

ARGYRO LOUKAKI

THE TROJAN WOMEN: READINGS OF SPACE
AND AESTHETICS IN THE FILM ADAPTATION
OF EURIPIDES BY MICHAEL CACOYANNIS



ABSTRACT: This paper assesses the cinematic adaptation of *The Trojan Women* (1971) by Michael Cacoyannis. Focusing on his “molding” of space, the paper discusses the depth of Cacoyannis’s sensitivity and awareness of painting, architecture, and sculpture, plus his manifold dialogues with the East. The following eight aspects are explored: The treatment of space in this film, which comprises various scales, including Eastern, Greek, and Western geographies. Beauty as a stratagem of both survival and authority appropriated by Helen. Cacoyannis’s lessons from Eastern, mainly Japanese painting and film. The role of color in this film. The kind of “modern” spatialities created by camera movement. The purposeful cinematic reincarnation of ancient Greek sculpture through choreographies of the bodies of Trojan women, which draws upon the graded placement of classical pedimental sculptures. The symbolic role of fire in *The Trojan Women*, and finally, the city as a sublime locus of sanctity, destruction but also restitution.

INTRODUCTION

THE FILM director Michael Cacoyannis claimed the privilege of being able to interpret Euripides correctly. In a sense, he argued that he is Euripides’s modern reincarnation. His statement that he had a great psychic affinity with the ancient tragedian approximates the modern Greek poet Odysseus Elytis’s belief that he was Sappho’s male reincarnation. This

* I owe many thanks to Professor Stavros Tsitsiridis, Director of the MA Program “Ancient Greek Theater and its Reception”, Department of Ancient Theater, University of Patras, for inviting me to give a speech on the same subject on 06.03.2023. Comments received then have informed this paper. Many thanks are also due to The Michael Cacoyannis Foundation, which endorsed this event and sent me materials, to Dr. Eleni Nodarou and to Dr. Don Evely for their remarks. I also wish to thank the “anonymous referee” for his/her suggestions.

is no small assertion. Euripides, “the most tragic among the poets” according to Aristotle (*Poet.* 13.1453a29), overwhelmed his audience with his poetic power, his excellent use of figures of speech, and his narrative flexibility. Pseudo-Longinus in the 1st century AD referred to the almost constant high style of Euripides,¹ reflecting the admiration of all antiquity, both Greek and Roman.²

Cacoyannis’s trilogy of film adaptations of Euripides’s tragedies comprises *Electra* (1962), *The Trojan Women* (1971), and *Iphigenia in Aulis* (1977). *The Trojan Women* represents the densely packed events that the ancient text describes between the fall of Troy and the violent removal of her women. Having lost their men and children, they are dragged, captives of the spear, into a foreign land like animals—slaves who will give birth to children of Greeks—if and when the Greek ships return home. Hecuba, until recently queen of the now-ruined city, remains before us throughout the play, while Andromache, Cassandra and Helen appear and depart in constant bursts of tension. Fear and trembling grip the viewer of this film engendered by the sweeping passions of the defenceless women of Troy after the city’s fall. The physical reaction is as powerful as would be the empirical experience of witnessing a real, live tragedy in a theatrical space. In the text of Euripides, however, the bad fortune of the Greeks has already been announced both by the gods Poseidon and Athena, and by Cassandra, so the promise of a double dose of catharsis is faintly to be discerned. The negatives mentioned above contain a positive element too, which can be detected in the high moral fibre of these women. It is about the mythical vindication and glory that awaits them and the entire city in the distant future.³

Despite some initial reservations from the critics,⁴ recent comments from the public vindicate the film as a sensational masterpiece.⁵ Here, we will focus on space and spatialities, namely the qualities and flows of space in *The Trojan Women*. We will explore the artistic solutions and affinities

1. Ps.-Longinus, *On the Sublime* (*Περί ὑψηλοῦς*) 40.3.

2. See Hall (2022). However, the jury relegated *The Trojan Women* when it was first performed (415 BC) to the last position (see Valverde García 2018).

3. See Dodds (1973).

4. See Roger Ebert’s review of *The Trojan Women* in: <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-trojan-women-1972>.

5. See comments in https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tW8OJoin_90. Scholarship has focused on the anti-war element since Gilbert Murray so argued in his *Euripides and his Age* (1913), see Hall (2022). Cacoyannis himself stressed it, see note 12 here. Nowadays, critics like Rabinowitz (2017) and Hall (2022) are sceptical for various reasons.

of Cacoyannis, some obvious and some unidentified. It is understood that the artist had a deep and personal awareness of every detail of his films, in which nothing is accidental. Possessing a global awareness of the arts of film and theater, the director used to say: “I always know what I want to shoot.”⁶ Cacoyannis’s deep sensibility results, among other things, from his painting skills, which associate him with the likes of Franco Zeffirelli and Akira Kurosawa.⁷ Like Kurosawa, Cacoyannis edited his films personally. Equally, just as Cacoyannis shot scenes of his *Electra* in Mycenae, so did Kurosawa use two important landmarks of Japan, the ancient castles Kumamoto and Himeji. The sets and costumes of *The Trojan Women* were designed by the famous Nickolas Georgiadis of Covent Garden,⁸ who apparently served Cacoyannis’s vision as completely as did the photographer Alfio Contini and earlier Walter Lassaly.⁹

Cacoyannis’s concern for spatial lucidity is already evident from his first film, *The Sunday Awakening*, with its excellent cinematography of a pulsating Athens. The filming locations in each part of the tragic trilogy occupied him intensely. He worshipped the Greek landscape and employed it in his search for maximum authenticity and to express his deep awareness of Greek history and geography in the first and third parts of this trilogy.¹⁰ The cycle of *The Trojan Women*, one of the more frequently performed tragedies,¹¹ did not end for Cacoyannis with this film,¹² given that he staged

6. See Sifakos (2009) 77.

7. On the importance of painting to cinema, see Dalle Vache (1996).

8. Very limited materials are included in the book dedicated to Nickolas Georgiadis’s work, see Georgiadi (2004).

9. Konomi (2011) refers to the weighty importance on image aesthetics of this collaboration between Cacoyannis and Georgiadis, due to the influence that this film exerted on subsequent theatrical interpretations.

