Synthesis in Cinema

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interviewed by Stavros Alifragkis for Scroope, 18 March 2006

Shooting a film, to the extent that this is possible, should be a poetic event. Exploring the ideological function of cinema does not shift the emphasis away from the aesthetics and, conversely, seeking a particular aesthetic result does not conflict with the communication of potent ideological-political beliefs through film. When my film *Oi Kynighoi*[1] premièred, it was received with scepticism from certain circles of the Greek Left. There is a scene where a party of people in barges drifts downstream, holding red flags and singing. Someone commented that "Revolution goes for a stroll", implying that this overly aesthetic approach was void of any political meaning. Yet Fyodor Dostoevsky's claim that "beauty would save the world"[2] still remains topical. There is no such thing as a dichotomy between content and form. Such dilemmas do not exist.

One can pinpoint the beginning of the process of synthesis in any number of things. First and foremost, our journey through life leaves us with everlasting impressions that unconsciously influence us, from the moment it can be claimed that we begin to register experience. What emanates from me as a product of synthesis is something that has been moulded over a vast expanse of time. My own readings or experiences, the visual stimuli I receive from my immediate environment, the unconscious choices whose motivation strongly resists rational explanation formulate an amalgam, a network of premises that dictate what I propose as a result of synthesis.
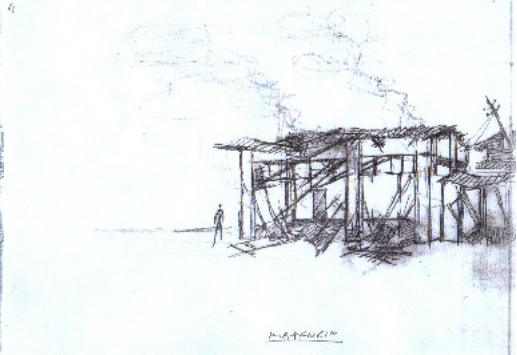
Synthesis and the Script

Synthesis in cinema refers to the work of art as a whole and involves both conceptualising the movie and transcribing it into the script, and subsequently visualising it in film. In architecture, when the design process is concluded, you move on to the construction of the project from the architectural blueprints, which may occasionally entail a certain amount of fine-tuning. An interesting analogy can be traced between this and what happens in cinema.

Writing up a script is something abstract, as abstract as writing a novel. One begins writing without any formal prerequisites. The text is faced with imagery at a later stage. Nevertheless, form can be present in various ways from the very beginning. This obviously depends on how one writes a script. Film-directors such as Alfred Hitchcock would docu-

ment all the technical information for a movie in the shooting-script in such detail that anybody would be able to take over. René Clair would characteristically argue that a movie is finished as soon as the script has been completed. A shooting-script was so precisely designed in an almost architectural sense that shooting became a mere transliteration of the script into film. A different approach, with the work of Jean-Luc Godard being at the extreme end, would be that of no shooting-script or storyboard, but only notes on ideas that are visualized while shooting or from the day before. This is also true for film-directors who are considered to be quite meticulous, such as Michelangelo Antonioni, who, for example, performs the découpage[3] for his movie the night before or over coffee the morning before shooting begins.

I use both approaches. Some aspects of the movie are either scripted with a certain degree of precision and detail or are at least known to me in advance but remain unvoiced, and others I discover in the process. _Thiasos_[4] was shot during the dictatorship (1967-74), therefore it was absolutely essential that I revealed as little as possible about the film, even to my colleagues and cast. I kept some notes, but those were for personal use only. Now and again, I would start working on an idea that would be formulated during the rehearsals. This was synthesis for me and I mean it in an almost absolute way. There is a _plan-séquence_ in _Thiasos_, where the camera follows a small, cheerful party of people leaving a ballroom in 1945 and entering 1952. My notes simply read: "transition from 1945 to 1952", but nothing more. The architecture of the scene was not clear to me until the very last moment. The day we filmed this scene, my self-censoring reluctance to face the task at hand disappeared and everything fell into place. Initially, I instructed the cast to walk leisurely while singing softly. Then I toyed with the idea of having the popular tune gradually transform into a marching song. This triggered a substantially different _mise-en-scène_. The merry group slowly began to walk in formation. These transformations could have been scripted in detail in advance, but in reality the integral parts of a composition and their interrelation are shaped during the rehearsals. This is particularly true for complex scenes, which are not fragmented in short shots, but retain a temporal span and unity similar to one-act stage plays.

