

Greek Avant-Garde Cinema and Marx: The Politics of Form in Sfikas's *Modelo* and Angelidi's *Idées Fixes/Dies Irae*

Rea Walldén

Athens School of Fine Arts

ABSTRACT

*This article poses the question of the politics of form. It compares two Greek avant-garde films of the 1970s: *Modelo* (1974) by Kostas Sfikas and *Idées Fixes/Dies Irae* (1977) by Antoinetta Angelidi. It investigates the premise that avant-garde filmmaking combines experimentation with political radicalism, enacting a politics of form. *Modelo* and *Idées Fixes* partake to left-wing politics and refer to Marxian concepts. Sfikas's film is a 'translation' of *Das Kapital* in the cinematic medium. Angelidi's film chooses a more complicated point of view, feminist and post-structuralist; yet it does refer to the Marxian critique, while also using the structure of dialectical juxtaposition. Both films' politics affect their visual form, narrative structure and textual techniques. They both deny classical narration, question the function of representation, investigate cinematic time, expand the definitional borderlines of their medium. Nevertheless, they are two very different films. *Modelo* is comprised by a single static shot, based on symmetry and minimal aesthetics, while *Idées Fixes* relies on a multileveled exploration of cinematic heterogeneity. The article studies both their differences and inter-connections, aiming to draw some conclusions as to what may constitute a revolutionary text made in the language of cinema.*

KEYWORDS

Angelidi
avant-garde
Eisenstein
Marx
Sfikas

This article compares two films of the 1970s, which can be considered milestones of the Greek avant-garde cinema: *Modelo* (1974) by Kostas Sfikas and *Idées Fixes/Dies Irae*¹ (1977) by Antoinetta Angelidi. These two particular cases are used as a starting point in order to examine wider issues partaking to the theory and practice of avant-garde cinema. The article investigates the premise that avant-garde filmmaking combines form experimentation with political radicalism, thus enacting a politics of form. It also attempts to explore certain strategies and techniques which may constitute such politics, as well as the question of what a revolutionary cinematic text may be.

The term 'avant-garde' originates in military jargon. In the realm of ideas, it was first used in the late 18th century in the context of the French Revolution. It was introduced into the field of arts in the early 19th century by the Saint-Simonians and interacted with the figure of the romantic artist as prophet and visionary. By the beginning of the 20th century, the function of avant-garde was claimed by both revolutionary parties and artistic movements. In the context of art, it has since become a historical determination. There were two peak periods of the avant-garde art movements: (a) the 'historical' avant-gardes, in the early 20th century to the 1930s; and (b) the 'neo-avant-gardes', mainly during the 1960s and 1970s (see e.g. Bürger [1974] 1984). However, there are more than one uses of the term 'avant-garde' in art theory. One division concerns whether it should be defined in terms of form experimentation or with regard to its social function (Bürger [1974] 1984; Poggioli [1962] 1981); another concerns the primacy of form or political radicalism in its definition. Moreover, the avant-gardes' dialectical relation and relative positioning with regard to modernity and artistic modernism is debated: the question is whether the avant-gardes were oppositional to the modernist project or belonged to it. Per Bäckström argues that the key for untangling this complexity may be found in the divergence of national traditions in theory, which he classifies into Germanic, Romance and Anglo-American traditions (Bäckström, 2007; see also Huyssen 2005). Following a structuralist and post-structuralist interpretation (Derrida 1967; Kristeva 1974), I believe that the form-oriented and the social-function-oriented definitions are indissolubly connected. They constitute the same structural

¹ The working title of the film, under which it sometimes appears, was *Le viol* [The Rape]. The title appearing on the film is *IDÉESDIES/FIXESIRAE*, an intentional mixture of the French expression 'idées fixes' [fixed ideas, obsessions] and the Latin 'Dies Irae' [Days of Wrath, i.e. the Apocalypse], a reference to Carl Theodor Dreyer's film. Already at the time, Angelidi referred to her film by the simplified version of the title: *Idées Fixes/Dies Irae*. In Greek theatres, it was screened under the title of *Parallages sto Idio Thema/Variations on the Same Subject*. From now on, I will refer to it in this text as *Idées Fixes*.

move, which applies the Formalist technique of 'defamiliarisation' to different scales of 'texts', starting with the individual work-event and reaching as far as social institutions and entire societies. Furthermore, I do not consider the avant-gardes as oppositional to modernism *per se*, but rather as its most radical expression; however, the national and institutionalised high modernisms were opposed to several principles of the avant-gardes, and therefore cannot be classified as such.

