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The agony of cosmopolitan love: the Melina Mercouri-Jules Dassin partnership

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the role that cosmopolitan love plays in the cinematic partnership of émigré director Jules Dassin and Greek star Melina Mercouri. In defining cosmopolitan love, it employs a conceptual framework informed by Simmel's theorisation of the 'stranger' and Barthes's analysis of 'a lover's discourse'. It offers a detailed and historically rooted understanding of stardom, performance, and aesthetics in the films of Dassin and Mercouri tracing changes in the director's film aesthetics and in the star's performance style. It argues that these transformations, demonstrated through a comparison between *Never on Sunday* and *Phaedra*, are substantially the outcome of a struggle to reconcile their cosmopolitan positions with love as a cosmopolitan disposition. The article uses this specific case study to propose an agonistics of cosmopolitan love that stands in opposition to ethical approaches such as Levinas's for whom love is a form of 'being-for-the-other'.

KEYWORDS

Jules Dassin; Melina Mercouri; love; cosmopolitanism; ethics; agonistics

Introduction

Spring 1966. I went to the Hilton to discuss writing the script for a Dassin movie. 'Its subject?' I asked him timidly. 'Anything you want! But there will be one contractual condition: Melina will be in every scene'. To which I responded naively: 'In the script that I will write of which I don't know its subject or title, what if two guys are conspiring to murder her, then how do I put her in the frame?' 'She might not be able to hear what is being said but her shadow should be visible in the shot'. Vassilis Vasilikos, *Eleftherotypia*, 7 March 2009 (Vasilikos 2009).

Therefore, on those occasions when I am engulfed, it is because there is no longer any place for me anywhere, not even in death. The image of the other – to which I was glued, on which I live – no longer exists; sometimes this is a (futile) catastrophe which seems to remove the image forever, sometimes it is an excessive happiness which enables me to unite with the image; in any case, severed or united, dissolved or discrete, I am nowhere gathered together. Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (Barthes 2001, 11).

This article analyses changes in Melina Mercouri's performance style and star image with close reference to her relationship with Jules Dassin, her lover and husband from

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1955 until her death in 1994. After an acclaimed career in Hollywood, Dassin, a blacklisted Jewish-American director, moved to Europe and eventually to Greece where he worked with Mercouri in nine films.¹ I will focus on *Never on Sunday* (J. Dassin, Gr/U.S.A, 1960) and *Phaedra* (J. Dassin, Gr/U.S.A, 1962), as films that revised Mercouri's performance style and star image and also registered a formal transformation in Dassin's cinema. Two critical approaches inform my argument. Firstly, consideration is given to cosmopolitan positions: Dassin's status as a celebrated émigré director and Mercouri's formidable reputation as a Greek national icon. Dassin's profound 'foreignness' (Eleftheriotis 2012), an *in extremis* version of Georg Simmel's 'stranger' (Simmel 1964), and Mercouri's ('the last Greek goddess', Goulioti 2009) quintessential Greekness, create distinctive cosmopolitan positions that electrify the field of their cinematic relationship. Secondly, I rely on Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse* (Barthes 2001) for an understanding of love as a formative force in their cinematic relationship.

Guided by Barthes and Simmel, I explore the Dassin–Mercouri relationship as a partnership of lovers who are also strangers in cultural terms. At the juncture of these identities, I will place the analysis of the cinematic changes in Mercouri and Dassin's careers. There is a dual ambition in this article in the focus on this extraordinary personal and cinematic relationship and in the way it stimulates a rethinking of key concepts within the discourse of cosmopolitanism. I will offer a detailed and historically rooted understanding of stardom, performance, and aesthetics in the films of Dassin and Mercouri informed by cosmopolitan love as a conceptual and analytical framework. Under the conditions of intensifying neoliberal globalisation, 'love' becomes an often idealised cosmopolitan disposition seen as an alternative to the instrumentalism of contemporary capitalism. In contrast, based on the pragmatic approaches of Simmel and Barthes, I propose an 'agonistics' of cosmopolitan love that acknowledges the difficulties that global citizens and human subjects face in their efforts to reconcile their often perilous positions with dispositions that conform with lofty ethical values.

Cosmopolitan strangers, cosmopolitan lovers

The first quotation of the epigraph, by the author and scriptwriter Vassilis Vasilikos (best known for the 1969 Costa-Gavras adaptation of his novel *Z*), is an eloquent testimony to Dassin's *amour fou* for Mercouri. It should not be dismissed as simply a foolish and exuberant statement of an infatuated man. Dassin's style of filmmaking changed dramatically through the expressed yearning for his lover's omnipresence and in that respect Mercouri's 'shadow' looms large over their films. The all-consuming desire to be immersed in her image can also be understood through Barthes's quotation which relates the discursive figure '*s'abîmer*/to be engulfed', to an experience of annihilation and catastrophe or alternatively of profound fulfilment. There is an all-or-nothing desperation in this 'figure' of love, expressed as an existential need to be in unity with and a fear of being severed from the image of the loved one. According to Barthes, this can lead to an 'outburst of annihilation' that allows no place where the subject can be 'gathered together' (Barthes 2001, 10). The feeling of being *nowhere*, of occupying a position that lacks togetherness, is also akin to the place that the 'stranger' occupies in Simmel. Contrary to the lover's 'annihilation', however, the stranger's experience of exclusion,

of being simultaneously close and culturally distant to a host group, enables an observing look, a vision that sees the whole world as a foreign land (403).

