Indeed if in her early films communal belonging was emphasised, in her melodramas of the 60ies individual empowerment within the family structures became privileged. Yet one must notice the significant absence of religious feeling or even of what usually enchants Greek audiences, the lack of ecclesiastical rituals. In her film *The Winner*, as the young couple is going to get married enters an empty church without a priest or congregation: a frisson of reserved sensuality infiltrates most of her films foregrounding the lack of religious piety even in its expression as folk-lore, the hallmark of Orthodox Christian religiosity. In her *Little Shoeshine Boy*, she even dares to challenge institutional religion, when the innocent boy declines to go to church because "God is everywhere and sometimes I meet him when I work."

In this essay I tried to investigate the historicity of Plyta's films and the way she articulated a distinct female mythography by infusing the cinematic frame with the female presence, agency and visibility. I insisted on specific films which demarcated spaces of contested values, aesthetics and practices. In an era of totalising and totalitarian ideologies, Plyta's work was infused with the same urge we find in the theorists of the first wave feminism—the urge to establish a cohesive representation of femininity. In order to achieve this goal, she cannibalised the male-centred language of the dominant cinematic genres, infused them with disturbing and unsettling micro-histories, and constructed open visual fields in which female

spectators could gain or reclaim their own self-recognition as women. Her achievement was not consistent but it was path-breaking for the construction of the female gaze through narratives of subversion and resistance. In return, many mainstream male directors searched in her work to borrow 'feminine expressions' as presented and experienced by a woman.

Yet, beyond the dialectics of cinematic interactions, she was the first creative film-maker, who presented women as desiring, thinking and feeling beings—and she struggled to visualise the antinomies of their presence and interiority while fighting against professional prejudice and moral panic. She belongs to what can be termed as world 'women's cinema' a category still laden with vagueness and fluidity, 'a hybrid concept arising from a number of overlapping practices and discourses' (Butler, 2002: 2). In a provocative yet indirect way, she managed to transform the screen into the site of a unique and radical revelation that needs to be revisited.

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