Consequently, avant-garde art combines form experimentation with ideological radicalism. Its definition includes the element of structural innovation at the level of the signifier, and particularly the kind of innovation which questions the once-established system and forges a 'new language' as well as the questioning and destabilisation of the institution of art itself. Moreover, a distinctive characteristic of the avant-gardes is the high degree of awareness of the theoretical implications of any practice: an awareness which is embedded in avant-gardes' artistic practices, and plays a central role in them. Finally, the axiom that underlies avant-garde practice and theory is the interdependence between form and content. From this axiom, it follows that a radical content cannot exist without a radical form. It may also be implied that a radical form constitutes by itself a radical content. The philosophical background of the axiom of interdependence between content and form can be traced back in the late 19th and early 20th century. It is then that Karl Marx explained society and economy relying no longer on essences but on relations and structures ([1867] 1976), Sigmund Freud substituted the unconscious for the soul ([1900] 1953), and Ferdinand de Saussure introduced in linguistics the radical arbitrariness of the sign and the complete interdependence between the signifier and the signified ([1916] 1972). One can reasonably claim that this triple origin of materialist formalism and formalist materialism constitutes the paradigm shift that defines the 20th century.

Cinema's relation to the avant-gardes, as well as to modernism is complicated because of its short history and its technological basis, which have been sources of both freedom and conservatism. There is an abundance of definitions of avant-garde cinema (see Albera 2005; Brenez 2006; Le Grice 2001; Noguez [1978] 2010; Sitney 1987; Voguel 1974). A central debate concerns the use of the term 'experimental' as identical or distinguishable from the term 'avant-garde' (see e.g. Albera 2005; Noguez [1978] 2010). Another debate concerns avant-garde cinema's dialogue with the visual arts and new audio-visual technologies (see e.g. Le Grice 2001). Moreover, as many of the definitions were proposed by the filmmakers themselves, they often have a polemical and exclusive character. My intention is to use a definition as inclusive as possible, without it losing its heuristic utility. A preliminary and very cautious definition stresses, firstly, (a) form experimentation, as expressed in the search for cinema's specificity and the

expansion of the limits of the cinematic medium, as well as the questioning and subversion of cinematic conventions, such as representational and narrative ones. One should note that form experimentation is a structural demand and does not imply particular stylistic choices, visual or other. This explains the diversity of avant-garde films, as well as the radical differences between this article's two case studies. Secondly, (b) avant-garde cinema combines form experimentation with a certain ideological radicalism – though not necessarily overtly political – as well as with the consciousness of the political significance and potential of form. These characteristics are complemented by extra-semiotic characteristics, such as, (c) alternative methods of production and distribution; (d) the filmmakers' self-awareness, and (d) classification by theorists, critics and the wider public. This paper investigates the link between the first and second characteristics, i.e. the fact that form radicalism is explained as an ideological choice, while ideological choices are realised necessarily – and sometimes exclusively – through form.

There are no historical avant-gardes in Greek cinema. Greek avant-garde cinema was born after the end of the seven-year fascist Junta (1967-1974), in the context of the movement of *Neos Ellinikos Kinimatografos* (New Greek Cinema – NGC), with the exception of a single film – *Ta Heria/The Hands* by John Kontes, which was made in 1961 and went unnoticed. Greek avant-garde filmmakers did not constitute a separate group, but participated in the actions, events and editions of the NGC movement. However, they were singled-out as 'different' by critics and colleagues: both esteemed and rejected, they were caught in the tensions and paradoxes of the Greek post-Junta society. On the one hand, there were the progressive aspirations of a newly liberated people, in which political radicalism and all kinds of freedom were valued, but, on the other, there was a still very conservative society, for which form experimentation was considered almost a scandal.

The term 'avant-garde' was rarely used to characterize films. When it did, it was used in three forms: translated in Greek (πρωτοποριακός), transliterated (αβανγκάρντ) or kept in its original form (avant-garde). The translated form usually referred to the political sense of 'avant-garde'. When used, the term 'experimental' (πειραματικός) was not just a descriptive determination, but, more often, an axiological one. Other terms were used by the critics too: general adjectives such as "different", "strange", "difficult" and more specific ones such as "art", "artistic", "formalist"; and names of specific movements such as "absolute", "minimalist" and "structural" (see the daily and periodical press of the 1970s and early 1980s). Before the 2010s, there were only two theoretical texts addressing Greek avant-garde cinema as a distinctive object of study: 'O Piramatikos/Protoporiakos Kinimatografos stin Ellada/Experimental/Avant-Garde Cinema in Greece' by Dimitris Kolioidimos (1980) and 'L' 'Anatreptikos'

dans le Cinéma Grec/The 'Subversive' in Greek Cinema' by Stella Theodorakis (1995).

The case studies in this article are two films that are radically avant-garde by any definition of the term; they caused a stir when first screened in the 1970s, and are widely recognised as milestones of Greek avant-garde cinema. According to the philosopher Savvas Michael, Sfikas and Angelidi are "the two most unyielding representatives of modernism² in [Greek] cinema" (Michael 2010: 16). *Modelo*'s screening in Thessaloniki in 1974 is the 'public birth' of Greek avant-garde cinema. The film took part in the first Thessaloniki Film Festival after the Junta, where it was awarded for the Best Full-length Art Film, an award that Sfikas shared with Dimos Theos's *Kierion* (1974), which Sfikas also co-wrote. *Idées Fixes* took part in the 1977 Filmmakers' Counter-Festival in Thessaloniki, where it received the award for Best New Director, as well as the Award of the Greek Society of Film Critics.

