

Karaghiozis, Art Critic  
An Essay on the Hero of Greek Shadow  
Theatre, Done as a Play in Three Acts

Lewis Hyde

PROLOGUE

[The scene: A shadow-theatre screen lit from behind; on the left, the falling-down hut of Karaghiozis; on the right, a modern art museum. Music plays. Hatziavatis enters, singing.]

**Hatziavatis:** Those who are asleep see only shadows on a screen, but those who are awake know what the shadows mean. When the lights go down the shadows disappear. Life is fleeting, death is always near.

**Karaghiozis** (*from inside the hut*): Shut up! I'm trying to get some sleep!

**Hatziavatis:** Karaghiozis! We're rich! Ahmet Bey has promised a fabulous sum for a critical essay on Greek shadow theatre. Get up! We have work to do!

**Karaghiozis** (*coming out of his hut and beating Hatziavatis with an old watering can*): I'll show you what the shadows mean! No shuteye for me, a black eye for you!

**Hatziavatis:** Stop it, Karaghiozis! I need your help. The topic is you yourself, Karaghiozis, and who above all knows you?

**Karaghiozis:** My little dog knows me. He and I often share a boner.

**Hatziavatis:** Seriously, Karaghiozis; we need to write out all the history: the shadow theatre in ancient Egypt, in Java, in Turkey, the fall of the Ottoman Empire . . .

**Karaghiozis:** The bottomless umpire?

**Hatziavatis:** . . . the heroes of 1821, the urbanization of Greece, especially in the periods 1870–1896 and 1920–1928 . . .

**Karaghiozis:** Will you shut up! May your tongue grow a beard, may scabs form on your teeth, may your eyeballs give birth to snails, and may

you be protected from all evil! Amen!

**Hatziavatis:** Excellent. Just the kind of material we'll need.

(*Writing as he speaks*): "Fusing both curses and prayers, the hero-anti-hero embodies a range of post-Ottoman dichotomies . . ."

**Karaghiozis:** Postal erotic duck toys? Keep up that shit and I'll tear you a new asshole!

**Hatziavatis** (*undaunted*): ". . . the *klepht* in the city . . ."

**Karaghiozis:** The theft of the titty?

**Hatziavatis:** ". . . Moslem and Christian . . ."

**Karaghiozis:** Musclemen *au gratin*?

**Hatziavatis:** ". . . the oral and the written . . ."

**Karaghiozis:** The bagel in the kitchen?

**Hatziavatis:** Stop it Karaghiozis; you never make any sense.

**Karaghiozis:** That's not what the ladies say. A cunning linguist they call me! I set tongues wagging, if you know what I mean.

**Hatziavatis:** Wonderful! (*Continues to write*): "In the heteroglossia of his bawdy eruptions we see dialogic resistance to the hegemonic monotone of . . ."

**Karaghiozis:** If Ahmet Bey's paying by the word, Hatziavatis, you should break the big ones up. Put more spaces in.

**Hatziavatis:** It is better not to end a sentence with a preposition, Karaghiozis; we're writing this for a cultured audience.

**Karaghiozis:** OK: Put more spaces in, fathead. Lots of tiny words, like a plate of sardines, that's the way to go. By the way, you wouldn't happen to have a sardine on you?

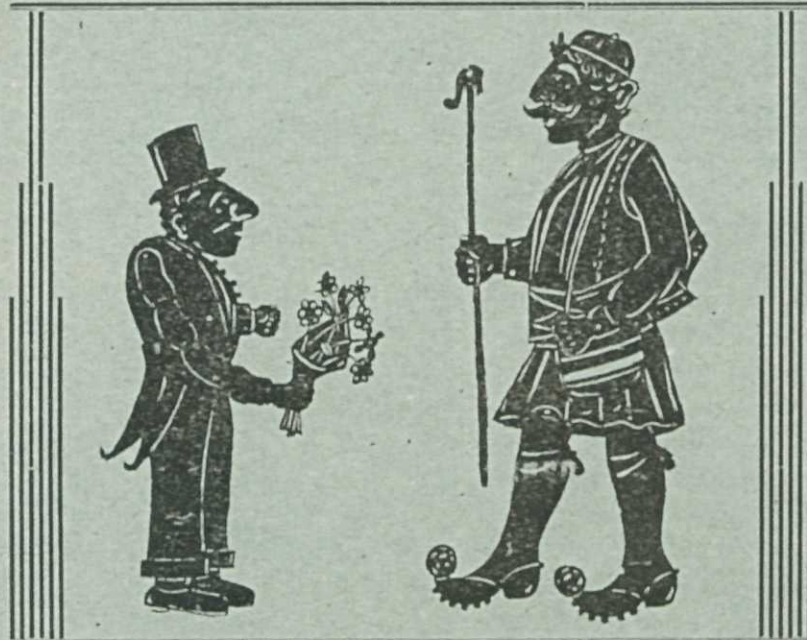
**Hatziavatis:** Have you ever been to a museum opening, Karaghiozis? Sardines are the least of it. They cover the walls with art, then everyone dresses up and spends the evening eating, drinking and looking at each other. Wine, cognac . . .