10. On the significance of space and in particular of landscapes in film adaptations of Greek tragedy, see Michelakis (2013) 191–215; Loukaki (2023b). A difference here would be that Michelakis insinuates that the aesthetic experience emerges only as peaceful contemplation; I argue that it addresses the entire affective region from pleasure to terror. In particular, the aesthetic is stimulant of the imagination, a bridge to social affectivity and to collective archetypes, plus theoretical discourse on, as well as sensations of the body (see Loukaki 2016b, 7–8).

11. According to Rabinowitz (2017), this tragedy is popular for the very characteristics that were criticized earlier.

12. See Cacoyannis in Sifakos (2009) 186, 192. *The Trojan Women* is emblematic for Cacoyannis, who is among the first to stage tragedy in a closed theatrical space. He did this in the Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto, 1962. Again, in 1963, with Rod Steiger, Claire Bloom, and Mildred Dunnock in the leading roles. Later in the same year, the play was staged in New York – he considered this to be the most “mature” of his stagings, and in 1965, in



Fig. 1. The *Trojan Women*: The setting. Notice the dynamism of the asymmetries, the ascending diagonals, and the definition of space through posts.

this play in many theatrical productions. The film was shot at a time when the director was in self-imposed exile during the Greek 1967–1974 dictatorship. An effort to stage *The Trojan Women* with Elli Lambeti in all three roles of Andromache, Cassandra and Helen, and with Yannis Tsarouchis’s costumes and sets in the Odeion of Herodes Atticus, Athens, in 1967, was cancelled because of this political situation.¹³ For the film, Cacoyannis chose the location, “an amazing castle that circled a hill, an ideal backdrop” in Atienza, Spain (Fig. 1) and the four protagonists, the great actresses Katharine Hepburn, Vanessa Redgrave, Geneviève Bujold and Irene Papas.¹⁴ The

Paris and in Avignon. For the latter performances, which he considered to be his most “classical”, the costumes and sets were designed by Yannis Tsarouchis. A picture by the master photographer Cartier Bresson was published in *Vogue*. His last staging of the play in Epidaurus was in 1995. See Siafkos (2009) 187–195. “For me”, he said in a 1971 magazine interview, “the play is particularly pertinent and real. What the play is saying is as important today as it was when it was written. I feel very strongly about war, militarism, killing people [...] and I haven’t found a better writer who makes that point more clearly than Euripides. The play is about the folly of war, the folly of people killing others and forgetting that they are going to die themselves.” See <https://en.kinorium.com/63268/>

13. See Siafkos (2009) 192.

14. The film had to be shot on a low budget. Each one of these actresses received the symbolic sum of \$25,000, see https://www.getty.edu/visit/events/cacoyannis_series.html#trojan_women.

castle was stunning, an ideal setting according to the director,¹⁵ although it is located far from the sea, approximately 130 km away from Madrid, quite contrary to the coastal location of Troy in the ancient text.

Filming an ancient tragedy is no easy task, argued Siegfried Kracauer (1997, 216). The tight narrative undermines any scene that is not directly related to the internal economy of both strictly circumscribed action and emphasis on poetic speech.¹⁶ Moreover, a cinéaste like Sergei Eisenstein voiced misgivings against cultured dramas and photographed performances of a theatrical kind in his 1928 manifesto. Ancient tragedy is less amenable to filming because of its tight and purposeful composition, Marcel Proust insisted as well.¹⁷ In addition, today's cinema does not seem to be stimulated by Greek tragedy, possibly because the genre requires a far greater than usual commitment and mental participation from the audience.¹⁸ In the same spirit, *The New York Times* wrote on the occasion of Cacoyannis's *Electra* that dependence on dialogue should be limited in films based on ancient Greek drama. This is a fact that Cacoyannis understood:¹⁹

Mr. Cacoyannis knows you can't photograph words, that a medium as visual as motion pictures must not put too much dependence on the ear. Also, he sees that the contours of the drama in the Greek tragedies are so massive and elemental that they may be suggested and impressed upon the eye with a proper and tasteful presentation of graphic images.

The manner in which Cacoyannis dealt with “the massive contours of the drama” and accomplished the “proper and tasteful presentation of graphic images” is explored below, starting from the spatial parameter in this cinematic adaptation.

15. This castle was nominated as a protected monument immediately after the end of the filming, Cacoyannis mentions in Siafkos (2009) 184.

16. It should be noted in passing that directors like Pier Paolo Pasolini did not follow this principle in their interpretations, as he broke the narrative through poetic intermedia, recollections and the large number of poetic freedoms that he took. Some of these are of concern to me in Loukaki (2024).

17. See Kracauer (1997) 14.

18. See Pomeroy (2017).

19. See <https://www.nytimes.com/1962/12/18/archives/screen-a-brilliant-new-electragreek-classic-provides-an-interesting.html>.

THE TREATMENT OF SPACE IN *THE TROJAN WOMEN*

The Trojan Women, both the ancient text and the film, displays a particularly acute and sophisticated spatial awareness, also found in other Euripidean plays. The tragedian is deeply aware of architecture and space, a fact attested by *Ion*, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, *Iphigenia in Tauris* and *The Bacchae*.²⁰ The tragedian even includes an imaginary tour of the geography of Greece through the agonizing questions of the chorus members as to their destination: Will they go to Argos, Corinth and its principal spring Peirene, Phthia, Athens, Sparta and Evrotas, Olympus and Pineios, Sicily and Mount Etna, Phoenicia, Ionia?