I argue that the fact that each film participated in a significant event in the history of NGC, and was critically acclaimed, is an indication of NGC's radical intentions in the immediate post-Junta era. This fact also shows that the avant-garde held an integral – and even central – part in the movement. As the 1970s was an era open to the avant-garde problematics worldwide, partly due to the echo of the late 1960s student, political and cultural movements, *Modelo* and *Idées Fixes* were shown and appreciated beyond the borders of Greece. For example, *Modelo* participated in the 1975 Toulon Film Festival, where it was awarded 'le prix de la Folie' [the Award of Madness] by a jury comprised by Marguerite Duras, Dominique Noguez and Shuji Terayama (Noguez [1978] 2010: 293). *Idées Fixes* was screened in the 1977 Thonon-les-Bains Film Festival and presented by Noël Burch in the Centre Georges Pompidou, while Louis Marcorelles compared its creator to Ken Jacobs and Ernie Gehr (Thibaudeau 1979: 35).

Modelo aspires to be a 'translation' of Marx's *Das Kapital* through the cinematic medium, "to show [...] *uno intuitu* the functioning of the phenomena described by Marx" (Noguez [1978] 2010: 292). *Idées Fixes* addresses the issue of women's representation in Western culture, "the adventure of woman's body, its representation, and the violence it bears" (Vakalopoulos 1978: 226). Both films deny classical narration, question the function of representation, investigate cinematic space and time, and expand the definitions of their medium. Nevertheless, they are very different films. *Modelo* comprises of a single static

² See my previous explanation on the uses of the terms 'avant-garde' and 'modernism'. In the Greek context, 'the most unyielding representatives of modernism' signify 'avant-garde'.

shot, based on symmetry and minimal aesthetics. *Idées Fixes* relies on a multileveled exploration of cinematic heterogeneity, i.e. cinema's multiplicity of codes and complexity of expressive substance (Metz 1971). *Modelo* is printed on coloured negative, in order to create a seemingly unreal colour tonality (**Fig 1**). *Idées Fixes* is black and white, with the exception of a single coloured shot. *Modelo* is silent, aiming to replace sound with the 'visual music' of movement (Sfikas 1974b: 56).

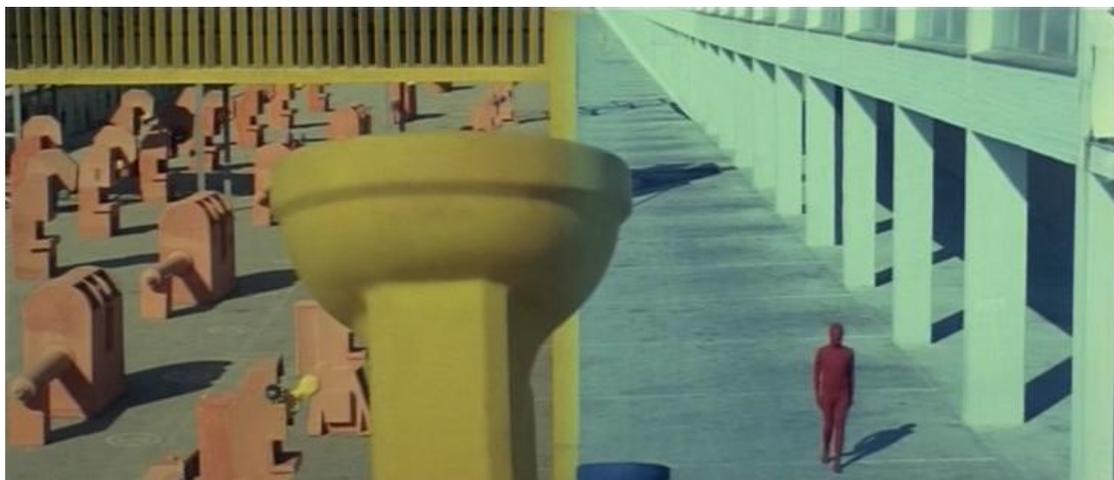


Fig 1: *Modelo* (Kostas Sfikas, 1974)

In *Idées Fixes* image and sound share equal status, while images and multiple texts function not in harmony but in counterpoint (Angelidi 1978: 89). *Modelo* speaks about Capitalism, not through a story or allegory, but through a 'formula' (Sfikas 1974b: 55), an abstract choreography of movements. *Idées Fixes* is structured associatively using the mechanism of dreams, while an entire section of the film is an ironic comment on the psychoanalytic connotations of Aristotelian narration. *Modelo* distances itself from realistic representation, creating an extra-real space inhabited by machines and vividly coloured humans. *Idées Fixes* thematises and criticises representation, in the sense of both thought and art. In one frame of the film, for example, a bound woman sits under the advertisement of two girls, behind the word 'MIMESIS' and confined by the mirrored image of the words 'FEMME NUE (naked woman)'. She is bound by mimesis, in the sense of representation, imitation and stereotype.

