

Cacoyannis' *Electra*: Un Film Noir du Grec

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The term “film noir” refers to a period of American cinematography at the end of World War II and during the post-war period leading to the early 1960s.¹ This era of cinematography reflected America’s reaction to the changing realities of life for those who fought and for those who were left at home to support the war effort.² The term also attaches to the genre of black and white crime films that were released during this period, but, among experts in the field, the term lacks an exact, unanimous definition because of the hazy classification of films into genres and because of film noir’s overlap with more firmly established genres, such as gangster films.³ As such, there is very little universally common ground when attempting to define film noir. Even the usefulness of what some consider a vague category is still hotly debated.⁴ However, some features that make a film count as film noir are fairly straightforward. Nathaniel Rich suggests that film noir is...

. . . punctuated by violence and pervaded with a profound sense of dread and moral uncertainties. The heroes tend to be cynical, tough, and overwhelmed by sinister forces beyond their control. Stylistically, film noir is distinguished by its stark chiaroscuro cinematography. . . Films are shot in black and white, lit for night, favor oblique camera angles and obsessive use of shadows, and, most importantly, take place in a city. Film

¹ Park, William. *What Is Film Noir?* Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2011.

² Park, 1

³ Park, 2

⁴ Park, 2

noir tries to make sense of the complexities and anxieties of the postwar urban experience by exploring the rotten underside of the American city, the place where the American dream goes to die.⁵

While this definition explains the core thematic, stylistic, and cinematographic elements that embody a film noir, the definition is decidedly Americentric. The focus on the American experience in the postwar world disenfranchises the postwar experiences of those living on the European continent who often experienced the horrors of the war from their doorsteps. This limited view of what characterizes a film noir unjustly removes European contributions from the equation.

This sentiment leads us to Cacoyannis's 1962 film, *Electra*, which depicts the events in Euripides' *Electra* as well as some additional scenes drawn from Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. One might wonder how a film adaptation of a play created roughly two thousand years ago could have any relation to the concept of a film noir, a relatively modern cinematographic movement. However, as reimagined by Cacoyannis and Irene Papas (the actress cast as Electra in the film and a key producer of the film), *Electra* presents a heterogeneous cinematic experience that intertwines the elements of film noir with references to both modern and ancient Greek identity, resulting in a work that presents a uniquely Greco-centric, classical world, while clinging tightly to definitive features of a film noir.

While the film itself deals with highly violent themes, violence against characters is not directly shown in any scene. This convention is in keeping with those of the ancient Greek tragedy, where characters generally die off-stage. However, the film strongly

⁵ Rich, Nathaniel. *San Francisco Noir: The City in Film Noir from 1940 to the Present*. New York: Little Bookroom, 2005.

implies violence and the deaths of numerous characters.⁶ An example can be seen in the opening section of film during the scene in the royal bath.⁷ Aegisthus is shown slashing at a figure off-screen, then the camera cuts to Agamemnon's pained expression.⁸ The scene makes clear to the viewer that Aegisthus is slashing at Agamemnon, but the film never depicts any wounds inflicted upon Agamemnon.⁹ We see a similar avoidance of outright depictions of violence in the murder of Clytemnestra. The camera never witnesses Orestes' blows to Clytemnestra's body, but the violence is, again, clearly grasped by the audience.¹⁰ Instead, the film employs both an unnerving soundtrack and the reactions of bystanders to convey violence to the viewer. The film's soundtrack, produced by Mikis Theodorakis (a famed composer in Greece whom also worked on *Zorba the Greek*), creates a sense of dread and unsettles the scene.¹¹

In addition to the striking violence of the murders, *Electra* also expresses the spirit of the film noir through its morally ambiguous view of vengeance. The film presents a conflict to the audience by incorporating both Greek Orthodoxy and pagan religion as two sources of guidance for the characters. However, these sources offer inconsistent guidance that pulls the characters' sense of morality in opposing directions. The women who attend most closely to Electra at the outset of the film dress entirely in black with head scarves that mirror the Apostolnik, a traditional garment of Eastern Orthodox nuns.¹² This distinctive attire would have been instantly recognizable to a

⁶ Pathmanathan, R. Sri. "Death in Greek Tragedy." *Greece & Rome* 12.1 (1965): 2-14.

⁷ *Electra*. Dir. Michael Cacoyannis. Perf. Irene Papas. 1962.

⁸ *Electra*

⁹ *Electra*

¹⁰ *Electra*

¹¹ "Mikis Theodorakis:Biography." *IMDb*. IMDb.com, n.d.