A brief description regarding the terms “space” and “spatiality” is necessary here. Our immediate associative response to the terms is *absolute* space, namely Euclidean, solid geometric space. Besides, however, following philosophers such as Alfred North Whitehead and human geographers such as David Harvey,²¹ two more kinds are included here: relative space, namely flows of space and time resulting from movements, actions and transformation. Also, relational space, which is fashioned by emotion, imagination and memory. Accordingly, it is evident that space as a concept is associated with different material, mental, psychic and spiritual forces or with combinations thereof. Mathematical-Euclidean space (the space of logos), but also space resulting from flows (information, movements) are associated with reason. On the other hand, mythical and memory landscapes relate to emotion, the imagination and intuition. All three categories coexist in *The Trojan Women*, both in the ancient text and in the film.

An absolute expressive economy prevails: Cacoyannis’s space can be shaped or defined by either raw, or well-elaborated building materials (smooth and carved stones, column drums, other scattered architectural members, wooden beams) but also by human bodies, here mainly female, and their movement, by cavernous and rocky figures, light, hazy colors, ash and dust, which emphasize absence of moral clarity and the debilitating tragedy of the situation, as well as by deliberate digressions and descriptions, imaginative or mnemonic.

In this context, the viewer shares the short-lived reverie, ultimately spatially manifested, that Hecuba articulates in her dialogue with Andromache

20. See Tsitsiridis (2019); Loukaki (2021b); Loukaki (2023b).

21. See Harvey (2004).



Fig. 2. The ruined propylon apparently erected by stage designer N. Georgiadis.

(see 0:52':14" – 0:53':20" of the film). She sees before her Troy standing again, rebuilt by the descendants of her grandson Astyanax, Hector's only child. It is about both an absolute (the new Troy as a geometric entity) and a relational spatiality (the city as a creature of the imagination). This dream is crushed with tragic irony along with the little body of Astyanax, whom the Achaeans kill a little later, throwing him from the walls, to avoid such an eventuality.²²

The opening scene in the terrestrial sphere is placed by Euripides on the beach of Troy, where the captives fret about their fate, in front of military tents. This is a fairly common action background, which we also find in *Iphigenia in Aulis*, in the fragmentarily preserved *Palamedes* (cf. test. v a and fr. 589 Kann.), in Sophocles's *Ajax* and in pseudo-Euripides's *Rhesus*.

Here, the ancient text differs from the film in two ways. First, in the film Helen, ever the enchantress, asks the soldiers for water which she uses to wash in, in the lodging where she is kept (see 1:06':53" – 1:09':04" of the film).²³ She does so under a cascade of curses coming from the terribly thirsty Trojan women. This moment is the filmic occasion for the climax of their rage. Second, in regard to the river Scamander, which played a role

22. There is foreshadowing of this spatiality of hurling Astyanax from the city battlements in Homer, see Scully (1990) 127.

23. See also analysis in McDonald (1989) 221.



Fig. 3. Cassandra's cave, a confection of Cacoyannis.

in the *Iliad* and echoes of the women's laments in Euripides.²⁴ In the film, water is mentioned but not shown (see, for instance, 0:51':50" of the film), apart from the aforementioned incident. The same applies to almost any trace of the ocean, except for a fleeting scene with Helen and Menelaus on the same boat back to Greece (see below).

Cacoyannis develops the action mainly outside the walls of Troy, on the slopes and at the feet of its burning citadel. The ruined propylon with its columns, which appears in the film, does not exist in Euripides but was apparently erected by Georgiadis (Fig. 2). In Euripides, Cassandra emerges from a hut, but in Cacoyannis she has taken refuge in a cavernous space with uneven ground, which is by definition charged with symbolism. Caves are closely linked to prophecy-giving. Greek sages, philosophers and heroes experienced underground sojourns; mystery initiations encompassed

24. Eur. *Tr.* 29–45: “Scamander’s banks re-echo long and loud / the screams of captive maids, as they by lot receive their masters. [30] / Arcadia takes some, and some the people of Thessaly; / others are assigned to Theseus’ sons, the Athenian chiefs. / And such of the Trojan women as are not portioned out are in these tents, / set apart for the leaders of the army; and with them Spartan Helen, / daughter of Tyndareus, justly counted among the captives. / And if you would see that queen of misery, Hecuba, you can; / for there she lies before the gates, weeping many tears for many sorrows; / at Achilles’ tomb, [40] / without her knowledge, her daughter Polyxena has died most piteously; / Priam is gone, and her children too; / Cassandra, whom the lord Apollo left to be a virgin, frenzied maid, / has been forced by Agamemnon, in contempt of the god’s ordinance and of piety, / to a dishonored wedlock.” (Tr. E. P. Coleridge)

rites located in caves, too (see Yustinova 2009). Ancient and Byzantine caves house human and divine bodies.²⁵ Here, however, the saving encounter with the divine does not take place (Fig. 3). The venerable priestess of Apollo is dragged by force to become Agamemnon's concubine.²⁶ She foresees, however, unfolding as if in a mental movie, the multiple terrible episodes of the breaching of sanctity that will happen to Agamemnon, Clytemnestra and herself.