Dassin's position as an image-maker who is a lover *and* a stranger is also one of exteriority, a position that he lucidly and self-consciously dramatized in the character of Homer, played by Dassin himself, in *Never on Sunday*. In the film's ending, as Homer leaves Greece and Ilya (Mercouri), the woman he loves, Dassin creates a scene of his own exclusion, the creation of which Barthes also describes in relation to the 'lover': 'I see myself walking away alone, shoulders bowed, down the empty street' (Barthes 2001, 133). In Homer, Dassin provides a clear representation of what he recognises to be the struggle to reconcile a stranger's cosmopolitan position with love as a cosmopolitan disposition. Intriguingly, Jacques Lacan produced the most extensive discussion on cinema in his work in relation to *Never on Sunday*. Lacan recognised Dassin's struggle, which he described in the following terms:

It is insofar as the subject is situated and is constituted with relation to the signifier that the break, splitting or ambivalence is produced in him at the point where the tension of desire is located. The film I just referred to, in which I learned afterwards the director, Dassin, plays the role of the American, presents us with a nice and curious model of something that can be expressed as follows from a structural point of view. The character who plays the satirical role, the role that is offered for our derision (proposé à la dérision), namely, Dassin as the American, finds himself to be as the producer and creator of the film in a position that is more American than those whom he makes fun of (livre à la dérision), that is, the Americans (Lacan 1992, 317).

Evident in this analysis of Dassin's position is the link between his identity as a lover (who experiences the 'tension of desire') with his struggle of being a stranger ('American' – an identity that he seeks to disavow through parody according to Lacan). While the position of the stranger has been discussed extensively within the discourse of cosmopolitanism, even more extensive is the literature on love and lovers. Nevertheless, although philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, and cultural theorists have addressed love across cultural divides (Badiou 2012; Fanon 1993; Levinas 1979; Nava 2007; Wilson 2012), they have not considered how it informs collaborative creative practice and it is this epistemological gap that I intend to address.

The approach of Barthes' remarkable text is to identify and describe fragments of a lover's discourse, which find expression in the creation of a series of 'figures', which become formal and concrete configurations of complex psychic processes:

These fragments of discourse can be called *figures*. The word is to be understood, not in its rhetorical sense, but rather in its gymnastic or choreographical acceptance [...] the body's gesture caught in action and not contemplated in repose: the body of athletes, orators, statues: what in the straining body can be immobilised [...] The figure is the lover at work (Barthes 2001, 3–4).

A figure as 'the body's gesture caught in action' is evocative of the creation of images that the relationship between a director and an actor generates; reciprocally, in the lover's creation of a repertoire of figures there is something of the work of a director and an actor working together. Equally, in the loneliness of the lover whose figure-creation remains separate from, but obsessed with, an amorous other, there is something of the stranger:

a simultaneous sense of attachment and detachment, togetherness and isolation, proximity and distance.

The specific cosmopolitan positioning of Dassin and Mercouri in the creation of the figures that surface in their films complicates the argument as the interaction between the former's foreignness and the latter's Greekness involves several overlapping layers. Acts of interpretation are at the heart of their cosmopolitan love and their filmmaking. In real life, Mercouri functioned as a cultural interpreter who explained, translated, and revealed a Greece hidden to Dassin while as an actor, she became an *interpréter* of Dassin's film roles. Such roles were based on an understanding of Greekness that Dassin assembled primarily with her help, which then were interpreted by Mercouri as an actor. This circuit of interpretation and interdependence is performed within a relationship that makes love a vital instrument in the making of the films. In this process, love loses the transparency that is prominent in romantic cultural enunciations and in critical approaches that elevate it to an ethical stance and becomes part of a struggle between two individuals striving to understand each other and to be understood in return. In our globalised societies, love that depends on and advances cultural interpretation, *between* cultures and *in* culture, is becoming increasingly common and is best expressed as *agon*, in its double meaning of struggle and game. Within such *agonistics* of love, I will trace the multiple strategies of power and desire which underpin the figures that Dassin and Mercouri collaboratively create in their films.

The Dassin–Mercouri relationship

Biographical details² offer insights into the Dassin–Mercouri relationship as one in which the personal permeates the cinematic – there are numerous examples of this, but I offer here just a few to demonstrate the point. Mercouri describes their first meeting at the 1955 Cannes Festival as ‘fatal and final’, an event that changed her life forever. In her account, as the lights came up after the screening of her debut film *Stella* (M. Cacoyannis, Gr, 1955), Dassin ran towards Mercouri climbing over the seats of the theatre. ‘I love the way you laugh, I love the way you walk’ were his first words (*Portreto*). An almost verbatim declamation³ by Dassin as an on-screen lover resurfaces five years later in *Never on Sunday*. In the film Mercouri's Ilya reveals her love for Medea, a role that the star revisited several times in her career, most importantly in Dassin's *A Dream of Passion*. Its narrative is structured as a play-within-a-film: Maya (Mercouri) plays Medea in a theatrical production of a modern version of the tragedy. In a poignant scene, Maya gives an interview in which she talks about her love for her husband (a thinly disguised Dassin) who ‘[...] asks nothing from me because he asks nothing from life. And I stayed with [him] because he was shelter and asylum, a safeguard against commitment to anyone else. And from each lover he was my refuge’. Significantly, in this monologue the relationship between Maya and her husband is expressed as a discourse that integrates the identities of lover and stranger.