Anonymous, Show  
advertisement, *Orpheus*  
Peristeriou, 1970, 23 x 17cm  
Courtesy of the Hellenic  
Literary and Historical  
Archive (E.L.I.A.), Athens

“**ΟΡΦΕΥΣ**” ΠΕΡΙΣΤΕΡΙΟΥ  
ΤΗΛΕΦ. 572.103

**ΘΕΑΤΡΟΝ ΣΚΙΩΝ**  
**ΜΙΧΟΠΟΥΛΟΣ**

Ο Καραγκιοζοπαίκτης του Ραδιοφώνου και της Τηλεοράσεως  
κάθε ΔΕΥΤΕΡΑ παρουσιάζει ένα δώρο χαρούμενο Πρόγραμ-  
μα με τον Καραγκιόζη Γεμάτο ΑΤΤΙΚΟ ΧΙΟΥΜΟΡ



• ΩΡΑ ΕΝΑΡΞΕΩΣ 8 15 ΜΜ. •

Δευτέρα 17 Αύγουστου 1970. Η Υπέροχη Κωμωδία που γελά και  
ό Άγέλαστος «τό Στοιχειωμένο Δέντρο»

Δευτέρα 24 Αύγουστου 1970. Τό θαυμάσιον Άριστούργημα τής  
Κλεφτουργιάς στήν Τουρκοκρατία Ο ΗΡΩΣ ΤΟΥ ΒΡΑΧΩΡΙΟΥ ΚΩΣΤΑΣ ΓΚΡΗΣ

Δευτέρα 31 Αύγουστου 1970 Τό θαυμάσιον Φαντασμαγορικών  
ΕΡΓΩΝ Η ΜΑΓΕΜΕΝΗ ΝΕΡΑ Γ΄ ΔΑ ΚΑΙ Ο ΚΑΡΑΓΚΙΟΖΗΣ ΣΤΗΝ ΖΟΥΓΚΛΑ  
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ΣΑΣ ΠΕΡΙΜΕΝΟΥΜΕ ΚΑΘΕ ΔΕΥΤΕΡΑ ΜΕ ΤΑ ΠΑΙΔΙΑ ΣΑΣ ΣΤΟΝ ΟΡΦΕΑ



**Karaghiozis:** Arrack?

**Hatziavatis:** Of course. Arrack, absinth, elixir, *vin chaud*, coca liqueur, vermouth, Old Tom, whiskey, champagne, Bordeaux, Bismarck, rum . . .

**Karaghiozis:** Better than Onassis's yacht! Mezedes?

**Hatziavatis:** Fried whitefish, roasted bluefish, smoked tongue, caviar paste, pickled herring, apples, pears, grapes, melons, watermelons, figs . . .

**Karaghiozis:** OK, let's write this thing, Hatziavatis, but how can we write it without writing it? You know how I hate to work.

**Hatziavatis:** It's time you learned to work, my friend. Pick up a pen!

**Karaghiozis:** I already have a job: I'm learning how to die. As for this, if there's food at these museums, let's go right away and follow one of those tour guides with the talking disease. I'll feed him a few lines, then we'll sit in the café while he carries on.

## ACT I

[Same scene. Silhouette of a tour bus crosses the screen. A crowd gets off and streams into the Museum, followed by the Tour Guide, who remains standing by the café at the Museum entrance.]

**Guide:** We have time for lunch, ladies and gentlemen, and then we'll meet on the third floor in front of the shadow figures by Sotiris Spatharis. While you're eating, let me say a few words about what you're about to see . . .