BEAUTY AS STRATAGEM OF SURVIVAL AND AUTHORITY

Both Euripides and Cacoyannis explore *κάλλος* —beauty, an essential aesthetic category— as a harbinger of the collective collapse of a civilization which is simultaneously a catalytic, a disarming strategy for personal survival and dominance.²⁷ Menelaus declares himself determined to kill Helen for the dishonor she brought upon him and her family by eloping (v. 878; 1039); however, Helen defends herself by means of the male privilege of public speech,²⁸ which is granted to her by her amorous, and therefore weakened husband following Hecuba's exhortation (v. 906). She both sophisticatedly and arrogantly attributes her folly to Aphrodite,²⁹ is rebutted by Hecuba, but remains invincible in the battle between rational discourse and visual persuasion as staged by both Euripides and Cacoyannis.³⁰ Helen's gaze and body possess enormous power, setting men, whom they exclusively affect and whose decisions matter, on fire. The meeting of the two spouses, Patrick Magee's slightly ridiculous Menelaus —an unexpectedly ironic interpretation on the part of the director in a relentlessly forceful film— and Irene Papas, who surrounds him like a predator circling its prey, creates centripetal spatialities. In this brief episode, which changes the pace of the film, the camera dwells on Helen's face, eyes and the rapid succession of

25. The use of caves as cult places is well known. Indicatively, Zeus is linked with caves of Ida and Psychro on Crete, while baby Jesus with the cave of Bethlehem. For more with analysis on the ancient period, see Katsarou and Nagel (2021).

26. The filming of her forced exit differs from the ancient text. For details, see McDonald (1989) 194–196.

27. This is a study of pursuing great beauty, la “grande bellezza”, according to Paolo Sorrentino's homonymous film, though human in the former case, urban in the latter.

28. See analysis in Blondel (2013) 182–201.

29. See McDonald (1989) 233.

30. On the latter, see Blondell (2013) 182–201).



Fig. 4. Helen: Hollywood (in Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy*, 2004) and Cacoyannis's interpretation of the ultimate Greek female *κάλλος*.

body postures, sensually exploring her bare back. These shots are the closest substitution possible for a gaze upon and contact with the perfect female beauty available to both the director and the male audience.

Menelaus's agitation, who in vase representations raises the sword only to throw it away,³¹ is also portrayed in the film. The tug-of-war between Helen's potentially punitive death and Menelaus's limb-relaxing yearning peaks, only to be resolved favorably for both. Euripides (1046–1055) and, more strikingly so, Cacoyannis (see 1:13':00" – 1:25':00" of the film) capture Menelaus's transcendent soaring through *ἔρω*s, love, as Plato's *Phaedrus* has it.³² Pseudo-Longinus, in his turn, claimed that instinctively our soul is uplifted by the true sublime, taking proud flight, and is filled with joy and vaunting as though it had itself produced what it has heard (here: seen).³³ The Greek aesthetic tradition, unlike the Western, merges great beauty with the sublime.³⁴ The divine origins of Helen and her bonds to the cosmos, as well as the merger of real and mythological time, namely the fusion of the duration of the Trojan War and the eternity necessary for the transformation of the Dioscuri Castor and Pollux into a constellation, are insinuated by Hecuba in the original text (999-1001):

31. See Blondell (2013).

32. As Sansone (1996) argues, Jacqueline de Romilly attributed Plato's ideas on issues such as psychology, ethics and politics to the influence of Euripides.

33. *φύσει γάρ πως ὑπὸ τᾶληθοῦς ἔψους ἐπαίρεται τε ἡμῶν ἡ ψυχή καὶ γαῦρόν τι ἀνάστημα λαμβάνουσα πληροῦται χαρᾶς καὶ μεγαλανχίας, ὡς αὐτὴ γεννήσασα ὅπερ ἤκουσεν* (*On the Sublime* 7.2). Ps-Longinus was primarily interested in literature, but his concept of the sublime has informed aesthetic theory, see Loukaki (2022).

34. See analysis in Loukaki (2022).

*τίς Σπαρτιατῶν ἤσθητ'; ἢ ποίαν βοήν
ἀνωλόλυξας, Κάστορος νεανίου
τοῦ συζύγου τ' ἔτ' ὄντος, οὐ κατ' ἄστρα πω;*

what Spartan saw this? what cry for help did you ever raise, though Castor
was still alive, a vigorous youth, and his brother also, not yet among the stars?
(tr. E. P. Coleridge)

This sublime is exactly what Menelaus sought, tried to repatriate and own, although his yearning to possess the beautiful painfully possessed him. Such an amalgam of the sublime and the beautiful is exemplified in Helen, though experience of this amalgam is now a conjugal matter only: its bearer has become loathsome to these women and burdensome to the rest of the Greeks. The significance of Menelaus's next move, to postpone Helen's death in both the ancient text (1050) and the film (this is announced by the soldiers, see 1:09':50" and confirmed by him, see 1:24':48" – 1:25':17"), is multilayered. First, it announces Helen's victory. Then, it reclaims a degree of respect for Menelaus from the viewers exactly because this unmissable moment of psychic ascent in the midst of, and despite, everything is skillfully depicted by Magee. Finally, it signifies that the gods did not grant Hecuba and the other women the favor of witnessing the extinguishing of the utmost example of human *κάλλος*. Helen, daughter of Zeus, is not afraid of the curses that the Trojan women throw at her. Disarming Menelaus, she leaves for Greece with a brief but triumphant, satisfied smirk (see 1:25':50" of the film), cold in the face of all the terrible devastation she has caused. Despite Menelaus's promise to Hecuba in the text (1053) that Helen will not embark on the same ship as him, this is exactly what is portrayed in the film (see 1:26':35" – 1:27':00").

Variance between the north European and the Mediterranean model of beauty (Fig. 4) intrudes into this snapshot, a fact which has not remained unnoticed and uncommented by critics who expected, almost self-evidently, a blonde Helen in this film. For Cacoyannis, however, Irini Papas was objectively the best candidate, because she possessed, and could easily project, the strength, magnificence and ingenuity of the heroine.³⁵

35. See Sifakos (2009) 185.

CACOYANNIS AND THE EAST

Euripides of course refers to a city in Asia Minor, *τὴν Φρυγῶν πόλιν* (994), generally in the East. In his turn, Cacoyannis opens a wider dialogue with world culture, Western as well as Japanese. The theme of a castle fire filmed by Cacoyannis also concerned Kurosawa, with whom some critics compare him,³⁶ earlier (*The Seven Samurai*, 1954) but also later (*Ran*, 1985) than Cacoyannis.³⁷ The poetic violence and the purity of Kurosawa's frames, which fascinated Francis Ford Coppola,³⁸ are arguably also present in Cacoyannis.