Mercouri also claimed that it was her love for the theatre and particularly Greek tragedy that determined Dassin's decision to make *Phaedra* (*Paraskinio*). Based on the Euripides version of the myth, the film sets its love triangle in cosmopolitan Europe, with the Hippolytus character, Alexis played by Anthony Perkins. In real

life, Mercouri claims, she and Perkins had a ‘deep relationship, an erotic relationship, [...] I still have his photograph next to my bed’ (*Paraskinio*). Maya’s monologue in *A Dream of Passion* becomes even more poignant in this context, indicating how Mercouri and Dassin’s relationship and their films became extensively enmeshed.

The meeting of Mercouri and Dassin in Cannes was more than the fateful meeting of two cosmopolitan lovers destined to spend the rest of their lives and careers together, it was also a coming together of two conflicting film traditions. In the competitive part of the festival Dassin won the Best Director Award for *Rififi*. Built on the critical acclaim of *The Naked City*, Dassin’s credibility as a blacklisted director was substantial, a slick, intelligent director whose innovative observational cinema was invigorating the film noir (Philips, 2009). *Rififi* was a natural extension of a cosmopolitan filmmaking that exhibited in the most elegant way the contrapuntal sensibility of the exile (Said 1994, 137–149) and the objective vision of the stranger (Simmel 1964), the identities and qualities that define Dassin’s career (Eleftheriotis 2012).

If in romantic terms their Cannes encounter was a perfect fit, in stylistic terms, a gulf separated Mercouri’s passion-infused performance style and Dassin’s detached cinematic aesthetics. *Stella*’s success was ground-breaking for the Greek film industry and signalled a new direction for Mercouri, until then a theatre star. The film is the story of Stella (Mercouri), a popular singer who flouts the patriarchal conventions of 1950s Greece. After rejecting an upper middle-class lover for the working-class footballer Miltos (Giorgos Foundas), Stella reluctantly agrees to marry him. On the day of the wedding instead of turning up for the ceremony she spends the day making love to a young student. A subsequent encounter with Miltos leads to murderous retaliation, which she seems to fully accept, kissing him passionately before she dies in his arms (Figure 1). Stella’s character caused critical and political controversy in Greece with reviews particularly focussed on the scene of Stella’s death praising Mercouri’s performative creation of a ‘mask of passion and suffering’; for others, Mercouri’s face as an ancient and tragic mask diverts attention from and in effect conceals the structures of modern oppression that constrain Stella’s quest for equality and freedom.⁴ *Stella* delivers an ambiguous



Figure 1. Stella.

image of Mercouri, torn between the dynamism of a contemporary, confident and assertive identity and the rigidity of an ancient mask.

Thus, Dassin inherited a deeply ambiguous Mercouri star image and performance style, one that fluctuates between conflicting signifying possibilities that correspond closely to those proposed by Barthes in *Mythologies* (Barthes 1982, 56–57) and exemplified by the faces of Garbo ('the mask, the Ideal') and Hepburn ('the lively, the Event'). In Dassin's films Mercouri's face hovers in between the two before settling for the former through an acting style that centralises a play between the performative acts of concealing and revealing.

Never on Sunday: strangers and lovers

While a comedy, *Never on Sunday* (written and directed by Dassin) is permeated by an anxious 'working-through' of cultural difference. The inherited ambiguity in Mercouri's image is amplified by Dassin's choice to negotiate difference through narration that depends on the omnipresence and centrality of his star and lover. Set in 1960s Piraeus, the film revolves around the relationship between Hellenophile Homer Thrace, an American traveller/writer/philosopher, and Greek Ilya, a happy-go-lucky sex worker who chooses her clients, never works on a Sunday and is the heart and soul of the port's working-class community. Homer arrives at a local tavern, which is the social centre of this male dominated group, where he meets Ilya. She instantly takes over the role of translator, interpreting the language but also the customs and values of the Greek community, rescuing Homer from several dangerous situations arising from his misunderstanding of social conventions. Homer sees Ilya as the personification of the 'miracle that was Greece' and persuades her to give up her profession and to become classically educated by him. To finance his project Homer strikes a deal with the pimp who controls the area's sex workers but not the fiercely independent Ilya. When the pact is revealed, Ilya revolts against Homer and leads the other women on a rebellion against the pimp. The film ends with Ilya finding love with Greek-Italian Tonio (Giorgos Foundas) and Homer's departure from Greece, as he finally accepts the futility of his mission to reform Ilya.

In her autobiography, Mercouri describes the changes in her life after meeting Dassin, especially her turn to reading books on politics and history that Dassin himself suggested (Mercouri 1971, 208). Self-consciously mirroring that, the film characters' relationship involves competing frames of cultural knowledge and contrasting cultural capitals: she understands Greek music, dance, the etiquette of drinking; she has an intimate knowledge of men, their weaknesses and their desires; he knows history, philosophy, art and drama. For Homer, Ilya becomes a love object and a symbol that exemplifies 'the decline of civilisation in modern Greece' that he must rescue from a culturally debased existence.

The film repeatedly displaces its attention from the complex reality of the working-class milieu of Piraeus to the mesmerising figure of Ilya. While in earlier Dassin movies it is the social context that unexpectedly bursts into intimate scenes disrupting dramatic intensity with a contrapuntal observational vision (Eleftheriotis 2012), in *Never on Sunday* it is the energy of Mercouri's performance that channels the social into the personal. The opening scene of the film is a clear manifestation of this. Amid the hustle and bustle of the docks, Ilya appears running towards the camera, her figure providing focus and coherence to a chaotic mise-en-scene (Figure 2). As she sheds her clothes



Figure 2. Never on Sunday.



