

BOOK REVIEW

New Greek Cinema 1965-1981: History and Politics

by Stathis Valoukos
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The flourishing of New Greek Cinema is one of the most exciting moments in the history of Greek film, marked by the emergence of a generation of young filmmakers, who introduced new modes of production, provocative aesthetics and radical uses of ideology during a period of political and social turmoil. In spite of the prominence of these films in the history of Greek cinema, there are only a few studies exclusively devoted to New Greek Cinema either as a movement or as the dominant expression of the art-house modernist cinema in Greece during the 1960s and the 1970s.

The literature on New Greek Cinema mostly consists of monographs, collective volumes and articles that focus on the work of several *auteurs* such as Theo Angelopoulos, Alexis Damianos, Tonia Marketaki, Nikos Nikolaidis, Nikos Panayotopoulos, Pantelis Voulgaris, et al. Among these studies, the collective volumes derived from *auteur* retrospectives of the Thessaloniki Film Festival are particularly useful, offering a wide range of essays, interviews, filmographies and film reviews on established or less known filmmakers, who participated in the movement. A relatively small number of brief articles also deal with several aspects of New Greek Cinema without, however, offering a detailed analysis.¹ There are only two older studies that provide an overview of New Greek Cinema: Aglaia Mitropoulou (2006), in the final chapters of her history of Greek film, makes a presentation of the filmmakers and their work during the 1967-1980 period; Chrysanthi Sotiropoulou (1989), in her study of the institutional and economic framework of Greek cinema from 1965 to 1975, offers a meticulous analysis of the

¹ A representative example of this is the special issue on New Greek Cinema of the journal *Optikoakoustiki Koulтура/Audiovisual Culture* (Levendakos 2002).

film industry in the early years of New Greek Cinema and underlines the shift from the popular commercial film to an independent art-house production. Sotiropoulou's valuable work remains until today the most comprehensive description of the state policies, production, distribution, exhibition, as well as audience reception in relation to Greek cinema.

It is worth asking whether New Greek Cinema was a "new wave" movement with clear goals, and ideological and aesthetical coherence as well, or it was just the expression of a generation of a few young distinguished filmmakers, who shared common thematic concerns and preferred the independent mode of production. Stathis Valoukos's new book *Neos Ellinikos Kinimatografos 1965-1981: Istoría ke Politiki/New Greek Cinema 1965-1981: History and Politics* gives a definite answer to that question and makes clear that New Greek Cinema was something more than a set of important films.² The book attempts a thorough examination of this – closely tied to the sociopolitical and ideological context – movement, including all the possible variations or exceptional cases, and presents various aspects of the cinematic landscape of the time.

The chapters of the book follow a chronological order and a clear periodization: after a prologue on the relationship between film and history, Valoukos elaborates on the historical context of the period and thoroughly surveys the most important characteristics of New Greek Cinema, associating its emergence not only with the sociopolitical context but also with the explosive cultural spring of the 1960s. He underlines the importance of the Thessaloniki Film Festival in the emergence of a new cinematic style and the role played by film journals, such as *Synchronos Kinimatographos/Contemporary Cinema*, in shaping the mentality of the young directors. These introductory chapters display high narrative quality in presenting a synthesis of the cultural, ideological, political, institutional and economic factors that contributed to the formation of the new wave.

A long prologue focuses on the relationship between film and history, discussing film as a historical agent and the turn of the "new history" (mainly expressed by the Annales School and Marc Ferro) towards fresh subjects such as cinema (pp. 7-13). What is missing from these introductory chapters is a detailed discussion of film historiography: writing film history raises important questions in terms of research, sources, methodology and approaches (aesthetic, technological, biographical, social or economical film history [Allen & Gomery 1985 :36-38]), and I would expect from the author a comprehensive development of his methodology in constructing his historical narrative. An overview of Greek film historiography on New Greek Cinema would have been also beneficial so as to map the position of

² Makis Moraitis argues that "the essence of New Greek Cinema can be epitomized in one aphorism: Angelopoulos and a few others" (Moraitis 2002: 45).

this new book in the field of Greek film history and establish continuities, affiliations or ruptures with previous studies. This kind of presentation would be more useful than the long overview on Greek film production from the first screening in Athens in the end of the 19th century to 1965 (pp. 22-27).