The director enlivens the visual impact with movement and depth by opening up the space in the Japanese way: he uses widely diagonal lines and asymmetry (Fig. 1). The artistic exploration of the diagonal is ancient. Recall, for instance, works such as "Nike untying her sandal" from the temple of Athena Nike on the Athenian Acropolis (420–410 BC) or "Athena and Nike fighting Alkyoneus" from the Pergamon altar frieze (*ca.* 181–159 BC). But, especially from the interwar period onwards, artists harnessed the diagonal's dynamism to attract attention with nerve and tempo, abandoning the staticity of rectangular shapes. In *The Trojan Women* the diagonal is consciously used in a multitude of inventive ways. In the theatrical descents of women and soldiers in Cassandra's cave, in chevron-shaped lines, even in Helen's dress.

In various shots of *The Trojan Women* the setup evokes the Japanese aesthetic, with a strong vertical element on the foreground level and then a definition of space with movable posts in a zig-zag line. Cacoyannis also introduces high or low viewing angles, perspectives similar to those explored in ukiyo-e (woodcut) and kakemono (paper or silk scrolls) painting, which were unusual before the West became visually familiar with Japan, and which captivated the Impressionists. If, during the 19th century, the Japanese revolutionized Western painting and architectural modernism, after Hiroshima

36. They may coexist in reviews, like the following of *Time Magazine*, 1963, see <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,829741,00.html>; or in printed matter, see <https://mcf.gr/wp-content/uploads/images/downloads/04sanfranciscoinernfilmfest00001.pdf>.

37. See also Sampatakakis (2011). To portray the devastation, the film crew lit a huge fire using gasoline; see Cacoyannis in Siafkos (2009) 184.

38. See director Francis Ford Coppola in <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rN7jzqK21JE>. Other Japanese directors portrayed castles, including Fujie Yamazaki's 1928 *Yoshi Castle*, Hayao Miyazaki's 1986 *Castles in the Sky*, Mitsutoshi Tanaka's 2009 *Castle Under Fiery Skies*, and more.

they had to process national trauma and a death drive.³⁹ Of course, Kurosawa, who, conversely, was in constant contact with Western culture, shot in *Ran* multifaceted war scenes front-on.

Elemental architectural forms, such as Helen's sooty dungeon (see 1:07':34" – 1:09':06" of the film), wildly stoned by the women, refer to a universal language and appear in cycles of interaction, prior but also subsequent to *The Trojan Women*. For instance, Dionysis Fotopoulos's sets for *Iphigenia in Aulis* were obviously influenced by architect Dimitris Pikionis, who was deeply knowledgeable in the Far Eastern, the Western and the local traditions in all their magnitude.⁴⁰ Cacoyannis is therefore not the first 20th century Greek to be fascinated by the East, either explicitly or implicitly. He was preceded by its deeply respectful friends Pikionis and Nikos Hatzikyriakos-Ghikas. Earlier, the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright was inspired by his Japanese references and connections, which he duly exploited.⁴¹

It should be noted in passing that the East appears to be a contentious issue for tragedy in the Greek theater. Some directors, like Theodoros Terzopoulos, refer to it in their personal visions, while others, like Lefteris Vogiatzis, want to bring tragedy back into the Western canon.⁴²

THE ROLE OF COLOR IN *THE TROJAN WOMEN*

The nighttime at the beginning of the film contains tones of dark blue, black and ash-grey mixed with and illuminated by the fire. During the day, the color scale, already hinted at, includes dusty greys, minimal light blues, when absolutely necessary,⁴³ very light earthy colors similar to those of the natural soil and the city walls, and the very dark or black of the imposing rocks. Surreally, there are almost no trees or shadows. Overall, we are

39. See Loukaki (2016b).

40. See Loukaki (1997); (2016a); (2016b); (2021b); (2024).

41. See Loukaki (2016b) ch. 7.

42. Some commentators argue that there were forbidden areas in any research into stage performance of the ancient drama in Greece of the 1950s. Research was even regarded unnecessary; experimentation was considered anti-national behavior. See Mavrogeni (2011) 462.

43. Cacoyannis's lighting here assimilates that of Tarkovsky's in *Stalker* (1979). Both differ radically from the lighting used in traditional black-and-white Hollywood films, which stresses strong outlines and contrasts. For analysis on the latter, see Bordwell and Thompson (2021) 208–214.



Fig. 5. A perfect correspondence between the Trojan women and the book-like, reposing rocks, is accomplished here.

as close as possible to black and white, with which Cacoyannis felt safe.⁴⁴ However, simultaneously, breathing in smoke and dust, we are far from the crisp and bright black and white of his *Electra*. This emotionally leveling color range recalls the Japanese Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows*. The extremely austere and clean effect, in which there are no bright contrasts, captures, I think, the inverted reality of a sepia-like, spectral, and illusionistic space, a transparent nightmare that, however, stands on the verge of mythologizing, having partly lost its material anchorage.

This is partly because in these photographically faded and washed-out frames, the dark costumes of the women and the colors of the rocks remain strong and legible. They thus express the mental struggle of the Trojan women, their physical exhaustion, as they are literally demolished by this tragedy. The rocks seem to tilt to participate, as it were, in carefully seeing and hearing, becoming part of the chorus. The perfect correspondence between women and rocks also includes the strong cracks and gaps that make them look like huge reposing books, where this legend is about to be recorded forever. At the same time, it underlines the rhizomatic significance of both for Troy.