**Karaghiozis** (entering with Hatziavatis at the mention of "lunch"): I am starving! By God I am hungry! I haven't eaten since before Easter, and the way things are going, it's not likely that I'll eat next Easter either. I've become so hungry by now that I can even tell you into how many sections hunger can be divided. There are five: the first is a rumbling in your guts; second, a blunting in your teeth; third, a rattling in your knees; fourth, a dimming in your eyes. And fifth, a life's gone-out-of-you-to-the-dogs!

**Guide:** Karaghiozis is the kind of character who will beg dog bones from the butcher so he himself can gnaw them. His defining characteristic is his great hunger. That is the ground of his being, the centre around which all



else revolves. So what does hunger really mean?

**Karaghiozis:** It means the doorway to death, you old fool. (The two continue, often talking at the same time.)

**Guide:** The ancient Greeks had an answer to that question: they connected hunger with lying – creative lying, actually. At the beginning of Hesiod's *Theogony*, for example, the Muses come down from their mountain and speak to the poet. He's with friends tending flocks of sheep, and the Muses address them with scorn – "Shepherds living in the fields, base objects of reproach, mere bellies!" – and go on to point out how different are those who live on high: "We can, whenever we are willing, proclaim true things."

The Muses believe that human beings are unlikely to tell the truth because they are "mere bellies", ridden by their appetites. This is an old idea, well illustrated by several scenes in the *Odyssey*.

Visiting the Phaeacian court, for example, Odysseus says that his belly makes him forget his story, and asks to be fed. He doesn't say directly that he will *lie* if he isn't fed, he says he



will “forget”, but it amounts to the same thing, for the root of “forget” is *leth-*, and to tell the truth is to be *a-lethes*. “If you want me to speak the truth,” Odysseus is saying, “you had better feed me.”

**Karaghiozis:** When Odysseus went to the underworld, he got to talk to his friends. If I died, the dead would just laugh at me! They’d say: “Boy, even down here you’ve come to us hungry!” I’d better call it quits and die before I starve. I’ll get a gun, press the trigger and blow my brains out. But if I had a gun, wouldn’t I sell it? No, better I kill myself first, and then, if I still find it worthwhile, sell the gun.

**Guide:** Now hunger, ladies and gentlemen, is the acid test of any social system. If the system doesn’t feed the citizens, it will seem to them some sort of lie, an artifice to be taken apart, not an embodiment of noble truths. They may begin to imagine better worlds, or worse, they may pick up weapons.

**Karaghiozis:** Then again, blowing your brains out is a messy way to go. No, I’d be better off if I fell down a well and drowned. One, two, three splash-boom, and down I’d go! But what if I look down the well and see water? What then? Hell, then I’d get wet, and catch a cold. I want to die by drowning; I don’t want to die of pneumonia. Besides, if the well is deep, I probably won’t drown, but will get killed on the way down.

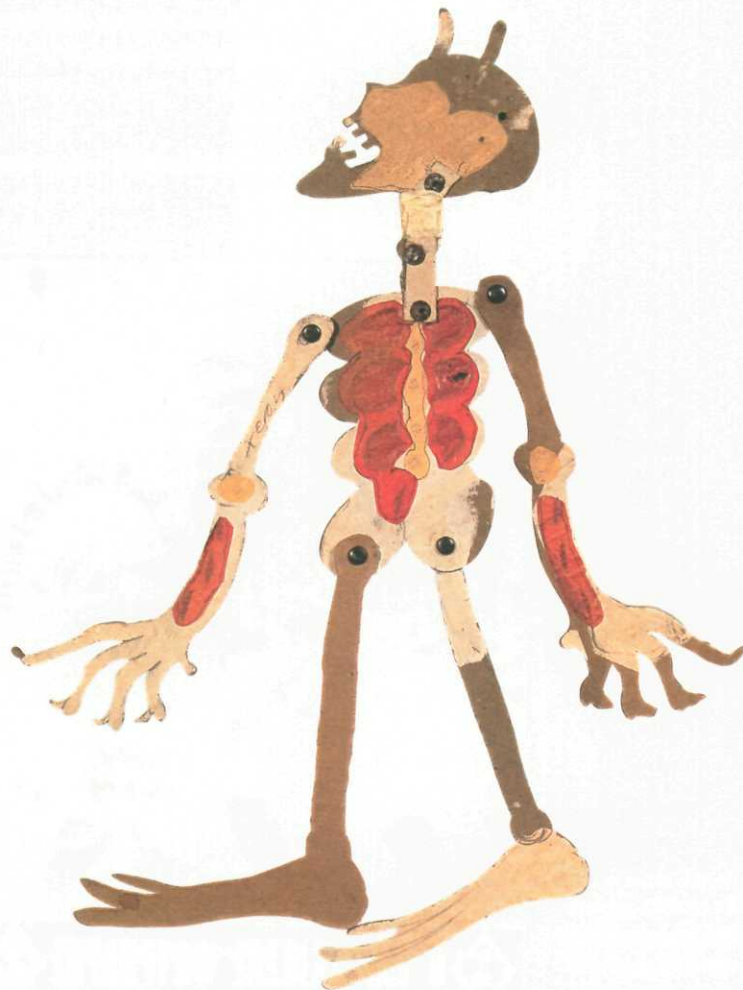
**Guide:** Take the play called *Karaghiozis Baker*, for example. An old Turk who owns a bakery has lost a son, who was the baker. In his grief he gives the bakery to one of Karaghiozis’s friends, who then asks Karaghiozis if he would like to run it. He would, of course, though he knows nothing about baking and has no interest in learning. His immediate impulse is to sell the equipment to the junk dealers, give the kneading trough to his wife for a wash tub, burn the place down for the insurance and so on – anything except to actually work as a baker.