¹² McDonald, Marianne, John M. Dillon, and S. E. Wilmer. *Rebel Women: Staging Ancient Greek Drama Today*. London: Methuen, 2005.

Greek audience. At the command of the oracle of Delphi, Orestes plots his vengeance against his father's killers with divine sanction. Orestes' elder tutor can also be seen as a representative of the old gods through his assistance, which enables the protagonists to achieve their vengeance.

Orestes eventually recruits his sister, who is eager to join him in assassinating their father's killers. At this point, the chorus members, clad in black, begin to separate themselves from Electra. Around the same time, Orestes, Pylades, and the tutor take a much more central role in Electra's story, filling the space left by the chorus, which has become distant. In spite of their withdrawal from Electra's inner circle, the chorus continue to warn her of the consequences that will befall her quest for vengeance. This uneasy tug of war between the ancient and modern religious influences comes to a violent conclusion with the death of Clytemnestra. The Orthodox chorus writhes in pain as Clytemnestra is murdered. They then lament the folly of Electra and her brother, while at the same time acknowledging the necessity of the act. The moral ambiguity of the protagonist's actions also leads to a sense of hopelessness in the character's actions. Electra and Orestes must suffer the wrath of the gods for failing to avenge their father, or for killing their own mother. This creates a sense of dread throughout the last half of the film, as the inevitable, painful conclusion approaches. The film concludes with our heroine left to contemplate her fate in exile. The film presents both the ancient and modern moral view, but offers no sign that one would result in a better outcome for the children of Agamemnon. The chorus' ambivalent speech as the characters walk into the desolate Greek countryside reflects the true moral ambiguity of the situation. They focus on the hardship of the protagonist's situation instead of espousing any hatred toward

them, stating “There has never been a family so damned and unhappy.”¹³ The characters are well aware of their unfortunate lot in life and the chorus, like the land stretched out before Electra, Orestes, and Pylades, offers nothing to sooth them.

In accordance with the cynical, dreadful, and morally bleak themes of both *Electra* and film noir as a whole, Electra and Orestes themselves embody the spirit of film noir protagonists. Upon the murder of Agamemnon, the two are thrust into entirely different, difficult lives. Electra is locked in a tower, while Orestes is sent to live in a neighboring country to avoid assassination.¹⁴ This lack of control over their own fates embodies the powerlessness Rich refers to in his talk of “sinister forces.”¹⁵ Both characters are robbed of their agency and kept from obtaining their claim to the throne, which helps to transition them into adults befitting a film noir.

We see Electra’s development into a film noir protagonist when her mother and stepfather, in order to ensure that she will have no claim to the throne, send her against her will to marry a peasant. In a token display of grit and defiance, she shears her hair in protest against the hopeless situation in which she finds herself.¹⁶ Later, when she is approached by women in her village to attend a festival for young women, she refuses, stating that her “heart is broken, dear friends, and as far as parties and dresses, I won’t dance or sing anymore with the girls of Argos.”¹⁷ Here she embodies the cynical nature of a film noir protagonist by dismissing the desires of a normal girl and focusing instead on her loss and her hatred for those who hurt her.

¹³ *Electra*

¹⁴ *Electra*

¹⁵ *Rich*, 8

¹⁶ *Electra*

¹⁷ *Electra*

Our protagonists' powerlessness is reinforced by the two conflicting moral codes that are thrust upon them by the classical and modern religious influences at play within the film. Electra and Orestes have no hope of avoiding divine punishment regardless of their choices, which again highlights the moral ambiguity of the vengeance killing with which Orestes has been charged by the oracle at Delphi.¹⁸ The influences within the film ensure that no positive outcome is feasible for the protagonists, which justifies their cynicism and in some ways explains their desire to kill their father's murderers despite the taboo nature of matricide, as that decision would, at least, quench their desires for vengeance.

Following from this powerlessness, the protagonist of a film noir is often a tarnished character, or one who has, through some series of events, committed a crime in spite of themselves and consequently falls into moral ambiguity.¹⁹ For much of the movie, Electra's hands remain clean, but, upon meeting her brother, she becomes obsessed with vengeance against her father's killers and the two plan and eventually execute her assassination strategy.²⁰ This decline reinforces Electra's cynical outlook as well as the pessimistic and foreboding tone of the work.