Modelo's single shot is based on a symmetrical composition and slight distortions, creating an unsettling space, expanding toward the spectator. *Idées Fixes* is constantly playing with the concept of frame: framing images within different images, re-framing, referring and mirroring. Temporal durations in both films challenge certain conventional expectations. *Modelo* lasts one and a half hours, in the first six minutes of which nothing moves, while the rest of the time is filled with the very slow motion of machines, humans and products. *Idées*

Fixes, on the other hand, plays with different rhythms and frequencies: it starts with two very long, static shots, and it is divided in two by another long static shot, showing the word 'Défense', implying the spectator's resistance to cinema. However, it also uses faster editing, which, in some cases, pushes the image to the edge of visibility.

Sfikas's and Angelidi's theoretical and political positions led them to make their films the way they did. As Angelidi clearly puts it: "I have tried to embody my political positions in my writing"³ (Angelidi 1978: 98). *Modelo* and *Idées Fixes* partake in left-wing politics and refer to specific Marxian concepts, such as dialectical materialism, the law of value and autotomized representations, as well as to texts, such as *German Ideology* and *Das Kapital*. When one speaks of cinema and *Das Kapital* in the same sentence, the obvious reference is Sergei Eisenstein and his unrealised project of filming Marx's *opus magnum*. In Michael's words:

The two most unyielding representatives of modernism in our cinema, Kostas Sfikas and Antoinetta Angelidi, the male and female subjects of this modernism, have, ultimately, as Urvater, [as] primordial Father, the creator of *Battleship Potemkin* and *Ivan the Terrible*. (Michael 2010: 17)

Being an explicitly avant-garde and Marxist filmmaker, Eisenstein as a reference connects Sfikas's and Angelidi's work to both the historical avant-gardes and a Marxist justification of their techniques. It is important to note that Eisenstein's films and writings had been more diffused in the Greek intelligenzia than these of other representatives of the historical avant-gardes, precisely because of his films' overt and easily interpretable political stance. Already in the 1960s, there were several Greek translations of his theoretical texts.⁴ Sfikas and Angelidi had also access to international bibliography, particularly in French. It can be claimed that Eisenstein's texts influenced them more than his films did.

Sfikas in *Modelo*, by transforming *Das Kapital* into film, unavoidably refers to Eisenstein's unrealised project. The reference was evident at the time to anyone versed in film history and it constantly appeared in the presentations of the film. Noguez starts his own presentation with an Eisenstein reference, and goes on to

³ In this citation, 'writing' must be understood as 'filmmaking', because Angelidi uses the term in the context of the post-structuralist theories, where all discursive activity in any semiotic system – including cinema – is considered 'writing'.

⁴ E.g. *Skepsis mou gia ton Kinimatografo/My Thoughts on Cinema* in 1964, *Provlimata Skinothesias Kinimatografou: Dialektiki tou Film – Montage/Issues of Film Direction: Film Dialectics – Editing* in 1967, *I Aisthitiki tou Film/Film Aesthetics* in 1979. In the late 1970s and in the 1980s, Greek translations of Eisenstein's texts multiplied; not always from the original Russian but also from their French translations. Sfikas himself made several of them.

explain why Sfikas's filmic choices distance him from the Russian filmmaker's approach [Noguez ([1978] 2010: 292)]. The difference lies, he argues, in their conception of narration: more precisely, in the fact that Eisenstein, unlike Sfikas, works "inside the problematics of narrative cinema" (ibid.). What Sfikas does is "showing [i.e. using images], without editing or narrative" (ibid.). The lack of editing in *Modelo* is distinctively un-Eisenstein-ian. However, the choice of rejecting storytelling, as an act of radical consistency with the idea of showing instead of telling, could be viewed as more Eisenstein-ian than Eisenstein himself.

What Angelidi mostly owes to Eisenstein is the cinematic interpretation of Marxian dialectics. Eisenstein developed a 'film dialectics' theory, based on the notion that the collision between contradictory film elements, through their juxtaposition, creates a third meaning in the mind of the spectator that surpasses the initial two. Significantly, Angelidi underlines in her personal copy of the Greek translation of Eisenstein's *Film Aesthetics* the following passage:

It is revealed that two pieces of film connected are combined unavoidably in the creation of a new conception, of a new property which is born from their juxtaposition. [...] The result of the juxtaposition of two pieces of film in editing is more like their product than their sum. (Eisenstein [n.d.] 1969: 10-11)