Images are dense. There is black against the washed and flimsy earthen hues with the son of Hector riding next to his mother and in front of the father's shield. This is a Homeric kind of foreshadowing, since the shield

44. Cacoyannis said during interviews that he was affected by black-and-white and afraid of color.

will soon become Astyanax's tomb. Only at his burial do the colors clear and brighten to honor the young prince's promising but short life.

SPATIALITIES ACCRUING FROM THE MOVING CAMERA

The closed shooting angles, in stark contrast to the huge open shots of Hollywood Troy,⁴⁵ bring to life a suffocatingly entrenched universe. Faces are explored as mental landscapes in this, as in the other two parts of Cacoyannis's tragic trilogy, through close-up portraits of the women, something impossible in the theater. The dolly zoom technique is used in the scene with Astyanax being cast from the walls of Troy, reminiscent of Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), the film in which this shooting technique was first used.

Astyanax's ascent to sacrifice announces a sacrificial landscape, like that of Iphigenia in *Iphigenia in Aulis*.⁴⁶ The view from top to bottom and its opposite—both typically modern, as is the filming of the vertical fall of Astyanax—make reference not only to Japanese concepts on portraying space, but also to that of the Impressionists such as Gustave Caillebotte, namely to the new urban gaze of the 19th century.⁴⁷ For the Impressionists, however, it is a depiction of urban superiority and the new possibilities of vision, while for Cacoyannis it is a means to portray vividly the depths of this tragedy.

CACOYANNIS'S "PEDIMENTAL" CHOREOGRAPHY OF THE FEMALE BODY

Says Cacoyannis:

In *The Trojan Women*, as in *Electra*, I often held the dance still. The careful observer can see, when an accident occurs, that there is a strange relationship between movement and stillness... Movement acquires a relationship with the situation.⁴⁸

This simple phrase masks a considerable sophistication.

45. We do not see the interiors of houses burning, as we would in a Hollywood production.

46. See Rodosthenous – Poulou (2022) 219.

47. See Loukaki (2016b) ch. 5.

48. See Siafkos (2009) 186.



Fig. 6. The eastern façade of the Zeus temple (472–456 BC), Olympia, and the “pedimental” postures of the three main female characters in Cacoyannis’s film.

First, the chorus of women, combined with the wide amphitheatric elevation or the flight of steps, is reminiscent of the form of an ancient theater, as noted.

Second, because Cacoyannis masterfully explores the face as a cultural and mental landscape. The Doric beauty of Irene Papas, “the most classically beautiful woman ever to appear in films” according to influential critics,⁴⁹ seems to have prompted Cacoyannis to begin his atavistic painting and sculptural explorations. In his trilogy, morphological archetypes from painting, sculpture and architecture emerge and are embodied in the faces of his protagonists. This is especially true of *Iphigenia in Aulis*, as I argue elsewhere.⁵⁰

Third, because in this film Cacoyannis materializes a deep study of form and content, as indeed did classical Greek art (Fig. 6), when it launched multiple renderings of the human body, exploring the new, dynamic state of human consciousness after the 6th century BC. According to Nikos

49. See Roger Ebert’s opinion in <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-trojan-women-1972>.

50. See Loukaki (2024).

Kazantzakis,⁵¹ the pediments of the Temple of Zeus in Olympia, especially the western one, glorify the suffering and struggling hero on his (here: *her*) way to perfection. In *The Trojan Women*, the implicit but shared desire of Euripides and the director appears to be to capture every moment of the agonizing and struggling heroines. Here it is not simply about the kinesiology of the body and of physical movement but also about a filmic register of both mental and physical strength or, conversely, of a crashing fall and flattening. Cacoyannis carries out a fascinating and original experiment. He both studies and monumentalizes matchlessly the female Trojan body in illustrating the physical effects of suffering in conjunction with expressions of these women's psychic and emotional landscapes after their fall, emotions like despair, ire, grief, courage, dignity, solidarity and resistance.

In accordance with a mental pedimental choreography,⁵² Cacoyannis composes their postures to be equivalent to the position and symbolism of pedimental sculptures of ancient temples like the aforementioned Temple of Zeus in Olympia. Similarities reflect the narrative continuity across the whole pedimental sequence.⁵³ I refer to the range of postures from upright to horizontal seen to the left and right of the central pedimental figure, corresponding to those essayed by classical sculptors. Just as in classical architectural sculpture, art here, through the human or anthropomorphic body, expresses virtue, valor, the urban collectivity but also beauty.⁵⁴ The combination of the central frontal divine presence with lateral figures in profile is common in gabled spaces. Cacoyannis's mental compositions differ from their classical sculptural equivalents in, among others, the fact that in 5th-century pediments the central, upright figure is understood to be a god invisible to mortals, who are slighter in stature, sitting or reclining in the pediments.⁵⁵ Here, the equivalent upright female figure, whether mortal (Andromache) or immortal (Helen) is always both visible and made of flesh and blood, experiencing as she does her personal moment of triumph in the face of a crumbling world, in a negatively fluid, chaotic spatiality of annihilation. Apollo's figure, emerging from a different spatio-temporality

51. See Kazantzakis (2018) 227–232.

52. McDonald (1989) ch. 5 argues that Cacoyannis choreographed the chorus.

53. See Neer (2011) 226. The same does not apply when other gods are portrayed, like in the eastern Parthenon pediment.

54. For an analysis linking ancient poetry, philosophy, and art, see Papaioannou (2009), esp. 234–247.

55. See Neer (2011) 230.

as guardian of a measure that would reconcile the opponents is missing,⁵⁶ as indeed is the god himself, since he has abandoned Troy. An additional difference is the following: classical pediments are organized to refer to the placing of the action and to local geographical characteristics — just remember the personifications of the Ilissos and Kephissos rivers in the western pediment of the Parthenon.⁵⁷ Here, the imaginary gables include only physical, if local, bodies; they supersede, thus, the limits of a specific geographical location to address the human condition in general.