Figure 3. Never on Sunday.

before diving into the sea, a perfect orchestration of gazes follows her body in its celebratory flight into the sea. In the medium shot that follows, Mercouri's face dominates, centrally framed in the shimmering water (Figure 3). While in Ilya's face Homer discovers the 'beauty that was ancient Greece', the film substitutes Greek social complexity for the beauty of Mercouri's face.

In a similar fashion, every tension and conflict in the film's diegesis seems to be resolved by or through Ilya. The diegetic acts of translation, interpretation (the story of *Medea* reworked and retold - Figure 4) and conflict-resolution (stemming from Homer's cultural gaffes - Figure 5) are supplemented by editing and cinematography that channel and resolve the complexities of the everyday and the commonplace, through Mercouri, as her movement, gesture and facial expression become acts of cultural interpretation.

We have seen that Dassin was particularly taken by the way Mercouri walked in *Stella* and she freely admitted her own pride: 'I have an easy, confident walk, very different



Figure 4. Never on Sunday.



Figure 5. Never on Sunday.

from the restrained walk forced on Greek women after centuries of oppression'. (*Portreto*) The film celebrates this particular attribute, for example, by contrasting Ilya's care-free walk accentuated by her billowing skirt (Figure 6) to that of the other sex workers who are repeatedly presented as a set of legs walking in a coordinated, disciplined, constrained and controlled way (Figure 7).

What Dassin loves as special and unique in Mercouri and what Mercouri likes about herself are very much aligned here, the director and the star joining forces as film partners and real-life lovers. However, in placing the star in a position that is differentiated from ordinary Greek women, the celebration of Mercouri's walk sits uncomfortably with the film's simultaneous demand that she represents Greekness. I propose that this paradox, however unique and specific to the personal history of the Dassin–Mercouri relationship it may be, is very much in line with the potential conflict that arises from their generic identities as lovers *and* strangers. Whereas Simmel's stranger seeks similarities in order to

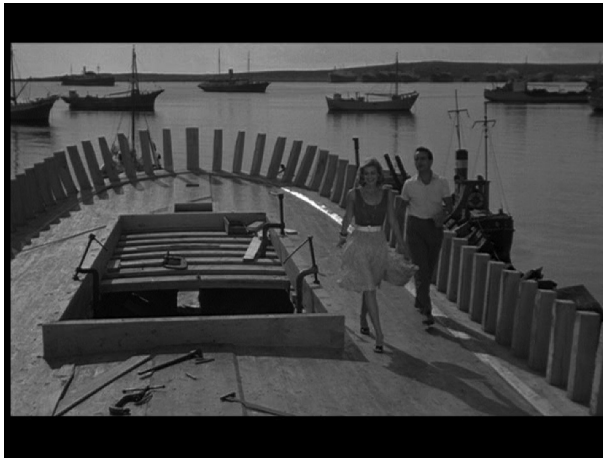


Figure 6. Never on Sunday.



Figure 7. Never on Sunday.

negotiate a place within the ‘host’ community, Barthes’s lover imagines the loved one as unique and exclusive. For Simmel

The proportion of nearness and remoteness, which gives the stranger the character of objectivity, also finds practical expression in the more abstract nature of the relation to him. That is, with the stranger one has only certain more general qualities in common, whereas the relation to more organically connected persons is based on the commonness of specific differences from more general features (403–404).

The proximity/distance dialectic that underpins the stranger’s cosmopolitan position produces a particularly fragile balance between the unique and the universal which is different from that sought by lovers. Barthes describes a catastrophic feeling experienced by a lover when realising that an aspect of the other’s image is imperfect, or even worse, ‘common’:

I suddenly see the other (a question of *vision*) busily or frenziedly or just insistently abiding by, respecting, yielding to worldly rites by which some sort of recognition is hoped for. For the bad Image is not a wicked image; it is a *paltry* image: it shows me the other caught up in the platitude of the social world – commonplace (Barthes 2001, 26).

Dassin the stranger seeks to interpret ordinary Greekness through Ilya, but Dassin the lover is unable to resist turning Mercouri's image into something extraordinary creating a tension that finds an unambiguous diegetic articulation. Homer and Tonio, Ilya's two lovers in the film, represent different ways in which she can be loved. As opposed to Homer's love for Ilya, which is expressed as a project of educational transformation, Tonio accepts and loves her as she is. After they have made love for the first time, Tonio declares that he wants to spend his life with her, 'because everything you do pleases me'. Reacting to these two drastically different approaches Mercouri's performance varies accordingly. Repelling Homer's 'love as educational project' her performance is marked by heavy affectation, playful but ironic fascination and flirtatious rebuke (Figure 8). In response to Tonio she becomes relaxed and at ease with herself and her ordinary, everyday setting (Figure 9).

These two structured possibilities (suggestively connoted by the characters' names) are articulated as two semantic alternatives in the hermeneutic struggle that underpins the film and Dassin's position as a stranger/lover. Homer demands in Ilya a stand-in for classical Greekness and its eternal and universal values; Tonio, accepts her as part of a complex society undergoing modernisation. This extends to the film's overall aesthetics: a realist, observational film style, committed to the everyday ordinariness of social life, is at loggerheads with the centrality of the excessively adorned image of Ilya.