**Karaghiozis:** Just imagine my wife pulling me out of the well, stretching me out and having everybody see me all dead! Wouldn’t then somebody say: “Ah, the poor guy! He’s wrenched his eye out! How’s he going to pinch

all those wallets from those stuffed pockets now?” And another might say: “Too bad! His fingers are gone! How’s he going to snip off all those watches from their chains now?” That’s why I don’t like that kind of death either.

**Guide:** In those days, the village baker had the only real oven in town and, as the plot unfolds, various people bring Karaghiozis food to cook: a Turk has him cook a goose; a friend gives him vegetables; his Uncle George has him roast a lamb. The odour of all this cooking attracts the Pasha, the local high official, who demands that Karaghiozis give him the goose. Karaghiozis resists, saying he’ll be arrested as a thief. The Pasha says he runs the courts and will find Karaghiozis innocent. “I’ll say that the Koran says that one day Muhammad will perform a great miracle. A goose, plucked and butchered, will fly away from a bakery. If your friends don’t

Eptanisos, *Figure of a skeleton*, 1940, 44 cm ca.  
Courtesy of the Hellenic Literary and Historical Archive (E.L.H.A.), Athens





believe the Koran, I will have them pay a fine.” This is exactly what happens with each of the defrauded villagers: one by one, the Pasha tells them tall tales about a prophecy in the Koran and, when they complain, he fines them for impiety.

**Karaghiozis:** No, I don’t want a brutal death, I want a sweet death! So I’ll eat some forty or so loukoums and die. Or I’ll stuff myself with a panful of shredded-wheat cakes, blow up and the hell with it! Yes, I’ll kill myself with a loukoumsdeath. (*He goes into the café to find loukoums.*)

**Guide:** In the meantime, however, Karaghiozis has taken all the food home to feed himself and his family. The Pasha understands this only at the end of the play:

**Pasha:** So, when are you going to bring me the goose?

**Karaghiozis:** What goose?

**Pasha:** The goose we lied about to your customer when we said it got up and flew away.

**Karaghiozis:** That was a lie?

**Pasha:** Of course it’s a LIE!

**Karaghiozis:** Wasn’t there a miracle? Doesn’t the

Koran say so?

**Pasha:** No, it’s a LIE! Now we are in Hesiod’s world of mere bellies who lie to feed themselves. And notice that the game has gone up a level: it’s the Pasha who is a liar, and an impious one at that, willing to debase the holy Koran. The hunger plot is never simply about hunger. Hunger is the acid that strips away the pretence of eternal truth. Karaghiozis gets fed and the Pasha loses his authority, both secular and spiritual.