The script is the raw material for cinema, as soon as it is written I forget all about it. A script becomes something else when it is transferred to film. Yet everything boils down to a personal, idiosyncratic language which functions as a limit as well. I cannot help but write in a very specific way. My scripts are novels, only they provide a slightly richer imagery and technical information that is crucial for setting up a scene. People I work with, people that know how I think, realise almost immediately what kind of shot I am looking for. My scripts, despite being the raw materials with which I work, are published as pieces of literature that seek a cer-

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a. b.: Sketches by set-designer Giorgos Patsas for the
décors of *Trilogy I, Wheeping Meadow*
(Theo Angelopoulos, Greece, 2005)

b.

tain amount of autonomy from the movies. For example, the script for *Taxidi sta Kithira*[5] and the actual movie have a distant relationship. Scripts remain much closer to the original idea behind a movie. Nevertheless, their role, their meaning alters significantly as soon as filming begins or, to put it in a slightly different way, a script is the movie up until the moment when the first scene is shot. As soon as this happens, the script and the movie go their separate, often considerably different pathways.

Synthesis and *Mise-en-Cadre*

Setting up a scene entails taking into consideration a number of variants. Aside from the cast, one has to take into consideration space and its integral components. There are actors who are close to the camera lens, others who are further away; there is the intricate set of spatial relationships between actors and an equally elaborate set of relationships between actors and prominent features of space. When I trace the trajectory of a *plan-séquence* through space, no matter how complex this trajectory is, the above-mentioned relationships should always appear to be in a state of balance such that they do not give me the impression of disfigurement or a sense of mutilation. The camera lens does nothing more than renegotiate these relationships, always pushing for different, temporal equilibriums by gradually and subtly alternating the close-up with the wide shot. In the course of the camera's journey, a constant flow of new elements keeps refreshing the mobile canvas of the shot, where faces and spatial elements advance and backtrack in a rhythmical choreography. The integral components that occasionally populate the screen and their relationship both to one another and the frame, answer to a personal understanding of synthesis that shares the compositional principles of classic painting supplemented with movement. Often in my work this understanding of synthesis is expressed through the exploration of harmonious balances such as the golden section. Now and then, when contradictory, strange to say the least, almost surreal elements are introduced, a man holding on to his open umbrella in a room or the brief appearance of a group of people with bright yellow raincoats in a dry day, these only temporarily upset the balance of the composition, without altering the main design principles.

Once Ingmar Bergman commented thus on my cinematography: "Angelopoulos treats close-ups with nothing but contempt". I would argue that constructing a filmic landscape that relies less on close-ups and more on medium and wide shots constitutes a different but equally valid cinematic language. I am mostly interested, much like Antonioni, in portraying people in a dialectical relationship with space. We do not exist independently of the space we occupy, outside our immediate environment, therefore a wide shot offers more than just a beautiful landscape. For Bergman, the synthesis of colours seems to be more important than the

depiction of spatial relationships. One might even say that his claim that the geography of a human face is the only landscape, confines him in a one-dimensional filmic vocabulary. The dialectics between the face and its environment is of extreme importance. Maybe I am more inclined towards Carl Dreyer's approach, whose *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*[6] is constructed with a particular kind of close-up that provides along the edges of the frame the breathing space, where elements from the environment can intrude. Naturally, the fact that he is filming historical dramas implies that these elements are carefully selected to function as iconic images of the epoch he is reconstructing. In a shot from *Jeanne d'Arc*, the diagonal perspective of a fragment of the cross in the background adds extra depth, both literally and psychologically, to the close-up on her face. With Bergman, one cannot trace such elements that essentially assume a dialectical relationship with the protagonist in the foreground, with the only exception being his historical dramas and, quite possibly, *Smultronstället*[7].

