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“People are waiting”: Elia Kazan and *America America*

by Adrian Danks  March 2012

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Martin Scorsese concludes his *A Personal Journey... Through American Movies* (co-directed and co-written by Michael Henry Wilson, 1995) with a brief passage from Elia Kazan's *America America* (1963). This epic, physical, elemental, almost monomaniacal film is an important touchstone for Scorsese, a talisman of the passage from and between the old world of Classical Hollywood and the new, more distinctly personal and modern cinema of such directors as John Cassavetes, Luchino Visconti, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Scorsese's varied contemporaries in the soon to emerge

New Hollywood. Kazan's film is also a driven tale of the passage from the old world of Europe and Asia Minor to the new, ambivalently cleansing world of America. Kazan's film itself sits between these opposed and entwined worlds. Its extensive use of European locations in Greece and Turkey (mostly the former due to the Turkish authorities' objections to Kazan's choice of locations and subjects), deployment of modish techniques associated with the new waves of Europe such as the jump cut and a more episodic, novelistic narrative structure, dexterous deployment of Haskell Wexler's lucid and fluid hand-held camera, and reliance on non-professional actors and less well-known faces, all combine to grant the film both a freshness and a sense of grounded authenticity. But these elements – including its emphasis on minority ethnicities (specifically Greek and Armenian) and the entrenched prejudices they endure in Turkish ruled Anatolia – are also combined with more traditional aspects of characterisation, continuity, narrative and language (everyone speaks in English, some with American accents), making the film a fascinating hybrid of old and new.

It is therefore unsurprising that Scorsese found the film so moving and significant in his own development as a filmmaker. Kazan pointed the way towards a fruitful and committed combination of the old influences and the seemingly freer terrain of a truly “modern” cinema. Kazan's film also clearly pointed back to the influence of the Soviet montage cinema of Sergei Eisenstein and Alexander Dovzhenko, and such breakthrough directors as Roberto Rossellini, a central figure in the cinematic fusion of fact and fiction, and whose key film *Paisa* (1946) is directly and bravely referenced in one of *America America*'s most shocking moments (as the bodies of failed revolutionaries are hurled into the sea). *America America* keenly reflects Kazan's own influences across American and European cinema, highlighting for a director such as Scorsese how to integrate and present such cinephilic allegiances and touchstones.

From what I have written so far, one might get the impression that *America America* represents a radical break in Kazan's cinema. There is some truth to such a claim. It is certainly, by some distance, the most personal work that Kazan produced for the cinema (his sometimes shockingly forthright 1988 autobiography, *A Life*, is its only real competition). The film closely parallels the novel that Kazan was writing at the time, his first, a partial fictionalisation of the single-minded, ruthless journey his uncle took from Anatolia to America at around the turn of the century (the film itself begins in 1896). It is also the first film for which Kazan was fully responsible for the script, and, I would argue, his last truly successful work for the cinema. Kazan was always forthright about placing himself in relation to *America America* and its impassioned account of identity, migration, memory, ethnicity, racism, ethics, morality, the dream of America and the uses to which it is put. Kazan's voice opens proceedings over the image of a stark mountain partially engulfed by cloud, its elemental and bold iconography a marker for much of what is to come. This voice also clearly positions Kazan as emerging from the epic and episodic story that is about to unfold: “My name is Elia Kazan. I am a Greek by blood, a Turk by birth, and an American because my

uncle made a journey.” But the film can also be seen productively in relation to many of the films and plays Kazan had made up until this point, certainly sharing the intense interrogation of family, patriarchy, place, belonging and outsidership that characterise such seminal works as *East of Eden* (1955), *Wild River* (1960) and *Splendor in the Grass* (1961) (the director’s greatest films alongside *America America* and *Panic in the Streets* [1950]). Nevertheless, *America America* does mark an important juncture in Kazan’s cinema leading towards more directly personal and self-generated projects, labours of love that largely failed to find significant audiences: *The Arrangement* (1969) and *The Visitors* (1972). Although *America America* was nominated for a number of Academy Awards, and received a mixed critical reception (which it holds till this day), it was not a financial success. Kazan struggled to get funding for the film – unsurprising when one encounters the scope and relentlessness of the final work – and Warner Bros. only provided financial backing when other sources pulled out of the project; perhaps feeling some loyalty towards Kazan as a result of some of the films he had made for them in the past (including the recently successful *Splendor in the Grass*).

The most common criticisms of *America America* relate to the inadequacies of Stathis Giallelis’ central performance, the lack of variety in the writing, and the naivete and clumsiness of the film’s unobtrusive deployment of core symbols (shoes and other items of costume, the “Anatolian Smile”, confining interior spaces, elements of geography, etc) and actions (such as the moment when Stavros kisses the ground on arriving on American soil). But although I think that some of these criticisms are valid they are also, for me, largely beside the point. Giallelis is indeed a very limited actor – a non-actor even – but his performance has an honesty and single-mindedness, even monotony, that is entirely appropriate to the film (though it doesn’t always make it easy to watch). There are countless shots of him glowering and scowling at the camera and the film’s other participants, but the purity of his mission and inscrutability of his expressions and actions are brilliantly communicated by these actorly and even physical limitations. This element, amongst others, also helps the film to ford the barrier between documentary and fiction, actuality and history, fact and myth. The film itself partly counteracts this monotony – marked by the mantra-like repetition of the phrase “America America” – through its visual style and episodic narrative structure. It is a film full of set pieces, some defined by action – such as the early “retaliatory” massacre of Armenians by the Turks – and others more intimate and reflective in scale. For me, the film’s greatest and most extended passage is one that moves beyond the more extreme and physically brutal details of Stavros’ picaresque journey from Anatolia to Constantinople (Istanbul) and his initial work there as a *hammal*, an almost sub-human manual labourer. Although extreme in its ruthlessness, it is easy to understand Stavros’ will to leave these demeaning environments and pursue his dogged dream of America. But the film’s greatest section – full of clutter, detail and weight – involves his near seduction by and temptation of marriage to the daughter of a wealthy merchant. This sequence is marked by one of the many dichotomies that structure the film: the radically different worlds of men and women, and the attitudes that each hold towards one another. It is in this section that Stavros is given the taste of an easier life. But the static servitude of the old world and the patronage it requires, as well as the knowledge of a life that repeats endlessly across generations, is cloying and deadening to Stavros.