Initially, Eisenstein invented and practiced this principle in editing, with the connection between shots. He then generalised it to all aspects of film construction. With the introduction of sound to films, he supported the same principle for the relation between image and sound. This theory of filmmaking has two foundations: the semiotic principle of differentiability and Marxian dialectics. On the one hand, one of the breakthroughs of Saussure's *Cours de Linguistique Générale* is that 'in language there are only differences without positive terms' (de Saussure [1916] 1972: 166); the meaning is created by the difference between elements and not by their positive existence. Semiotics, through the intermediation of Russian Formalism, influenced the group of filmmakers to which Eisenstein belonged. The series of experiments in film language, which were named after Lev Kuleshov, were of particular importance. The crucial finding of these experiments was that the individual shots were meaningless before their combination.⁵ On the other hand, when Eisenstein forms his 'film dialectics', he overtly refers to Marx's dialectical materialism. He interprets the fundamental semiotic principle of differentiability as the dialectic

⁵ The word for 'editing' in French, and Russian, is '*montage*'. That is why the school of Soviet filmmakers who stressed the primacy of the meaning-producing powers of editing has passed into history as the *Soviet Montage School*.

tripartite construction: thesis-antithesis-synthesis, where the last step of synthesis, destroys and surpasses the previous two.

There is a long philosophical line behind this construction, from Plato to Hegel to Marx, but Eisenstein's proposition refers particularly to the materialist conception of dialectics. Eisenstein's film dialectics, with its double root in semiotics and Marx, fit well with Angelidi's interests. When she went to Paris, fleeing from the Junta in 1973, she participated in post-structuralist debates on politics and film, and the art and filmmaking practices of the neo-avant-gardes. Angelidi studied under Noël Burch and Thierry Kuntzel in the *Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques* (I.D.H.E.C.), while she also studied under Christian Metz in the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*. For her first full-length film, *Idées Fixes*, she combined the Eisensteinian principle of dialectical conflict with Metz's semiotic heterogeneity and Burch's structural use of sound. She also referred to and used the techniques of the historical and neo-avant-gardes, such as the surrealist collages, Dada ready-mades, lettrist optical poems and more. All these references had already intermingled roots, and Angelidi "inhaled them along with the fertile air of Paris" in the mid-1970s (personal interview). It is, therefore, at the level of structural principles, and through multiple reformulations, that Eisenstein influenced the construction of *Idées Fixes*, not through his iconography or narrative techniques.

Idées Fixes uses the structural principle of dialectical conflict on multiple levels of codes and messages and expressive substances; conflict between successive shots, between sound and image in the same shot, between images and written words, between images in the same frame, between what is said and how it is said. An example is the shot of a vulva, with the phrase 'USAGE EXTERNE' projected on it (Fig 2), accompanied by a troubadour song and then by Mikis Theodorakis's song *I Epistoli/The Letter*. The image refers to the paintings 'L'Origine du Monde' (1866) by Gustave Courbet and 'Le Bouchon d'Épouvante' (1966) by René Magritte. Each of the referent paintings already functions in double register. Courbet's painting of a vulva entitled as 'the origin of the world' is voyeuristic, and between irony and respect in recognizing its subject matter as humanity's entrance to the world and to sublimation, through birth and sex respectively. Magritte's painting of a hat, with the label 'external use' that usually accompanies medicines, and the title 'the stopper of fright/the frightful stopper', mainly comments of the possible functions of language. Their combination multiplies the possible meanings *en abime*, adding some new ones too. Is woman only 'for external use' or is she a *panacea*, or both, or is it the same? Questions are implied in multiple ironic registers, between respect and objectification, overvaluation and undervaluation. The sound adds more levels of conflict. The troubadour song connotes romantic love, while Theodorakis's song connotes left-wing politics. Significantly, it is a song that conveyed a hidden meaning,

resonant with all at the time: it was supposed to be the letter of a political prisoner and exile to his family. It is of equal significance that the song is sung by the filmmaker herself. The co-existence of sound and image situates romantic love and left-wing politics, as well as high and avant-garde art, in the same nexus of patriarchic oppression, although left-wing politics and avant-garde art may also provide a weapon against this oppression. In this nexus of oppression, a woman is an object and an exile, who cannot indeed be ‘well, very well’, as the lyrics say. And yet she is: she has a voice and sings, and makes films against oppression. Angelidi in an interview commented on the importance of the multiple ironic and positive registers that co-function in this shot:

[The song] doesn’t function [only] as a positive reference to Theodorakis or as an ironic reference. One should realize that it functions autonomously as well: positively (I am well despite ‘external use’) or ironically (you want me to be well while I am only for ‘external use’). There is therefore an effort of non monosemous use of slogans. (Angelidi 1978: 95)



Fig 2: *Idées Fixes/Dies Irae* (Antoinetta Angelidi, 1977)