The next two parts of the book are divided according to major political events: the first part examines the period extending from the political turbulences of 1965 and the fall of the democratic regime to the end of the military dictatorship in 1974. Each chapter focuses on a different period and comprises a brief introduction and a close reading of representative films. The first chapter explores the independent film production in the years before the definitive emergence of New Greek Cinema and also the directors who are considered as the forerunners of New Greek Cinema, such as Robert Manthoulis and Alexis Damianos. It is followed by a chapter on the films produced during the dictatorship that constitute the core of the emerging new wave: the films discussed here include *Kierion* (Dimos Theos, 1968), *Anaparastasis/Reconstruction* (Angelopoulos, 1970), *Evdokia* (Damianos, 1971), *Meres tou '36/Days of '36* (Angelopoulos, 1972) and *To Proxenio tis Annas/The Matchmaking of Anna* (Voulgaris, 1972). The third chapter presents a group of films produced in 1973, when censorship restrictions were lessened, encouraging bolder attitudes. The last chapter of this section discusses the few documentaries produced during the Junta.

The second part of the book deals with the period from the restoration of democracy in 1974 to the rise of the socialist government of PASOK in 1981. The logic behind this periodization is explained in the introduction of the book: although many film scholars believe that New Greek Cinema survived during the 1980s³, Valoukos argues that the state film-funding system, which was established by the government of PASOK, brought about the end of New Greek Cinema. Valoukos considers that independent production and financing is the major defining characteristics of the movement, securing at the same time its dynamism and critical attitude. So, according to the author, after 1981, as the directors became entirely state-subsidized, New Greek Cinema began to vanish.

The second part begins with an information-rich chapter that presents the various trends of the Greek documentary after the fall of the Junta (politically-engaged documentary, examples of direct cinema and films of ideological montage). What follows is a detailed chapter about the experimental cinema and essay films that sheds light into less-studied areas of Greek cinema. The third chapter, entitled "Left Wing Fictions", examines the feature films with political subject matter and

³ The problems of Greek Cinema's periodization are discussed also by Yannis Scopeteas (2002: 89-100), Yannis Bakoyannopoulos (2002: 12-46) and Maria Stassinopoulou (2011: 131-143).

attempts to map the ideological discourses of the politically-engaged filmmakers. The typology proposed by the author, although innovative, is not quite convincing due to the lack of theoretical documentation regarding the left-wing rhetoric of the period. The main part of this chapter is devoted to the films of Angelopoulos and Voulgaris.

The following chapter is also theme-centered and presents film narratives with “enclosed characters”. As Valoukos notes, a significant number of films from 1973 to 1977 built an allegorical, claustrophobic and grotesque universe while developing a distinctive style that combines the use of allusion with the aesthetics of closure. In contrast to the openly political films of Angelopoulos and Voulgaris, the films of Panayotopoulos, Nikolaidis and Costas Ferris use the tropes of allegory to imply the political situation in an ambivalent, ironic and pessimist manner. Valoukos’s seminal idea of an interaction between closure and allegory is very interesting considering that many of the contemporary young directors of the so-called “Greek Weird Wave” (Rose 2011), such as Yorgos Lanthimos, Athena Rachel Tsangari, Yannis Ekonomides and Alexis Alexiou, also work within the aesthetics of closure in an allegorical chronotope and thus establish an inter-textual dialogue with this tradition⁴.

