

Early Greek Talkies (1930-1940): Struggling Between Technology and Theatre

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The very first screening of a talking film in Greece took place in Athens in late October 1929. It was the musical *Fox Follies* (David Butler, Fox 1929) and understandably the whole local film industry was shaken. In this paper I will present the very few films produced by Greek companies during the 1930's where music was used in order to take advantage of the new technology and satisfy the demand of the local audience for talking films in their native language.

I

Prior to presenting these films, let me say a few words about the political and social situation in Greece during the interwar years. In Greek history, the interwar period spans from 1922 to 1940, namely, after the defeat of the Greek army in Asia Minor in August 1922 and the consequent population exchanges to the Italian invasion in October 1940. More than one million refugees moved permanently to Greece, the abolition of monarchy was followed by a short lived constitutional democracy shaken by various military coups, while the return of the monarch in 1936 was followed by a coup d'état which established a dictatorial regime with fascist characteristics. Despite all that, there was marked economic development with the expansion of industrialization and an attempt for agrarian reformation, up to 1931 when the international economic crisis hit Greece as well.

Before 1922, only two or three long feature films were produced with very serious technical problems. Up to 1926 two more long features were produced but they turned out to be sounded flops. However, in a period of seven years, from 1927 to 1933, 32 long feature films were produced. This is the most prolific period of Greek

cinema during the interwar years. The introduction of sound in cinema proved to be a very serious obstacle for the development of the local film industry. In fact, the industry collapsed and after 1935, the next film to be finished in a Greek laboratory was in late 1939. Although the exhibition sector managed to cope with the new situation, and prominent cinema theatres invested in sound technology, the reaction of production companies as far as renewing their equipment was concerned, ranged from reluctance to inability. It must be noted that for decades, actually up to the early 1970's, the Greek film industry was a typical *laissez-faire* and not a *dirigiste* industry. In 1930, some companies tried either to synchronize films with recording discs or to use their own patents, but the audience turned to the technologically and artistically superior foreign productions despite the language gap. Sound films demanded new expensive machinery and new technical knowledge, therefore the few released Greek sound films were either finished in American and European laboratories or produced abroad (Turkey and Egypt). Especially in Egypt, from 1937 to 1939 six talking films were produced in studios owned by Arabs, where Italian-Jews directors and technical personnel worked and Greek actors played. At that time, Greek theatrical groups used to travel to Egypt performing for the strong Greek community. It was a good chance for them to play for a film production which could be distributed in Greece and in countries with considerable Greek urban population.

The performances of music theatre in Greece were introduced by Italian groups in 1835 when the Athenians for the first time attended opera and some comic operas, regarded as the precursor of the operetta. In the late 1860's, again foreign groups introduced vaudeville comedies with considerable success amongst the middle class audience. After an initiative taken by the palace, the Greek ambassador in Paris arranged with a French theatrical group the first performances of operetta in Athens during the winter of 1871. It was an instant success despite the reaction on the part of some conservative intellectuals. Although German groups made the Viennese operetta familiar to the Athenians, the French operetta, especially Jacques Offenbach's plays remained dominant until the turn of the century. The parallel performances of operetta and vaudeville plays by foreign groups proved to be unequal competition for

the Greek actors. Eventually, in 1888 a Greek version of vaudeville, called komidyllio [comic romance], appeared and dominated the Greek music production for the next five to six years. As a reaction to the European influence on komidyllio, another music theatre genre appeared in the early 1890's called dramatiko idyllio [dramatic romance] with references to an ideal agrarian life and Greek folk music. However, the actual successor of komidyllio was epitheorisi in 1894, a term introduced after the performance of a Spanish revue in Athens. From 1907 onwards, until the 1930's, the Athenian revue became one of the two most successful genres of the Greek music theatre; the other one was the Athenian operetta. 1908 marks the appearance of the first operetta composed by a Greek composer. For the next 20 years, more than 500 plays of operetta were composed and performed in Athens and other big cities in Greece with two composers, Theofrastos Sakellaridis and Nikos Chatziapostolou being the most successful. In the early 1930's tendencies of merging between the two genres became obvious and this process was accelerated under the pressure of the musical films brought to the audience with the introduction of sound cinema. Another reason for the merging and the gradual decay of the two genres was that after 1936 the dictatorship actively expressed its enmity both against the revue for its political satire as well as against the operetta for its lightness; promoting instead the serious prose theatre.

II

According to Walter Benjamin, "Paris is acknowledged as the capital of luxury and fashion. Offenbach sets the rhythm of Parisian life. The operetta is the ironic utopia of an enduring reign of capital." On the other hand, Siegfried Kracauer, showing his enduring interest in the boulevard, argues that Offenbach's creativity "came to life when moving among crowds of people, and for him the theatre was the epitome of social life." In other words, Kracauer is interested in the social function of the composer rather than his music, although his operettas are "the most representative expression of imperial era". Both, Benjamin and Kracauer, connect the operetta with the historically specific social spaces of the boulevard and the bourgeois salon but it