As we move from the core elements of the film's plot to its style, it is important to define some terms that are critical to understanding what characterizes a film noir. Chiaroscuro cinematography, for instance, refers to the heavy use of contrast to create extremely dark and light sections of the image without much intermediate light

¹⁸ *Electra*

¹⁹ Park, 24

²⁰ *Electra*

intensity.²¹ While this stylistic choice may not seem key to the spirit of a film noir, this technique is often used to differentiate groups from one another in a scene.²² *Electra* presents a unique challenge since its scenes are, for the most part, focused on large outdoor sets shot during the day, which restrict the manipulation of light on the part of the filmmakers. However, there are a number of scenes in which this technique plays a role. When Electra is first given to her peasant husband, a woman hurries to offer her a knife.²³ Electra herself is brightly illuminated and wears a bright white dress. As she reaches for the knife, the knife and her hand are shadowed by the cinematography. The scene suggests that the knife was meant as a last resort for Electra to end her life, contrasting the purity of Electra through the brightly illuminated, white dress with the hopelessness of her situation through the shadowed hilt of the knife.

The film also makes excellent use of the natural light of the Greek countryside to create a highly contrasted film with a deep, rich use of shadow. During the many outdoor scenes, the shadows created by the sun on the actors seem unnaturally deep compared with the harsh light that bleaches the surrounding landscape.²⁴ The few night scenes in the film also make excellent use of shadow to create a striking image of the characters. During the meeting between Electra, Orestes, and Aegisthus that takes place just before Aegisthus' death, the lighting illuminates part of Electra's figure, while part is shrouded in deep shadow.²⁵ In the context of the scene, this effect marks our heroine's pursuit of vengeance as both a heroic and detestable.

²¹ Bordwell, David, and Kristin Thompson. *Film Art: An Introduction*. New York: McGraw-Hill Companies, 1997.

²² Park, 5

²³ *Electra*

²⁴ *Electra*

²⁵ *Electra*

The film also displays another of Rich's stylistic requirements for film noir. Of course, the film is shot in black and white, as were most films of the time. Color cinematography only became popular in the 1950s with the development of Kodak's Eastman film, which allowed studios to produce full-color feature length films under financially viable conditions.²⁶ Of course, this technology still required a greater investment than standard black and white equipment, and it took nearly a decade to become fully adopted in the United States.²⁷ It is no surprise that Cacoyannis, filming a independent Greek film, would forgo color cinematography.

Two film noir elements missing from the style of *Electra* are oblique or Dutch angles, and an urban setting. While lacking key features could exclude a film from the genre, the absence of some film noir elements is, somewhat paradoxically, also a feature of film noir. Important examples of film noir such as, *They Live by Night*, *Gun Crazy*, and *Double Indemnity*, lack a strong depiction of an urban landscape in decay.²⁸ The lack of Dutch angles, or canted angles, is also not particularly surprising, as they are rarely used in cinematography in general.²⁹

After exploring the connections between Cacoyannis' *Electra* and the defining characteristics of the film noir, the film clearly belongs in the same realm as other notable film noir works. In addition, this film was critically applauded upon its release as "what undoubtedly is to be a screen classic."³⁰ This acclaim illustrates the successful incorporation of film noir's elements and the successful execution of the filmmakers in

²⁶ "Milestones | Kodak." *Milestones | Kodak*. N.p., n.d..

²⁷ "Milestones | Kodak"

²⁸ Park, 22

²⁹ Bordwell, 194

³⁰ Crowther, Bosley. "Screen: A Brilliant New 'Electra': Greek Classic Provides an Interesting Film." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 18 Dec. 1962.

appropriately employing these elements to create what reviewers considered an excellent film.

We are then left to ask why *Electra* works so well within the framework of a film noir. The solution may lie with the characters of film noir. In these films, the fates of the characters, much like the fates of the characters in Greek tragedy, are widely known before the conclusion of the performance.³¹ Their fates are interesting due to the dramatic path they take to their inevitable, tragic, fate.³² “These characters exist on the penumbra between life and death; although most of them are alive, they have resigned themselves to imminent death.”³³

The fates of Electra and Orestes are similar. In spite of their actions’ divine sanction, the matricide will continue to haunt them, and, if the cycle of their family continues, they will eventually suffer the same fate at the hands of some other force of vengeance. In this sense, Electra died the moment her vengeance was complete, existing in the same penumbra as the film noir protagonist.

³¹ Luhr, William. *Film Noir*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012,6.

³² Luhr,6

³³ Luhr,7

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