In *The Trojan Women*, the inclusion into imaginary pedimental triangles is all about the women and the women only. The soldiers, Talthybius, Menelaus as well as the child's body, broken by the fall, are all omitted since they cannot enter the circle of this psychic struggle for various reasons. Further, this matter in its fullness concerns only the postures of Andromache, Hecuba and Helen. Beyond the constant theme of the diagonal, imaginary pedimental compositions create an additional rhythm in this relatively static film.⁵⁸ All stages of life are expressed through the female experience. In the most shocking moments, the suffering body tends to become completely horizontal, merging with the ground. Crushed, levelled and covered in dust, but also rising to be erect and haughty, Andromache occupies all positions (see 0:53':55" – 1:03':10" of the film).⁵⁹ In the center of her imaginary pediment, it is not Zeus or Apollo who appear in epiphanies of unspeakable and soothing power, but herself, defeated and yet victorious. Neither she nor Hecuba go through the posture and phase of kneeling supplication to their enemies.

Hecuba does occasionally stand upright (see 0:12':35", 0:38':00", 1:11':50", 1:21':34" and 1:44':30" of the film), but her body remains more flattened (see 0:05':25" – 0:05':35", 0:07':00" – 0:08':00", 0:35':20", 1:40':20" and 1:41':54" – 1:43':00" of the film), even more so than Priam's when he begged Achilles for the dead body of Hector; this is a manifestation

56. On Apollo in the eastern pediment of the temple of Zeus in Olympia, see Papaioannou (2009) 271–272.

57. See Neer (2011) 280.

58. See Marchand (1985). The adaptability of modern styles to advertising illustration was primarily based on the dominance of the diagonal line.

59. Bakogianni (2009) describes thus the scene, one of the most physically and emotionally intense of the film, in which Andromache tries in vain to protect her son but is vanquished instead: "[Andromache's] wordless cry, increasing in volume and intensity, gives expression to the depth of her rejection of the idea [...] as (she), supported by the chorus, tries to shield the boy from Talthybius and the Greek soldiers under his command. Redgrave frantically runs around clutching the boy and falls to the ground with him in her arms. Her physical collapse is a visual sign of her helplessness when faced with the brutality of her captors".

of her crushing sorrow. Standing, running, disturbed, foretelling, and threatening at first, Cassandra folds over in the carriage that carries her to Agamemnon, resigned to her fate (see 0:20':48" – 0:35':00" of the film).

Helen, quasi-goddess of beauty, alter ego of Aphrodite —pleading, ingenious, threatening, ruthless, scheming tricks like a suicide attempt (there is an inherent irony here since she is a semi-divine human figure,⁶⁰ therefore potentially immortal), orating against Hecuba, shedding tears squeezed against Menelaus's body, flirtatious— adopts two positions. She remains standing (see 1:13':55" – 1:22':00" of the film) or kneels (see 1:24':32" of the film). She begs but is not crushed. Claiming the central as well the highest places of her own pediment, she seeks redemption through Menelaus for no one but herself.

In the burial of Astyanax (see 1:29':00" – 1:38':00" of the film), where again the principle of emphasis on the diagonal and of triangulation is observed, the director activates multiple symbolisms. Cacoyannis refers to the Great Entrance, i.e. to the orthodox liturgical process, as he does in the film *Electra*. He selects a damaged spot on the city wall, next to which the child is buried. At the same time, using the camera, he instantly creates both gable-like formations and smaller individual triangles through the kneeling female figures. These triangles are the symbol of Logos and Fire as a creative principle according to Heraclitus and Plato respectively. Plato in *Ti-maeus* (56d) symbolized fire with the tetrahedron, the triangular pyramidal geometric solid. This brings us to a further dominant theme, fire.

THE ROLE OF FIRE IN *THE TROJAN WOMEN*

The city is set on fire twice in this film, in the beginning and at the end.⁶¹ In the beginning, women and children, who shortly afterwards disappear, pass through the imposing but ruined propylon and are violently pushed out of the city, while carriages full of golden booty are rushed to the ships. The camera follows the fiery dissolution of an entire world. Fire, after all, is a huge and constant theme in Homer's *Iliad*, with the vast conflagrations of destruction as well as creation, from the thunderbolts of Zeus to the anvil of

60. Death and humiliation are risks that Helen obviously wants to circumvent. Some of Zeus's children like Sarpedon, who fought in the Trojan War on the side of Troy, and Heracles did die.

61. See Siafkos (2009).

Hephaestus, the funeral pyres of Achilles and the other heroes.⁶² Fire, one of the basic elements of the pre-Socratic philosophers, is an archetype of creation, a symbol of transformation⁶³ and emancipation for humankind as a gift of the philanthropic Titan Prometheus. It activates an endless sequence of symbolisms. In the Mediterranean area, the mythical palm tree symbolizes life after fiery annihilation.⁶⁴

As one of the four structural elements of the universe, fire remains constant in itself while all the others change and transform perpetually. Such unrelenting movement agitates the universe; a dynamic transition from one state of a system to another is always at work. However, it is actually only thanks to these continuous transformations that the universe can and does exist. The world order, cosmos, may be tumultuous but it is harmonious, not chaotic. The universal principle of the interconnectedness of everything is Heraclitus's *logos*. Heraclitus thus anticipates the first law of thermodynamics, which is the principle of energy conservation: energy can neither be created nor destroyed. It can only be transformed from one form to another. Heraclitus also expresses the temporal view of antiquity. There is no linear progress, for time is circular.⁶⁵ In the ancient text, as in the film, action is an uninterrupted stream, except as regards articulated memories. Insurmountable temporal ultimata impose an accelerated velocity in every way.⁶⁶ Spatio-temporalities express such ultimata by being extremely stifling in this film — escape is impossible for all involved, even the Greeks.