Mercouri's performance is a valiant attempt to reconcile the two: while an integral part of the complexity of ordinary social life, she also transcends it, possessing an extraordinary strength of emotion that manifests itself primarily in the scenes in which she sings. Even though Mercouri was not a professional singer her songs were commercially successful, turning her passionate renditions into their unique selling point.



Figure 8. Never on Sunday.



Figure 9. Never on Sunday.



Figure 10. Never on Sunday.

Two instances in the film stand out in that respect. The first occurs when, accompanied by extra-diegetic music she sings (Figure 10) for an English sailor/customer. Mercouri performs with her face directed off-screen as the narrative freezes and the film focuses exclusively on the performance. Similarly structured is the second instance; Ilya, taking a break from Homer's educational regime, wanders around her crowded by books room eventually discovering a photograph of the local football team which instigates Mercouri's performance of the film's theme song ('Never on Sunday' by Manos Hadjidakis, winner of the 1960 Best Original Song Academy Award). The song is performed with passion, the kneeling and crossed hands evoking religious piety and suffering (Figure 11). In both cases, the film places Mercouri's performance of the songs beyond the ordinariness of its diegetic world, endowing it with a privileged structural position.



Figure 11. Never on Sunday.

Stella was the only Greek language film that Mercouri ever made as after she met Dassin the main language that her characters used was a heavily accented and often incorrect English which compromised aspects of authenticity and self-expression in her acting. Singing acquired a compensatory function, by enabling a performance signified as genuine and unhindered amplified by the structural autonomy of the songs. However, the songs are delivered in Greek, a language that Dassin never mastered, so Mercouri's passion is expressed in a way that is foreign to him. The singing scenes in *Never on Sunday* as acts of overcompensation register anxiety on many levels and ultimately rein in her momentary autonomy. In the first of the two instances, Mercouri repeatedly interrupts her singing offering a makeshift English version of the lyrics. This act of translation is clearly dictated by a demand to make the songs accessible to foreigners: to the sailor, to international audiences and to Dassin.

Never on Sunday sets up Mercouri as an instrument of multifaceted cultural interpretation of the everyday and ordinary aspects of Greek society. This makes Dassin's efforts to represent Greekness not only futile but also tragic as he channels the ordinari-ness of this 'foreign' culture through the image of his lover which he cannot treat as anything but extraordinary. For Dassin, ordinary Greekness poses a tortuous problem as he struggles to resolve the conflicting demands of love for his star and a career-long aesthetic and political commitment to realism. This is most evident in the inconsistent and contradictory ways in which Mercouri is positioned in relation to everyday and ordinary Greekness. In its more general sense, both Simmel and Barthes address this difficulty in an intriguingly congruent way. Considering the stranger as lover Simmel observes:

A trace of strangeness [...] easily enters even the most intimate relationships. [...] It is rather caused by the fact that similarity, harmony, and nearness are accompanied by the feeling that they are not really the unique property of this particular relationship: they are something more general, something which potentially prevails between the partners and an indeterminate number of others, and therefore gives the relation [...] no inner and exclusive necessity (404).



Figure 12. Never on Sunday.

For Simmel, the discovery that love can be a shared human trait, rather than unique or exclusive to two lovers, induces a state of ‘estrangement’. In Barthes, a lover’s discourse registers anxiety over the potential subordination of the specialness of the loved one under ‘commonness’ and seeks to discover ways in which a trivialisation of the other’s image (‘the paltry image’) is avoided. This is often expressed as an attempt to ‘circumscribe’ the dangers of ordinariness and commonness, by placing ‘within a parenthesis of the unthinkable those broad depressive zones’ (Barthes 2001, 50) that exist between the lovers’ special moments. However, these ‘depressive zones’ are integral and extensive parts of everyday life, puncturing the desired continuum of extraordinary pleasures.

Mercouri’s performance in *Never on Sunday* becomes an embodiment of such anxiety in its oscillations between a portrayal of natural ordinariness and a stylised expression of something extraordinary and special. A clear manifestation of this is the film’s incoherent treatment of her much celebrated ‘walk’, often evidenced within a single shot: confident natural strides (Figure 6) turn into self-conscious coquetry (Figure 12) whereas a dash to catch a tram decelerates to an exaggerated pose (Figure 13).

Phaedra: the classical Mercouri image

Phaedra can be seen as a response to these challenging contradictions. Set in Greece in the 1960s the film is a faithful adaptation of the ancient Greek myth of Phaedra that forms the basis of Euripides’ *Hippolytus* version of the tragedy. Phaedra (Mercouri) is the second wife of ship tycoon Thanos (Raf Vallone) and daughter of one of his many rivals and competitors. After launching SS Phaedra, the latest addition to his fleet, Thanos asks Phaedra to persuade Alexis (Anthony Perkins), his son from a previous marriage and a student in London, to return to Greece. Alexis and Phaedra are strongly attracted to each other, and they spend a few passionate days together at Thanos’ Paris apartment. Back in Greece, Thanos seeks to consolidate his shipping empire by arranging a marriage between Alexis and Ercy (Elizabeth Ercy), daughter of another ship owner. Phaedra, helplessly in love with her stepson, reveals the affair to her husband who,



Figure 13. Never on Sunday.

enraged, beats Alexis senseless. Alexis flees driving his sport car at extreme speed, crashes over a cliff into the sea and dies. The SS Phaedra perishes at sea drowning dozens of crew while Phaedra ritualistically poisons herself.