**Karaghiozis** (*returning, he turns to Hatziavatis:*) Is this guy for real?

**Hatziavatis:** I’ve written down every word. Ahmet Bey will love it! This guy puts the ‘muse’ back into ‘museum’.

**Karaghiozis:** And the goose into loosy-goosy! I think he’s a liar. (*Falls asleep under a café table.*)

## ACT II

[*The screen now shows another screen, a museum display of a traditional shadow theatre set with Karaghiozis’s hut on one side and Ali Pasha’s castle on the other; in the middle is a silhouette of Karaghiozis himself.*]

**Guide** (*lecturing the tourists*): Notice that

Karaghiozis has a long, many-jointed arm. This is a Greek innovation. In Turkey, it is true, the ancestral Karagöz figure, had an articulated arm and other figures, like his sidekick Hacivat, do not. So there you see the root of what Karaghiozis presents us: an outsized, prehensile, phallic, baboon arm.

**Karaghiozis:** Well scratch my ass! (*This he does.*)

**Guide:** He is the embodiment of flexibility and change. In Greek literature they used to speak of a character like Odysseus as *polytropic* – meaning “turning many ways” – in contrast to the *atropic* or steadfast man, the one of unchanging character.

Karaghiozis has a polytropic arm and the polytropic arm is a work of art in the deepest sense.

**Karaghiozis:** Well pick my nose! (*This he does.*)

**Guide:** Our word “art” comes from an ancient root that means “to join” and “to make”. Many other modern words come from the same root, all of



*Karaghiozis Baker*, early 1950 ca.  
Pamphlet, 18 x 13 cm  
Manos Haritatos Collection



them having to do with joints. “Arthritis” is a disease of the joints; an “arthropod” is an insect with jointed legs. “Articulate” denotes clarity of speech but it does so because clear speech is jointed; you need a little elbow or wrist between each word before the stream of sound makes sense. One can also “articulate” a skeleton, which is to say, assemble it joint by joint. In this ancient sense, Karaghiozis’s arm is the most articulate organ in all of the Mediterranean.

**Karaghiozis:** Well scratch my balls! (*This he does.*)

**Guide:** We can also speak of society itself as being “well articulated” when its joints are clear to everyone, which is to say, when everyone knows his or her place and where the limits lie. And here we see that the surreal arm of Karaghiozis signifies all those chaotic forces – sex, hunger, violence, but also imagination – that can put the world out of joint at any moment.

(*Karaghiozis’s many-jointed arm starts to crawl up the leg of the Tour Guide.*) This is the famous function of an artist like Marcel Duchamp – who upset the joint separating fine art from manufacturing – or of a philosopher like Jacques Derrida who opened hidden cracks in the House of Plato.

**Karaghiozis** (*his hand in the Guide’s crotch*): Well scratch your joint, buddy!

**Guide** (*noticing him for the first time*): Ouch! Excuse me? Guard! Guard! This man is not on the tour!

**Karaghiozis** (*to Hatziavatis*): His theory has some hidden cracks we could explore, no? Are you getting all this down?

**Hatziavatis:** Yes, yes! It’s just what we came for. He’s pulling the sense out of the seemingly senseless.

**Karaghiozis:** He’ll be pulling my arm out of his seeming harmony pretty soon! (*He slips behind the shadow-theatre screen showing the famous stage set.*)

**Guide** (*undaunted, and pointing at the screen in question*): The shadow-theatre screen itself is the master-joint of this art.

Notice the great ambivalence this sheet of light contains! In the movies, the screen makes things visible; in the theatre, the curtain is a barrier. But in shadow theatre the screen hides



and reveals at the same time! (*As he is speaking, Karaghiozis’s arm begins to snake across the screen.*) It obscures the players and reveals the puppets. Thus we get illusion in its finest form, both real and not-real, subjective and object, and – most of all – in play! Such is the beginning of art. According to the psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott, the transitional object . . .

**Karaghiozis:** Prehensile my ass! (*His arm punches through the screen, tearing it to pieces.*)

**Guide:** Guards! Guards!

### ACT III

[*The guards have brought Karaghiozis and Hatziavatis to the café and are waiting for the police. The Tour Guide joins them.*]

Anonymous, *Figure of a skeleton*, 1940 ca., 75 cm  
 Courtesy of the Hellenic Literary and Historical Archive (E.L.I.A.), Athens



Spyropoulos, *Figure of Karaghiozis*, 1960 ca., 51 cm  
Courtesy of the Hellenic  
Literary and Historical  
Archive (E.L.I.A.), Athens

**Guide:** Who are you?

**Karaghiozis:** I'm your mother's . . .

**Guide:** You remind me of someone I know.

**Hatziavatis** (*singing as in the Prologue*):

. . . those who are awake  
know what the shadows mean.