Sfikas’s *Modelo* (Fig 3), in its single ninety-minute shot presents the model of a capitalist factory, but also of the capitalist way of production as a mechanism. It intends to be “the immediate visual transcription of the fundamental laws of *Das Kapital*” (Sfikas 1974a: 428); to “propose the theoretical formula of the model that lurks since the 17th century”, and to propose this theoretical formula “in the

form of a single image” (Sfikas 1974b: 55). It is “like an equation, of which the unknown element is time”, where “the abstract elements symbolise the process of production” (ibid.: 61). The film presents micro-events on four levels. The frame is divided in two parts: on the left side is the area of production, while on the right is the market. The element that divides the two areas extends ideally toward the spectator. On the upper left part, in a left-to-right direction, a procession of vividly coloured human figures moves in a relatively fast pace: that is the workers: men, women, children, and then men again. The main left-side axis is dominated by rows of machines. In the right-side area, faceless vividly coloured human figures again, the consumers, walk slowly and in big intervals, toward the spectator. Finally, on the central axis of the frame, a conveyor belt brings the finished commodities to the spectator, in an extreme *gros plan*. These commodities have the same colours as the human figures, and consist of toilets and various consumer goods. The colour implies that they are transformed workers, an implication intensified by the appearance of human parts on the conveyor belt. Therefore, the workers play both the role of labour-power and of first materials.

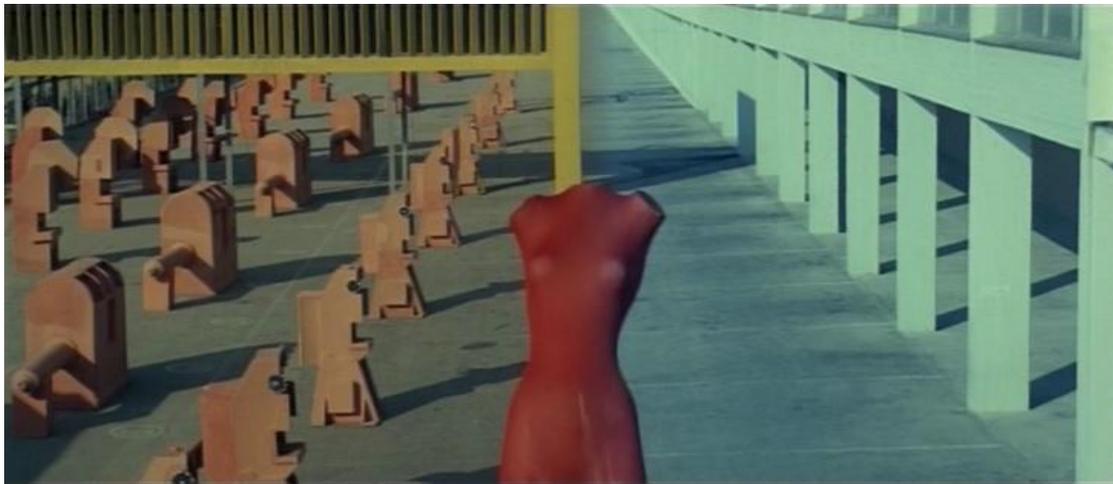


Fig 3: *Modelo*

As Michael argues, in order to interpret *Modelo's* choreography, one has to take into account the relation between the movements, where verticality means opposition, and parallelism interconnection (Michael 2009). The entrance of the workers is vertical to the movement of commodities and parallel to the place of production, while the movement of the faceless figures is parallel to the movement of commodities and vertical to the space of production (**Fig 4**). The worker is opposed to the commodity, and waged labour is connected to capitalist production, while alienation is connected to commercialisation. So *Modelo* is the model of a capitalist production circuit, as described by Marx. Sfikas has stressed many times the importance of time in this film: how it is meant to “give a feeling of death” (Sfikas 1974b: 60) and that the dead, torturing time is the law of value.

As Michael explains, this transcribes *Das Kapital* where “value is just dead labour, the dead time consolidated on the product”, time killed and stolen (Michael [1986?]: 2-3). In Sfikas’s words again, capitalism is “a mechanism that engenders death” (Sfikas 1974b: 56).