Phaedra provides a perfect vehicle for Barthesian ‘circumscription’, resolving in its style and structure many of the challenges that ordinariness and commonness pose to lovers. The film’s narrative, while predominantly situated in contemporary Greece, revolves around a very exclusive, elite group of multinational millionaires. Where *Never on Sunday* places its diegesis in the working-class milieu of Piraeus, *Phaedra* bypasses ordinary Greeks, who are only present as the doomed vessel’s sailors and their bereaved families. This is a very conscious and deliberate marginalisation, a fact that is brilliantly acknowledged in the film’s opening, when shots of the opulent party and fireworks display for the launch of SS Phaedra (Figure 14) are abruptly interrupted by a medium shot of a group of women in black headscarves (Figure 15) who are reacting to



Figure 14. Phaedra.



Figure 15. Phaedra.

the festivities with bewilderment: ‘they are powerful, they speak many languages, they celebrate with fire in the sky’. This is a clear manifestation of the contrapuntal vision that Dassin injected in his previous films but here it comes as a gesture of self-awareness of the subsequent cinematic marginalisation of ordinary working-class Greeks.

While such textual practices circumscribe the demands to represent contemporary and ordinary Greekness, in other words to deal with the prime challenges that arise from Dassin’s position as a stranger, his struggle with the extra/ordinariness of his lover’s image leads to a reworking of Mercouri’s performance style. By setting itself up as an adaptation of a classical text that follows on the footsteps of other notable adaptations by dramatists such as Seneca and Racine, the film’s narrative veers away from modern Greek society engaging instead with classical, and by extension, eternal and universal values. In that respect, the film creates a perfect platform for its star to deliver a veritable dramatic performance. Reviewing the film upon its release, the *Sight and Sound*’s Peter John Dyer playfully notes the production company’s name, ‘Melinafilm’, which might be in itself adequate to describe the film as ‘a decorative shrine for a performance by Melina Mercouri’ (Dyer 1963, 95).

The first meeting of Phaedra and Alexis, which instigates their fateful affair, takes place in the British Museum, specifically in Room 18 that houses the Parthenon (‘Elgin’) Marbles. The two lovers-to-be are placed within a hyperbolically classical mise-en-scene which foregrounds Mercouri’s dominant presence in the frame and showcases her performance. Here, the centrality of Mercouri’s image takes a meaning that is new and departs from that of *Never on Sunday*. The classical but sparse setting of the Museum creates a blank canvas, an abstract backdrop that excludes any contemporary social context, as Mercouri’s face becomes the sole point of reference. This is not just because it stands out against the white marble walls but also because the dialogue revolves around it. Alexis, who is drawing a picture of a statue, turns his attention to Phaedra and after examining her face he pronounces: ‘Never let them photograph you. They would make you look pretty. And you are not pretty. Your face is unique. I never saw a face like yours’. In response Phaedra looks up at Alexis, offering her ‘unique’ face to his gaze (Figure 16)



Figure 16. Phaedra.



Figure 17. Phaedra.

but then, as if realising the power that her own image holds and the erotic temptations that can arise from such offering, she turns her face downwards lowering her own gaze (Figure 17). What Mercouri performs is a facial gesture of revealing and hiding, registering a struggle to control by concealment the prohibited and fateful passion that the encounter with Alexis is about to unleash. As the solemnity of expression suggests, this moment of realisation of an inescapable destiny is also tinted with pain, accentuated by the backdrop shadow that pierces Phaedra's face.

In this trope of acting, the display of an act of concealment is followed by a revelation of true emotions to the camera. This harks back to the *Stella* image of Mercouri exemplified at the end of that film by the close-up of her face revealing her passionate love over the shoulder of a lover from whom these very emotions are concealed (Figure 1). This becomes a cinematographic and performative motif in *Phaedra* adopted by Dassin and Mercouri as an articulation of the play between appearance and truth,

surface and depth, hidden and revealed, expression and repression, desire and trepidation, in other words the very tensions that classically permeate the melodramatic. At the beginning of their affair, Phaedra dances with Alexis, their bodies drawing inexorably closer. This moment of erotic rapture is also a transgressive and forbidden act and the realisation of its tragic consequences is etched on Mercouri's face (Figure 18). This motif appears in numerous variations playing out different emotive registers through frame composition. Moments before Phaedra and Alexis make love in front of a roaring fire, as her lover slides down to the floor and out of frame, Phaedra remains standing for a few seconds her face expressing submission to her emotions and the signature pained look (Figure 19).

As the film moves towards its tragic denouement, Phaedra's passion is consumed by an overwhelming sense of suffering brought by the impossibility to fulfil her love. With nothing more left to hide or reveal, Mercouri's face itself becomes increasingly concealed,



Figure 18. Phaedra.



Figure 19. Phaedra.



Figure 20. Phaedra.



Figure 21. Phaedra.

initially with sunglasses (Figure 20) and finally with a ‘death mask’ as she lies down to die (Figure 21).

The face that hides and reveals is noted by Barthes as a key figure (‘dark glasses, to hide’) of a lover’s discourse, in terms that aptly describe the dialectic that underpins Mercouri’s performance:

[To] hide passion totally (or even to hide, more simply, its excess) is inconceivable: not because passion is in essence made to be seen: the hiding must be seen [...] I advance pointing to my mask: I set a mask upon my passion, but with a discreet (and wily) finger I designate this mask. Every passion, ultimately, has its spectator (Barthes 2001, 42–43).