Synthesis and Space

I do not film documentaries; natural or man-made landscapes in my movies are primarily projections of an inner space. First, I seek within myself and then I scout for locations. If the *repérage* turns out to be unsuccessful, I design and construct this mythical landscape. Naturally, when designing a set, I keep returning to certain architectural motifs that reappear in my work, such as the neoclassical detached house, the shanty, the rail station, or the traditional Greek *café*. The final result is something that conforms both to certain standards set by the script and, most importantly, to a personal vision. Each cinematic landscape should be able to integrate and transform into a complete whole a particular piece of dramatic action.

The chromatic palette of my movies corresponds to a personal mental image as well. I began painting Greece from *Meres tou '36*[8]. I colour landscapes, buildings, interior spaces. I reproduce creatively things that I have seen in the past, things that do not exist anymore. I prefer filming with cloudy skies, when the colours are not explosive, when they become more like an aquarelle and less like an oil painting. There is something elusive, something slightly melancholic about this palette. This was not the case with my first movie, *Anaparastassi*[9], which was filmed on location at Zagoria in northern Greece, the ideal place to host such a kind of drama. On the other hand *Anaparastassi* was shot on black and white film and therefore assumed the character of a documentary more or less.

In my movies I reconstruct a kind of space that condenses and reflects the drama and the development of the main characters. In *Mia Aioniatita kai Mia Mera*[10] the main protagonist, a writer who lives in Thessaloniki, is the medium through which

the cinematic landscape of the city is reconstructed. Yet my protagonists would never make choices that I myself would not make. Let me quote Gustave Flaubert's notorious saying "Madame Bovary, c'est moi" to argue that for those film-directors who have developed over the years a personal cinematic mannerism, every protagonist in their movies is, quite often, a different rendering of his own persona, whether they are male or female characters. Therefore the celluloid cities that I construct are projections of a personal urban topography; Thessaloniki in *Mia Aioniatita kai Mia Mera* is my Thessaloniki.

In my forthcoming film, I plan to construct various small-scale *décors* and a considerably larger one, which will be built inside a film studio. The latter will function as a transitional space between reality and fiction. The movie itself is a negotiation between *réel et imaginaire*, where the protagonists gradually evolve into mythical figures. The diegesis follows paths that stem from a cinematic reality but lead steadily to well within the realm of *imaginaire*, as if fiction is the only reality in life. According to a branch of quantum physics, everything we experience around us could be interpreted as the projection of a single universe in a multi-world reality. Does reality really exist?

Synthesis and Editing

Editing is rather easy for the kind of cinema I am interested in. I merely remove the clapboard mark from the beginning of each scene before putting them together. Sergei Eisenstein, the director who, among other things, introduced the term *montage des attractions* (1923) and had worked consistently on the theory of montage throughout his career, appears in his essay "Montage and Architecture" to be re-evaluating the value of *plan-séquence* for particular environments. He gradually moves away from the rapid, formalist montage that the Soviet School is renowned for as early as *Ivan Groznyy I*[11], where montage is less dynamic and, quite possibly, less of a priority than in, say, *Bronenosets Potyomkin*[12]. In the aforementioned essay he implied that if he was asked to film the Acropolis of Athens he would have done so in a single shot[13]. It is quite fascinating to discover how both montage theories and Eisenstein's own perception of montage have evolved over time. His reference to *plan-séquence* does not only acknowledge the existence of a different, yet equally valid, approach to synthesis in cinema, but also a significantly dissimilar way of constructing a meaningful thematic. We have gradually shifted away from the fixed signifier-signified relationship of the shot-sign analogy in *montage des attractions*, and moved towards what is nowadays understood as the multiple readings, where the meaning of a shot is open to various interpretations. Furthermore, where meaning used to be produced by the affect generated by adjacent shots and their rhythm, it is now produced in the

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c. d.: Sketches by set-designer
Kostas Dimitriadis for the *décors* of
Trilogy I, Wheeping Meadow (Theo
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course of time through the unconstrained function of the shot in a *séquence*. In this latter case, pauses, or what in theatre is described as dead time, function as transitions, where the narrative can unfold freely and the reading is not dictated 100%.