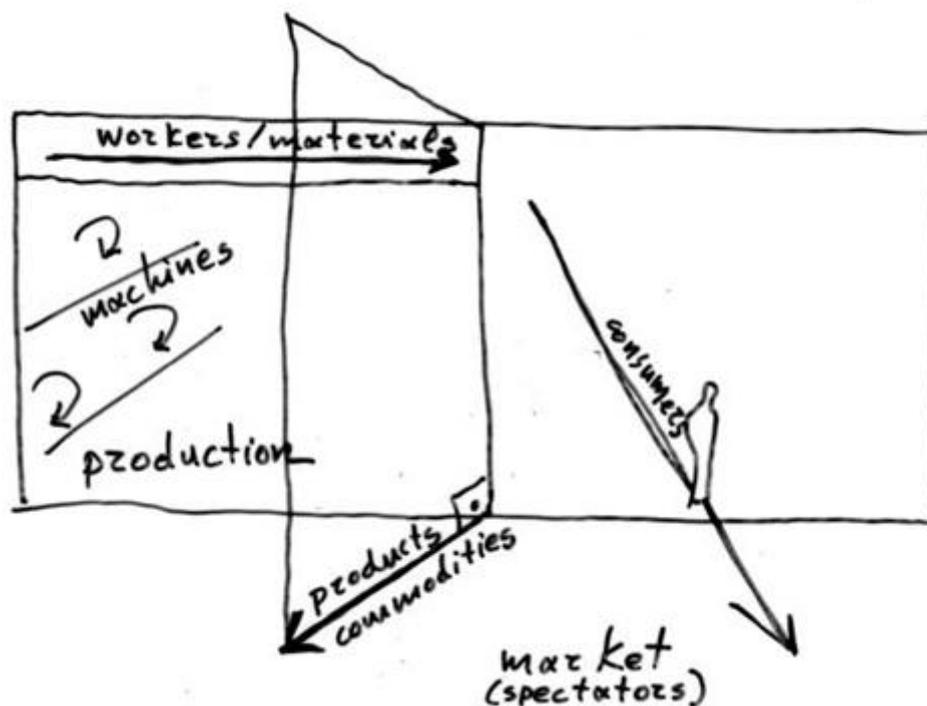


Fig 4: A diagram of movements in *Modelo*

Angelidi was equally deeply impressed by *Das Kapital*. As she has often described (e.g. Angelidi 1996), she used to have visions of the cities as condensed and consolidated labour-power, a literal imagery of Marx’s words:

All these things now tell us is that human labour-power has been expended to produce them, human labour is accumulated in them. As crystals of this social substance, which is common to them all, they are values – commodity values. (Marx [1867] 1976: 128)

However, *Idées Fixes* has a more complicated view on Marx and left-wing politics than *Modelo* does. Although the two films are separated by just three years, the filmmakers are separated by an entire generation. Sfikas’s (1927-2009) political views were formed during World War II and the Greek Civil War (1944-1949), while Angelidi’s (b. 1950) political stance was formed by her participation in the resistance against the Colonels’ Junta (1967-1974). In their theoretical formation, Sfikas relates mostly to the historical avant-gardes, while Angelidi was ‘a child of May ‘68’ (Michael 2010: 17). *Idées Fixes* takes into account the structuralist and post-structuralist readings of both film and Marx, as well as the

second-wave feminist critique on gender. In its consumer society critique, the film claims that commodification regards not only objects and people but also discourses, including the political discourse. It takes issue with political dogmatism and the failure of the Left to address sexism. It endorses the feminist critique of the Marxian exclusion of re-production from production – a key phrase of the film being ‘usine/cuisine (factory/kitchen)’. As it deals with the fetishisation of representations, its Marxian references include the *German Ideology*, where the autonomised representations are precisely called ‘fixed ideas’ (e.g. Marx & Engels ([1845-1847] 1964): 171), as well as Althusser’s critique on ideology (e.g. Althusser 1970). Its text functions on multiple registers, both literally and ironically, based on the dialectical juxtaposition of messages.



Fig 5: *Idées Fixes/Dies Irae*

For example, a sequence of the film starts with a shot of two men in women’s underwear reciting a mixture of theory and advertisement in Greek, French and English, with the advertisement of two women in the background, while the words ‘state’ and ‘family’ are projected on their bodies and while a diagonal line crosses them out. The line of recitations opens with the phrase ‘political positions and femininity are commodities’ and is interrupted by the sound of a factory shift bell. After an off-screen direction, a backward movement of the camera reveals the writing on the poster, which reads ‘Êtes-vous à gauche ou à droite?’ (Are you a left-winger or a right-winger?), as well as part of the shooting

equipment. Finally, a fully dressed man appears in front of the crossed-out poster (**Fig 5**). He claims – in French-accented Greek – that ‘political positions and femininity are NOT commodities’. Once again, the sequence functions in multiple registers. For example, the poster that reveals the question ‘*êtes-vous à gauche ou à droite?*’ was initially a commercial, relying on a wordplay between the political and style division of the inhabitants of two sides of the river Seine. In the film the joke is redoubled and gains a critical gravity: it is not just stylistic choices that become politics, but also political choices that become style and are commercialized as such. Then again, the appearance of the question, along with the shooting equipment, reveals ideology as construction, while also exposing the cinematic construction. The man who claims that ‘political positions and femininity are not commodities’ is of equal significance, despite what family and the state propagate. The message is once again both positive and ironic. For a feminist-conscious audience, the fact that the speaker was a man would not pass unnoticed, while the French-accent of the Greek phrase is also obvious. Angelidi is commenting on the latent sexism of the Left by comparing it to its latent colonialism. This parallelism is repeated many times in the film. The notion of patriarchal ideology as colonisation is supported by Angelidi’s words “alien myths about our body and colonies in our collective unconscious” (Angelidi 1979: 172).