Fittingly, Barthes uses Racine’s *Phédre* as an example in which ‘hiding’ as an amorous strategy fails and the subject ‘breaks apart: Now you know Phaedra and all her fury’ (Barthes 2001, 44). In Dassin’s film, Phaedra’s fury leads to the death of the two illicit

lovers, the drawn-out scene of her death expressed as gradual and escalating concealment of her unique face solely for the camera. Mercouri's image is placed within a classical hermeneutic of emotion and conflict, which in *Phaedra* replaces cultural interpretation and mediation as performative context. *Stella* endowed Mercouri's image with a profound ambivalence that *Never on Sunday* struggled with and failed to resolve. While the act of revealing concealed meanings as employed by *Never on Sunday* is instrumental to cultural interpretation it also turns Mercouri into an instrument, subordinate to the needs of the process. By contrast in *Phaedra* concealing and revealing are fundamental to the construction of her character and become the signs of Mercouri's performance. Unburdened by the weight of representation of ordinary and common Greekness, Mercouri indulges in a classical interpretation of passion, creating in the process an image that is special and extraordinary. Ultimately, that was beneficial to both Mercouri and Dassin. Mercouri's classical image helping Dassin as a lover to circumscribe the danger of ordinariness and as a stranger to find refuge within the values of universal communality. For her own part, Mercouri ensures that Dassin films become 'shrines' to her, in which she becomes an *interpréter* rather than as an instrument of interpretation.

The agony of cosmopolitan love

This article traced the transformations in Mercouri's star image and Dassin's cinematic style in the period that spans *Stella* and *Rififi* on one end and *Phaedra* on the other. Following Barthes and Simmel, I have approached love as a cosmopolitan disposition that can be engulfing and annihilating. The relationship between love, suffering and death has been played out over millennia in all forms of art and has been discussed by countless commentators. Passion has also been scrutinised, especially in the context of melodramatic conventions,⁵ but I want to further consider love within discourses of cosmopolitanism. This necessarily involves an examination of the relationship between the kind of love performed by Mercouri under Dassin's direction and the basic premise that underpins cosmopolitan ethics as a commitment to reaching out and opening up to the culturally different.

As the critical reception of Dassin's post-*Rififi* work suggests (e.g. Dyer 1963; McArthur 1972) and my analysis has demonstrated, the all-consuming love for his star that engulfs his films annihilates his distinctive cinematic style, blunting his contrapuntal observational vision. Annihilation also emerges in *Phaedra*'s death and in Homer's expulsion. *Phaedra*'s donning of a 'death mask' conceals the eyes and seals her from the outside world disallowing the possibility of an outward look (Figures 20 and 21). The pain and death suffered indicate a love that is self-consuming, an emotion that annihilates the self. However, this is not an act of selflessness and sacrifice but one that centralises and asserts the value of the self in its quintessential romantic notion of an entity that perishes when self-fulfilment is not possible. Homer's expulsion from Greece in *Never on Sunday* is a similar, albeit less drastic, form of annihilation and equally remarkable as it is self-inflicted, not just as the character's own decision but in Dassin's authorial choice. In both cases, it seems that there is no place where the loves of Homer and *Phaedra* can be accommodated, nowhere, as Barthes notes, that they can be 'gathered together'.

The motif of Mercouri's face that reveals passion over the shoulder of a lover who remains unaware of her true emotions, also negates Levinas's commitment to a 'being-for-the-other' as the ethical imperative that he invests in love. His assertion that 'love aims at the other; it aims at him (sic) in his frailty' (Levinas 1979, 256) is rejected by this motif in two significant ways. Most obviously Mercouri's face is not directed at her on-screen lovers ('the other') but away from them. In fact, in terms of the frame composition of these shots, it is 'the other' that is annihilated, face excluded from view, emotions unknown. There is a formal similarity of this compositional motif to the shots used by the Dardenne brothers and analysed by Sarah Cooper, following Levinas, as an example of the possibility of creating through proximity a space of ethical responsibility for the viewer (Cooper 2007). However, these formal articulations could not be more contrasting. In the case of the motif created by Dassin and Mercouri, proximity comes at the expense of the image of the other and the only relationship that the viewer is invited to form is with her face which is expressing a tragic loneliness, in a proximity that excludes the other and affirms the self. More importantly Mercouri's performance of passionate love despises the frailty that Levinas requires of love. As Barthes explains: 'Love-as-passion is therefore a force, a strength ("this violence, this stubborn, indomitable passion"), something which suggests the old notion of *ισχυς* (*ischus*: energy, tension, strength of character), and closer to us, that of Expenditure' (Barthes 2001, 84).

This can shed light into the reasons that Lacan decided to use *Never on Sunday* to conclude his argument in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Lacan's critique of morality revolves precisely around the recognition of an inescapable 'force', desire, which is denied by the way in which the 'question of ethics' is raised in post-Kantian philosophy. Lacan focuses on what Homer as a character exemplifies by 'doing things in the name of good, and even more in the name of the good of the other, [which] is something that is far from protecting us not only from guilt but also from all kinds of inner catastrophes'. (319) Homer's moral project to reform Ilya's life is a thinly veiled attempt to disguise his love for her, desperately seeking to sanitise his ethics from the traces of desire. A similar line of demarcation between love as an ethical disposition and desire is drawn by Levinas in his exploration of the 'ambiguity of love' as he acknowledges the clear possibility of a 'return to self' that lurks in desire: 'a movement ceaselessly cast forth, an interminable movement toward a future never future enough – is broken and satisfied as the most egoist and cruellest of needs. It is as though the too great audacity of the loving transcendence were paid for by a throw-back this side of need'. (254)

In his own 'praise of love', Badiou criticises Levinas' influential formulation for its determination to define love as 'an ethical sentiment *par excellence*', and, like Lacan, he rejects spiritual puritanism:

In my view there is nothing 'ethical' about love as such [...] I believe there is really an encounter with the other, but an encounter is not an experience, it is an event that remains quite opaque and only finds reality in its multiple resonances within the real world. Nor can I see love as an experience of 'communion', namely an experience in which I forget myself on behalf of the other, that is a model in this world of what will lead me to the Almighty Other (24).