Synthesis, an on-going Process

All my movies are what is called work in progress, meaning that what I propose as a synthesis is always incomplete and this is why I do not use "the end" – there is no end. I consider my movies to be, one after the other, chapters from the same on-going work. Therefore, I am rather sceptical toward describing a work of art as a masterpiece; there is something unbearably definitive about this term. I am more interested in generating the kind of polysemy that will allow for multiple readings. Thus my creation, what I propose as an organic whole, awaits the audiences' readings before it can be considered complete; their interpretation concludes the process of synthesis, for multiple readings is a vital precondition for succeeding in finding a common language with people from different cultural backgrounds. Screening a movie for me implies engaging your peers, the audience, in a conversation.

e. f.: Sketches by set-designer Kostas Dimitriadis for the *décors* of *Trilogy I, Wheeping Meadow* (Theo Angelopoulos, Greece, 2005)

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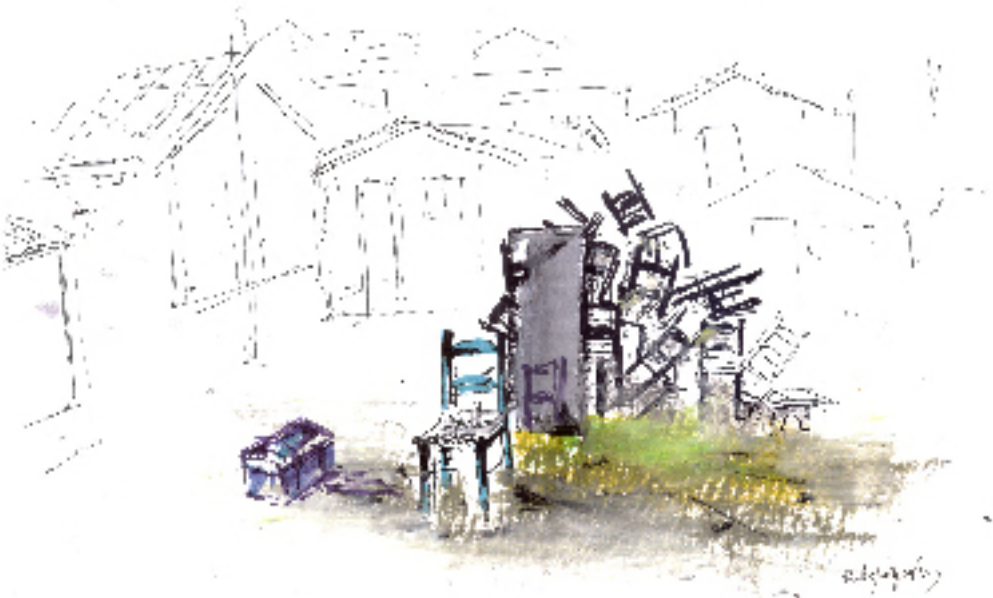
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Notes

1. aka The Hunters, Greece, 1977.
2. "Is it true, prince, that you once declared that 'beauty would save the world'? Great Heaven! The prince says that beauty saves the world! And I declare that he only has such playful ideas because he's in love!", Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Idiot, trans. by Constance Garnett, William Heinemann, London, 1913.
3. the process of subdividing a scene in different shots.
4. aka The Travelling Players, Greece, 1975.
5. aka Voyage to Cythera, Greece, 1984.
6. aka The Passion of Joan of Arc, France, 1928.
7. aka Wild Strawberries, Sweden, 1957.
8. aka Days of '36, Greece, 1972.
9. aka Reconstruction, Greece, 1970.
10. aka Eternity and a Day, Greece, 1998.
11. aka Ivan the Terrible, part I, Soviet Union, 1944.
12. aka Battleship Potemkin, Soviet Union, 1925.
13. "…it is hard to imagine a montage sequence for an architectural ensemble more subtly composed, shot by shot, than the one that our legs create by walking among the buildings of the Acropolis." in Michael Glenny and Richard Taylor (eds), S. M. Eisenstein, Sellected Works – Towards a Theory of Montage, Vol. II, BFI Publishing, London, 1991.