America America’s visual style is characterised by Wexler’s shifting use of hand-held camerawork and often striking juxtaposition of close-ups and extreme long shots – these long shots also partly work to “hide” elements of Giallelis’ performance. This combination works well to emphasise both the immediate experience of the characters and their place within a broader and dwarfing network of history, myth, geography and cultural diversity. The film is full of both open spaces – particularly those of the Anatolian plain that Stavros trudges through – and pointedly enclosed environments. For example, Stavros and his bride to be, Thomna (Linda Marsh), are given an apartment as a gift for their coming marriage. Its interior is cluttered with domestic objects and tokens, many revealing an attention to detail, familial history and daily life that is truly touching and caring (the mantle even carries pre-arranged photographs of their future in-laws). But the sense of entitlement and pre-ordination this communicates is also gently horrifying and stultifying, particularly for Stavros. This sense or feeling characterises another wonderful moment when Thomna’s father (Paul Mann) regales his future son-in-law with tales of what he should expect and demand of married life. The promised comfort of children, food, domesticity, patriarchal respect, heritage, the knowledge of sedentary existences that repeat over generations (with expanding waistlines to match) – considerable “achievements” for someone of Stavros’ meagre and impoverished background – palls alongside Stavros’ pursuit of freedom, change and rebirth, as well as his dream and fantasy of America. His pained and bitter rejection of “the good family life” is shadowed by the snippets of information about America that he learns throughout his travels: pictures in magazines and on the walls of shipping offices; questioning and dismissive accounts by those who have returned; the chauvinistic privilege and wealth of the few Americans he actually meets. Although Stavros claims he will be “washed clean” in America, his relentless march towards the new world is ironically accompanied by his degradation (he is robbed, has to take on the lowest of occupations, must tolerate his exploitation by a wandering Turk, almost marries for money, and becomes the lover of an older woman who sponsors his ultimate passage). There is a purity of purpose to Stavros’ actions and decisions – though these are not without their moments of existential doubt – but his journey emphasises what he must sacrifice, endure and compromise to meet his goal. This is why the film’s penultimate scene, showing him at work in a New York shoeshine parlour, comfortable in his adoption American manners, appearances, language and morality, is both unsettling and apt in its implications. The speed and commercialisation of American life are indicated by his aggressive pursuit of customers and money: “Come on you. Let’s go you, people are waiting.” But *America America* is also about the ties of family and ethnicity, and how these profoundly mark the experience and legacy of migration. Characteristically, Stavros’ final words can also be read and heard as a call to his homeland, a symbol of the relentless progression of this migration.

In its final moments the film returns to the image of the cloud shrouded mountain and the steady voice of Kazan announcing that Stavros eventually managed to bring all of his family to America, “except for his father. That old man died where he was born.”

This final line highlights the importance of time – and different notions and experiences of it – to *America America*. The film’s episodic structure and duration are highlighted by its use of jump cuts. These act to emphasise the relentless linearity of Stavros’ journey, as well as his movement from the old to the new world. It is apt that a “modern” technique of film style is used to dramatise this progressive journey. These jump cuts also act to emphasise a sense of disorientation. The long, sometimes repetitive passages that are often contrasted with these radical shifts in space, place and time are marked by a cyclical temporality. These menial chores, backbreaking labours, rituals of courtship and servitude, are played out at length and in detail to help dramatise the will and effort Stavros has to muster to overcome them (to literally jump forward in space and time). But in such moments as when the film cuts from the final emotional conversation between Stavros and Thomna to a close-up of Stavros’ determined, isolated face battered by the spray of the ocean, we experience something of the radical shift in time, place and experience that characterise migration. In this moment Kazan contrasts the vastness and indifference of the ocean with the boxed-in, darkened interior that contained the previous conversation. *America America* is Kazan’s testament to origins, to the passage from the old world to the new and everything that is gained and lost while enduring and pursuing this odyssey.

America America/The Anatolian Smile (1963 USA 168 mins)

Prod Co: Athena Enterprises Corp./Warner Bros. **Prod, Dir:** Elia Kazan **Ser:** Elia Kazan, based on his book *America America* **Phot:** Haskell Wexler **Ed:** Dede Allen **Art Dir:** Gene Callahan **Mus:** Manos Hadjidakis

Cast: Stathos Giallelis, Frank Wolff, Harry Davis, Elena Karam, Gregory Rozakis, Paul Mann, Linda Marsh, Katharine Balfour

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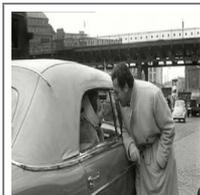
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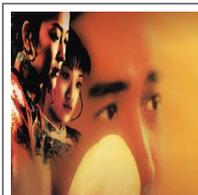
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About the Author

Adrian Danks is Director of Contextual Studies (including Cinema Studies) in the School of Media and Communication, RMIT University. He is also co-curator of the Melbourne Cinémathèque and co-editor of Senses of Cinema.



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