The next chapter covers the film production from 1977 to 1981 that marks a shift from modernist and experimental articulations to classical narratives and everyday realism. This turn coincides with the filmmakers’ collaboration with commercial producers due to the increased cost of the production. The chapter revolves around the figures of the “compromised” characters, who appear in many films of the period, such as in Pavlos Tassios’s and Vassilis Vafeas’s films. This shift is further confirmed by the emergence in the same period of the biopic, presented in the following chapter. The last chapter focuses on the notion of “Greekness” and examines the transformations of the state policies on domestic cinema after the elections of 1981 and during the government of PASOK. Valoukos closes this chapter with an analysis of Lakis Papastathis’s film *Ton Kero ton Ellinon/When the Greeks* (1981), which, according to the author epitomizes the main features of New Greek Cinema and marks the end of the movement.

In this interesting book, however, we can identify some weak points: the main problem is the lack of a strong methodology concerning film analysis. In the introductory chapter the author mentions that he uses the “phenomenological analysis” (p.13) as an analytical tool, without, however, developing further his

⁴ Lanthimos’s *Kynodontas/Dogtooth* (2009), for example, can be seen as a re-reading of *Tembelides tis Eforis Kiladas/The Idlers of the Fertile Valley* (Panayotopoulos, 1978), while both *Istoria 52/Tale 52* (Alexiou, 2008) and *The Capsule* (Tsangari, 2012) make references to *Evriddiki BA 2037* (Nikolaidis, 1975).

approach to make his intentions clear. This methodological weakness becomes more evident in the chapters dealing with film analysis, eventually leading to weakly documented judgments. For example, although the author considers independent production as the main defining feature of New Greek Cinema, he does not include in his study a systematic examination of the production and film-financing practices. Furthermore, the methodological problems lead to readings that, sometimes, ignore the film's form as an integral part of narration, thus resulting in personal interpretations of the content and superficial analyses of the plot. However, what does it make the New Greek Cinema films so distinctive from the previous film production? Is it the choice of the subject matter (social problems such as unemployment and immigration, gender issues, representation of historical events, etc.) or the revolution against classical narration, the adoption of a modernist vocabulary and the radical experimentation with both form and content? Even if the main concern of this book is the analysis of the ideological discourses of New Greek Cinema and their relationship with the historical events that places it closer to the tradition of cultural studies, I believe that a more systematic aesthetic approach would have been fruitful.

One final remark is that the examination of film reception is often limited to the Greek critics and audiences. I would expect a more elaborated presentation of foreign reviews in the press and specialised journals and some discussion on the international presence of these films in festivals and the European art-house circuit⁵ or even in political events against the Junta. During the late 1960s Greece was in the spotlight of international media because of its unstable political situation that favoured an interest in Greek cinema. In this context, New Greek Cinema was not just a Greek phenomenon; it was part of the wider European modernist film tradition with references to Western and Eastern European directors and new waves. In this point of view, I think that it would be necessary to decipher the influences of the foreign films on the Greek production so as to establish a dialogue with the international art-house cinema of this period and place it into the European cinematic map.

Despite the above weaknesses, Valoukos's study is a valuable addition to the historiography of Greek cinema as it is the only monograph wholly focused on New Greek Cinema. It is information-rich and well-written that makes it appealing to cinephile readers and a useful tool for film students. Most importantly, it revitalizes the discussion of New Greek Cinema as a movement closely linked to

⁵ In 1967, for example, the French film journal *Positif* (December 1967, N° 90) made a tribute to the Greek films of the time under the title *Peut on être grec?/Could we be Greek?* There are also numerous reviews for films such as *Prossopo me Prossopo/Face to Face* (Manthoulis, 1966) from critics who identified the link between the films and the political situation in Greece in 1967.

the socio-political situation and helps the rediscovery of the art-house Greek cinema. In the contemporary context, films such as *Reconstruction*, *O Thiassos/The Travelling Players* (Angelopoulos 1975), *Evrudiki BA 2037*, *The Idlers of the Fertile Valley*, *Happy Day* (Voulgaris, 1977) or *Evdokia* are points of reference for the generation of the “Greek Weird Wave”, which pays a tribute to the cinematic modernity of the 1960s and the 1970s.

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