**Karaghiozis:** I haven't eaten since Easter!

**Hatziavatis** (*to the Guide*): Art thou only a stranger  
in Jerusalem?

**Guide:** Huh? We're in Athens. I'm an American  
expert on Greek folk culture.

**Karaghiozis** (*snaking his arm in a suggestive manner*):  
He is risen!

**Guide:** Have you ever heard of Karaghiozis? I was  
lecturing on him when you destroyed that  
exhibit.

**Hatziavatis:** Those whose eyes are open, know  
him, but those whose eyes are closed . . .

**Guide:** He embodies the spirit of the Greek people



in their myriad phases. He's a centripetal force  
that pulls into its comic field the fragmented . . .

**Karaghiozis:** Hand me that basket of bread; I'll  
bless it. (*Takes the bread and begins an obscene  
pantomime with his arm and two of the buns.*)

**Guide:** But the tourists all fled. I'll never finish my  
lecture now.

**Karaghiozis:** That's best, boss. Never finish  
anything, that's my motto.

**Guide:** "Not finishing": that was one of my  
themes, actually.

The way Karaghiozis mucks up all progress. He's  
the father of delay, the saint of stalling.

**Hatziavatis** (*taking out his notebook and writing*): Go  
on, go on . . .

**Guide:** No. It's pointless. Everything's ruined.

**Hatziavatis** (*prompting him*): Isn't there a Turkish  
story about "not finishing"? The one in which  
Karagöz and his pal were a blacksmith and a  
mason helping to build the Mosque in Bursa.  
They clowned around so much that the work  
came to a halt. The sultan had them put to  
death.

**Guide** (*drawn in*): Yes, that's right. He fools around  
to such a degree that what needs to be done  
doesn't get done. The same thing happens in  
some of the plays about Greek history. There's  
one in which Ali Pasha executes the  
revolutionary Katsandonis; at a crucial point  
Karaghiozis is given a letter to deliver – it's  
supposed to save the hero's family – but soldiers  
capture him and suddenly there's a comic  
interlude. They accuse him of stealing a pistol . . .

**Karaghiozis:** He stole a penis?

**Guide:** No, a pistol. He tells them it's been in his  
family for generations.

**Karaghiozis:** The family jewels, handed down from  
father to son.

**Guide:** That's right. He ends up in jail with the  
letter.

**Karaghiozis:** I bet they gave him a stiff sentence.

**Guide:** So Karaghiozis is a kind of anti-messenger.  
He's the scribe who writes nonsense when  
people dictate letters to him.

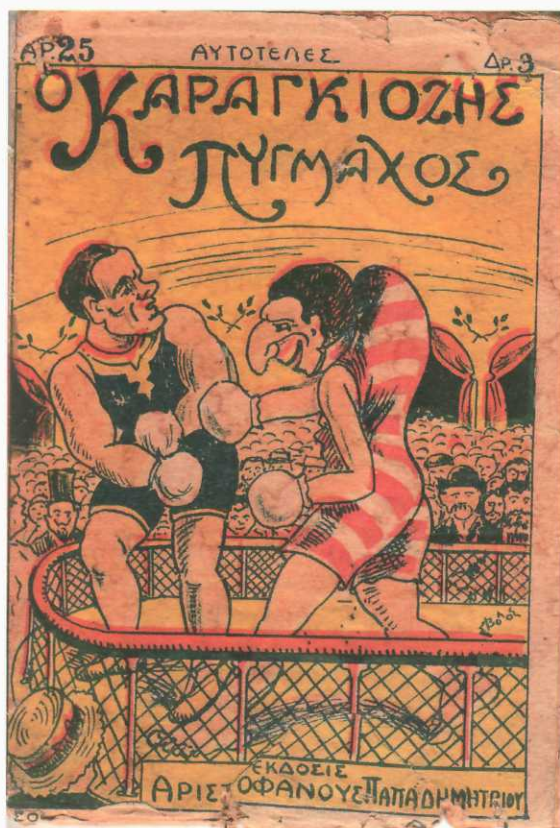
He's the servant who won't answer the door.

He's the punster who makes clarity into muck . . .

**Karaghiozis:** He makes clerics run amok?

**Guide:** . . . so nothing ever gets explained or





finished. Lots of the shadow-puppet plays just end; they dribble off into confusion.