This insistence on the unity of archetypal elements, despite their constant transformation from one to the other, is already announced in the *Iliad*. One may thus detect the birth of philosophy in Homer.⁶⁷ In the episode of the blaze miraculously started by Hephaestus in the river Xanthos or Skamandros at the behest of Hera, who does not wish for the death of the great enemy of the Trojans, Achilles, we notice that Homer simultaneously brings into play all the primary elements: fire, water, air and earth (*Iliad* 21.328–358). In *The Trojan Women* both fire and *logos*, as a mental function now, are manifested in the confrontation between Hecuba and Helen. One is defeated once more; the other triumphs, perhaps unwittingly serving some

62. See analysis in Loukaki (2016b) ch. 1. Persians destroyed Athens in 480–479 BC, around the time Euripides was born.

63. See Dance (2023).

64. See van den Broek (1972) 63. See also <https://firefightergarage.com/symbolism-of-fire/>.

65. See Kontogiorgis (2001).

66. See Hall (2022) 107.

67. See Loukaki (2016b); (2023a).

higher but mysterious purpose, quite possibly the salvation of the utmost sublime-beautiful duo embodied by the human race, as discussed above.

THE POLIS: SACREDNESS AND DESTRUCTION

The ancient text begins with a dialogue between Poseidon and Athena. In their ominous exchange, which takes place within divine space but in a time synchronous with that of mortals, namely in parallel with the fall of Troy, they co-operate in deciding the punitive accountability of the Greeks. All other gods have already departed. The desecrated sanctuaries and the entire city are de-sanctified and gape like emptied shells. Euripides explicitly refers to this emptying. Apollo did not care to protect his priestess.⁶⁸ Even the gods suffer and must depart when cities collapse, says Poseidon.

This dialogue is omitted in the film. However, sanctity is an essential element of urbanity. De-sanctification entails abandoning the human-made space and returning to that of “first” nature, nature proper, even if burnt-out, as we see in the film. This is exactly where we are faced with an essential aesthetic and moral contradiction. The city, an absolute, relative and relational spatiality *par excellence*, is the greatest and collective achievement of human civilization.⁶⁹ Every creative expression of the city, mirroring the struggles, rivalries and toil of its inhabitants, is housed there. However, the city only offers an illusion of immortality. In the *Iliad*, Hera tells Zeus that he can raze even her most beloved cities, Argos, Sparta, and Mycenae, whenever he wants (*Il.* 4.51–53).

On a human level, the destruction of Troy’s sacred urbanity is expressed in its highest degree not by Hecuba, but by the Hector–Andromache couple.⁷⁰ The heroic figure of Hector, the watchful guardian of Troy, acted as a defender of this urbanity, enveloping even the open space around the city and its bastions, the limits of civilization and resistance. Pindar and Aeschylus included Hector among the mythical supporting pillars of cities.⁷¹ His death is the cause of the fall. Andromache, the eponymous prudent wife,

68. Contrary to the close relation between Sappho and Aphrodite, who is poetically represented as intervening at critical moments in Sappho’s personal life, see Loukaki (2016b) ch. 2.

69. See Mumford (1961) 53. The city, the most precious collective invention of civilization, is second only to language concerning the transmission of culture.

70. According to Scully (1979) 65.

71. See Tarn Steiner (2021) 371.

expresses the legitimate reproduction of urban population and forces. The brief supreme bliss enjoyed by the two of them, surrounded by glory and wealth, as immortalized by Sappho, was interrupted by a separation for which they were not responsible, by Troy's fall and death.⁷²

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The film ends with the second incineration of Troy. The burning diagonal of the walls, filmed from below, symbolizes this scorched perspective, the charred future (see 1:38':00" – 1:40':00" of the film). As the credits roll, the viewer, stunned, is possessed by a feeling of absolute and inescapable futility, intensified by the fact that Cacoyannis has triggered geographical and cultural traditions and symbols understood globally.

And yet, Troy has secured an undying existence, as the Trojan women hope.⁷³ This anticipation is but obliquely announced in the film yet also to be found in urban theory as well. Cacoyannis employed the ancient triangular symbols of re-creation and eternity. Only extremely rarely is a large and important city completely deserted, although the trauma of a destruction may linger long after recovery, as Lewis Mumford argues in *The City in History*. Proverbially, Troy itself lasted from 3000 BC to Roman times.⁷⁴ This urban persistence and permanence (to recall Aldo Rossi 1982) confirms the importance of the choice of a geographical location, which does not diminish in value and sanctity over time, but instead increases. It involves the *genius loci*, the spirit of place, which is both historically and culturally shaped through fire and steel literally here.⁷⁵ The poetic stillbirth of Troy reflects the historical consciousness that the city is a universal site where all kinds of destructive forces, internal and external, are manifested. But the city also contains the seeds of its regeneration.⁷⁶

We are therefore led to the following conclusion. The city itself, always potentially alive, is the Sublime, the aesthetic zenith of human creativity.⁷⁷

72. As did Homer before her, Sappho appropriated poetically the wealth of materials like gold, silver, ivory and purple robes to celebrate their union in matrimony, see Loukaki (2016b) ch. 1 and 2.

73. See Hall (2022).

74. See Rubalcaba and Cline (2011).

75. See Loukaki (1997); (2016a).

76. See Mumford (1961) 53.

77. See Loukaki (2021a).

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HELLENIC OPEN UNIVERSITY

aloukaki@eap.gr