This article foregrounds the challenges that arise within the conceptualisation of love as an ethical disposition *per se* by recognising love's 'multiple resonances within the

real world' in the Dassin–Mercouri partnership. This might be the logical consequence of the reliance on conceptualisations of the lover and the stranger that come from the specific perspectives of Simmel and Barthes who, unlike Levinas, are interested in the pragmatics of interaction rather than its idealised theorisation. Love, and likewise any other cosmopolitan disposition, should not be approached as simply an ethical imperative or a political duty; instead, it must be also situated in *ordinariness*, in the context of messy, far from ideal, at times playful, at other times tragic, daily interactions between strangers. Barthes defines a lover's discourse as a lonely and threatened activity that seeks to give expression to the anxious imaginings of the other, who in such enunciations is also a stranger. I would argue that *agony*, defined as both the anxiety that becomes the companion of any attempt to bridge gaps and to reach out to strangers *and* the coping *agonistic* mechanisms that come with it, is the most productive way of defining cosmopolitan dispositions. The agony of cosmopolitan love encompasses both a desiring force striving for oneness *and* its dialectical opposite, the inescapable *agon* that arises in living with difference under globalised capitalism. It is this recognition that informs my proposal of an *agonistics of love* that seeks to conceptualise cosmopolitan positions and dispositions, as complex articulations of the anxiety experienced in the struggles of cosmopolitan subjects.

Mercouri-Dassin is a clear example of such struggle which is neither unique nor rare, the case of Roberto Rossellini and Ingrid Bergman, amongst many other, being very similar and extensively documented. Demonstrating the complexities of the agonistics of cosmopolitan love, the introduction of a Hollywood star in the neorealist tradition has been critically appraised as challenging and ultimately transcending neorealism's closed and exclusive representations of Italy by placing the nation in a modern cosmopolitan context activated by Bergman's presence (e.g. Gelley 2008). In effect, the Rossellini-Bergman cinematic partnership stands as the exact opposite of Dassin and Mercouri's regression to a classicism that turns its back to an emerging modern face of Greece.

The emphasis on suffering and anxiety prompted by Mercouri's performance in *Phaedra* should not detract from the playful, 'gaming' aspect of their love. This article has also highlighted how the creation of the Mercouri-Dassin cinematic 'figures' was marked by playfulness (in its referentiality of their 'real-life' relationship, for example) and tactics (playing to the strengths of Mercouri's acting and star image or by compensating for Dassin's foreignness). The critical consensus of the creative 'failures' of the couple should not hide the success that Mercouri enjoyed as one of Europe's most effective and successful women politicians of the late twentieth century, serving ten years in a Greek socialist government and contributing significantly to the progressive modernisation of an oppressive patriarchal society. Dassin supported her work unwaveringly and remained active on his own international political causes, including the U.S.A civil rights movement and the Greek anti-fascist struggle. Ironically, out of *Phaedra*'s mise-en-scene of the British Museum, emerged their joint campaign to repatriate the Parthenon Marbles, a cosmopolitan struggle against the legacy of Elgin's colonial barbarism. The effectiveness and international reach of a campaign that was fundamentally about the love and loss of cultural heritage, owed a lot to Mercouri's ability to infuse her argument with the passion and suffering that the classicism of her star image offered, tactically mobilised as a powerful agonistic tool.

Notes

1. Jules Dassin's career highlights include *Brute Force* (U.S.A, 1947), *The Naked City* (U.S.A, 1948), *Thieves' Highway* (U.S.A, 1949), *Night and the City* (UK, 1950), *Rififi* (Fr, 1955). The Dassin-Mercouri films are: *He Who Must Die* (It/Fr, 1957), *La Legge* (It/Fr, 1959), *Never on Sunday* (Gr/U.S.A, 1960), *Phaedra* (Gr/U.S.A, 1962), *Topkapi* (U.S.A, 1964), *10.30 PM Summer* (Sp/U.S.A, 1966), *Promise at Dawn* (Fr/U.S.A, 1970), *The Rehearsal* (UK/Gr, 1974) and *A Dream of Passion* (Gr/Switz, 1978).
2. There is a wealth of material on both Dassin and Mercouri on the website of the Melina Mercouri Foundation (<http://melinamercourifoundation.com/en> accessed 13 February 2023). I have been relying heavily on two extensive Greek television interviews with Mercouri made in 1993 for the state channel ET1: a special issue of the regular *Paraskinio* arts programme and the special two-hour long programme *Melina Mercouri Portreto*. Literature on Dassin includes: McGilligan and Buhle (1997), McArthur (1972), Hirsch (2006), Eckstein (2004), and Prime (2008); on Mercouri: Kourelou (2016); and Mercouri's autobiography *I was born Greek* (Mercouri 1971).
3. Barthes (2001, 93–94) identifies the declamatory trope as instrumental in the construction of 'enamorament as drama'.
4. For a survey of the critical responses see Soldatos (1988, 178–184).
5. For example, Duncan (2011).

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