There's one in which a prayer is supposed to protect the hero from a demon; but it doesn't – the demon kicks the hero, who kicks the man who taught him the prayer. End of play. There's one that ends because the hero gets bored and sends all the players away!

Sometimes all the drama simply falls apart in the final scene, whereupon Karaghiozis suggests that everyone go out for soup! What kind of theatre is that?

**Karaghiozis:** It's a deathless theatre, boss, that's what it is.

**Guide:** I wish that were the case. But no: the shadow theatre itself is dead now. Television has killed it, and the movies – all those one-sided screens that numb their audiences. Karaghiozis has become a museum piece, something for the tourist shops. You can buy a Karaghiozis key-chain over in Plaka.

**Karaghiozis:** You don't like the idea of going out for soup, boss?

How do you think a play should end?

**Guide:** A moral would be nice, something that ties things up. Like my lectures: I like them to end with a clear, properly limited thesis, a message to take away.

**Karaghiozis:** But that's not how things work, boss. The world is never finished. There's always a new performance tomorrow night. (He hands the bread he's been playing with to the Guide.) Take, eat . . .

**Guide:** That's disgusting! You infidel!

**Karaghiozis:** You imbecile! (The police enter.) Ah, the cops! Very good. In jail they feed you three times a day. These museum openings sound splendid, but this is too much work, writing a critical essay. (He is hauled away.)

**Guide:** I'm sure I've seen that guy somewhere before. It's on the tip of my tongue . . . (He starts to eat the bread absentmindedly, looks up suddenly.) My Lord, that must have been . . .! (The screen goes dark.)

## EPILOGUE

**Hatziavatis:** Aren't you glad that's over, Karaghiozis?

**Karaghiozis (hitting him):** May your children be born naked!

**Hatziavatis:** Let's thank the Lord that He has given us life!

**Karaghiozis:** You're lucky He didn't give you my wife! (Hits him.)

**Hatziavatis:** You tore up the museum exhibit, Karaghiozis; you've ruined an important piece of cultural heritage!

**Karaghiozis:** Oh calm down, Hatziavatis. We'll replace it with something from the Getty Museum. (To the audience): Honourable ladies and gentlemen, forgive the mess we've made! Our show is over. But tomorrow night we begin again, so be sure to come see our new play, *Karaghiozis, Modern Artist*.

## THE END

### Sources

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*Karaghiozis Boxer*, late 1930 ca.  
Pamphlet, 18 x 13 cm  
Manos Haritatos Collection



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#### *Author's Note on Sources*

My "play" includes many fragments taken from the commentary and from the shadow-theatre plays that were available to me in English. Of the plays themselves, most useful were these: "The Muddleheaded Night Watchman", in *Torn is the Curtain*, pp. 215–244; "The Hero Katsandonis", in *The Karaghiozis Heroic Performance*, pp. 63–136; "A Little of Everything," in *The Bitter-Sweet Art*, pp. 182–253; and "Karaghiozis Baker", in *Karaghiozis: Culture & Comedy*, pp. 123–210.

More specific credit is due to the following: a version of Karaghiozis's monologue on hunger is found in *The Bitter-Sweet Art*, pp. 192–194; for the Pasha who lies about the Koran, see "Karaghiozis Baker" in *Karaghiozis: Culture & Comedy*, pp. 208–209; for a reading of the screen as embodied ambivalence, see Talat Parman's essay in *Torn is the Curtain*, pp. 111–116; for the scene that confuses 'pistol' and 'penis', see "The Hero Katsandonis", in *The Karaghiozis Heroic Performance*, pp. 94–97. *Torn is the Curtain* also has English summaries of a number of Karagöz plays that I was unable to read

in any other form. Two sections of the Tour Guide's analysis are taken from my own book, *Trickster Makes This World*. For a fuller reading of hunger and lying, see *Trickster*, Chapter 3; for more on 'joints and art', see Chapter 11. The Guide also uses fragments of commentary from everything I've read, and I can only ask that the various the authors forgive the mess I've made of their ideas. Finally, a story told in Luke 24: 13–32 informs Act III.

p. 67  
Spyropoulos, *Male figure*, 1972  
82 cm, Courtesy of the  
Hellenic Literary and  
Historical Archive (E.L.I.A.),  
Athens



# **In Praise of Shadows**

CHARTA



Published on the occasion of the exhibition  
**In Praise of Shadows**

Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin  
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