must be said that only Benjamin associates the operetta with the phantasmagoria of the commodity form. In the case of Greece, it would be wrong to apply such approaches without considering the specific political, social and cultural conditions of a young nation-state in the periphery of Europe. Although Greece entered the era of modernity upon the establishment of the small kingdom in 1830, the formation of modern life was a slow and problematic process throughout the 19th century. The construction of a national identity had to solve the dilemma whether Greece belonged to the West or the East while the majority of the Greek-speaking population lived outside the Greek state. The actual process of industrialization started after the bankruptcy of 1893 and the international financial control in 1897, while it must be noted that the modernization of the state started in 1909 after an army intervention and the territorial expansion (Greek territory was more than doubled) was the result of the Balkan Wars (1912-1913). Additionally, the urban population of Athens grew considerably in the turn of the century, which meant an increase in urban strata (middle class and working class), though the peasants remained the majority of the population as a whole. Drawing on Benjamin's question "how do the words and words of the poet/composer communicate or give voice to the society in which they are first uttered, written, played, sung?", we can certainly find answers examining the history of the music theatre and the characteristics of its various genres. In the 1930s, with the introduction of sound in cinema, the film companies inevitably turned to the music theatre and its actors, and composers worked for the first sound films, reflecting similar tendencies in the process for the formation of the film genres. Below, I will discuss three films which express these specific tendencies.

The Apaches of Athens was produced in 1930, by DAG Film, the biggest Greek film company in the interwar years. It is based on the operetta with the same title composed by Nikos Chatziapostolou and performed in 1921 with huge success. It is actually a silent film accompanied by recording discs of the songs. On the one hand, it is a reaction to the foreign sound films introduced the previous year and on the other, the producer obviously invested in the most successful Athenian operetta of all time. The protagonists are three poor guys, two unsuccessful bilkers, the comic

characters of the plot, and the “prince”, a poor but honest man who wants to become rich. They intrude in a bourgeois salon in order to deceive a Greek-American upstart who has returned from the USA with a lot of money. However, the “prince” does not want to deceive the daughter of the Greek-American and leaves the salon with his two drunken friends. Eventually, he inherits a fortune and marries the poor girl he loved. In fact, it is an operetta without bourgeois characters, its target group is not the whole of the poor urban population, as it has been argued, but specifically the new low middle class strata of Athens. According to Benjamin the apache was an individual who “lived out his life within the precincts of society and of the big city”. The protagonists remain outside the bourgeois milieu but manage to overcome poverty without hard work. At that time, in 1921, Greece was engaged in an expansionist military adventure in Asia Minor without yet the apparent signs of the forthcoming defeat. Tellingly, the orientalist scene in an Ottoman harem parodies oriental music and songs. The rest of the music is of European influence. Reviewers of classical music accused the composer for plagiarism of Italian songs, particularly canzonettas, a common accusation for all Greek operettas.

The second film is *The Lover of the Shepherd Girl*, released in 1932 and the first sound film produced by a Greek company. Two previous sound films were produced in the USA by Greek-American producers. However, editing and sound synchronization were done again abroad, in Berlin. Although it is a sound film, seventy five percent of the film is an actual talkie. It is based on the dramatiko idyllio play with the same title written, composed and performed for the first time in 1891. As I said before, dramatiko idyllio was a reaction to the high middle class taste for the European music; an attempt to build national identity on traditional cultural and social values. During the interwar years, dramatiko idyllio was regarded as an outdated and inaccurate depiction of rural life. However, the conservative modernists, the dominant tendency at that time in literary and cultural criticism, were rather sympathetic to the genre or at least thought it to educate the masses with traditional values and manners. After 1922, “Greekness” had to be redefined beyond the expansionist politics of the previous period. Therefore, they used tradition against

time and history replacing historicity with a timeless narrative of stillness. This problematic construction is also obvious in the music used. Together with some well known folk songs, the soundtrack includes some recognizable melodies by Schumann and Rubinstein, folkish songs actually based on the German romantic music without forgetting the usual Neapolitan forms.

The Refugee Girl (1938) was directed by the Italian-Jew Togo Mizrahi in collaboration with the theatrical director Dimitris Mpogris. As I have already mentioned it is one out of the six films produced in Egyptian studios and the only one which has survived. The other five films were music comedies while *The Refugee Girl* is a music drama. The film is regarded better than the rest of the Egyptian productions but suffers also from technical problems of synchronization. The main role is played by Sofia Vempo, at that time a young singer of the musical theatre. Later, she became very popular during the war between Italy and Greece singing patriotic songs. The songs of the film were written by Kostas Giannidis, a young composer who belongs to the last generation of operetta composers. He composed 50 operettas and wrote music for comedies and revues. The film was not so successful when released in Athens but became a huge success in the countryside. Firstly, because of Vempo and Giannidis and secondly due to its plot. The plot is based on the binary opposition between urban and countryside life. The city symbolizes corruption, dishonour, sensuality while the countryside represents the harmonious familial and social relations where the landlord cares, protects and is concerned about his subjects. His kindness includes even the refugees from Asia Minor who were not so welcomed by the native population, while due to his innocence he falls victim of a bourgeois woman who wants to destroy him financially and socially. The music follows the plot therefore there are songs written in a folk form, very similar to the pattern of *dramatiko idyllio* and urban songs influenced by operetta. It is interesting though that despite the success of the film in the countryside, the European style songs became more popular than the folkish ones.

During the period of the silent cinema the dispute between theatre and cinema had specific limits due to the particular absence of sound in cinema. For the people involved in the theatre business, there was an antagonistic relation with the cinema especially since the latter had become very popular. Besides the theoretical arguments, the conflict moved further when the state imposed a tax on cinema tickets in favour of the pension fund of actors. With the introduction of sound in cinema, the perspective of a deep crisis in theatre business was deemed unavoidable. However, the film industry turned to the theatre in order to use its experience especially on musical matters, a collaboration successfully developed after the war during the two golden decades of the Greek cinema from 1950 to 1972.