Both Sfikas and Angelidi when interviewed for the journal *Synchronos Kinimatografos* discussed how their films relate to the question of revolution (Angelidi 1978; Sfikas 1974b). The interviewers think that *Modelo* does not contain the element of working class consciousness that leads to the inversion of the system in its formula. Thus the film makes capitalism appear eternal. Sfikas, who thinks that this deadly time “will cease to exist, when the equation will be solved, when the model will cease to exist”, answers that “what gives birth to the model, this destruction, shows that the model will cease to exist” (Sfikas 1974b: 61). He adds, however, that he thought a lot about how to include the dialectical dimension in his film, but “didn’t find a solution” (ibid.). *Idées Fixes* differs, containing not only references to revolutionary politics but also a critique to its shortcomings, as well as implying a future potential. Angelidi points out that the film’s critique is also addressed to her own self – “I don’t take myself out of the picture” – because “we carry the revolution that was taught to us” (Angelidi 1978: 89). She also adds that “it would be a lie to say that I have a solution” (ibid.). One could observe that the very title of the film, *Idées Fixes/Dies Irae*, resonates a revolutionary reference; in the film’s context ‘Days of Wrath’ cannot but connote revolution.



Fig 6: *Idées Fixes/Dies Irae*

At a shot toward the end of the film, Angelidi herself re-enacts the dead French revolutionary Jean-Paul Marat, from the eponymous painting by Jacques Louis David (1793). On the frame the word 'HORIZON' is written, while the audience hears the unsettling sound of water dripping. Then the 'Internationale', the anthem of the working class movement, starts playing from a music box out of tune. When the music stops, the 'female Marat' opens her eyes (**Fig 6**). This is a multileveled comment, both ironic and hopeful. The viewers see the representation of the representation of a dead revolutionary. Angelidi stressed that while the initial painting signified the dead-end of a revolution, the film's shot is a representation of this representation, which she "believe[s] inverts the logic of the initial representation" (ibid.: 98). Instead of the dead *male* revolutionary, there is a *female* body: a woman, both revolutionary and dead. Moreover, this woman happens to be the film director, connoting to the death of the author. The word 'HORIZON', signifying hope, is written on a frame without depth or a visual horizon. The suspense-producing dripping sound is met by the communist anthem, ironically produced by a music box: childish and petit-bourgeois. One failed revolution commenting on another. Who has killed the revolution? Who has killed women? And who has killed the revolutionary woman? It is the nexus of repressive culture, from political discourse to high art, that has committed this murder. Yet, the woman Marat wakes up from her sleep under patriarchal domination. For a fleeting moment, she opens her eyes. And everything obtains a double register: revolutionary hope is active again.

By analysing both their films and their words, this article has demonstrated that Sfikas and Angelidi consider their decisions on form as politically meaningful. They consciously oppose the possibility of a form-independent content. Angelidi, for example, speaks of the close relation between dogmatic writing and dogmatic politics, and comments on the inconsistency of people of apparently progressive politics who are conservative in issues of art form (Angelidi 1978: 90). Moreover, what Sfikas and Angelidi consider to make a film politically meaningful is primarily the way it is made and not its topics. In other words, a film may thematise the revolution without being revolutionary. A revolutionary film may not necessarily need to thematise revolution. This last proposition is implied by the fact that both Sfikas's and Angelidi's later films have less overtly political subjects, while continuing to be interpreted by their filmmakers within the same reasoning as the two films examined here. *Modelo* and *Idées Fixes* were chosen for this article due to their overt politicization. So far I have shown that the constitution of a political discourse articulated in the language of cinema is achieved through these two films, as well as I have highlighted their proposition of a left-wing and Marx-inspired, and in the case of *Idées Fixes* also feminist-inspired, discourse.

One question that underlies this discussion is which form choices can be considered politically radical and why. To start with, one can argue that not to comply with a convention is, in a way, by itself an emancipatory move, particularly if one reveals the convention's conventional nature in the process. However, there are more specific implications regarding avant-garde film choices. Firstly, to question representation is to question how reality is turned into concepts. This means to question, on the one hand, specific representations, and on the other hand, the very possibility of representation. To reveal aesthetic realism as conventional and ideological, as well as to reveal the constructed nature of film, is to fight against an illusion with ethical and political implications.

Secondly, to deny classical narration means both to deny the dominant narrative and to oppose the narrative mechanisms of audience-manipulation. It has been convincingly argued that the classical, so-called Aristotelian, structure of narration is indissolubly linked to the Oedipal trajectory, as well as to capitalist and patriarchic ideology. Moreover, it functions manipulatively, contributing to the spectators' identification with the film and, therefore, diminishing their critical position with regard to what they see.

Thirdly, the focus on medium materiality is not unrelated to the notion of materialism. The primary reference is, of course, Marx, even when it passes through the post-structuralist transformations: Althusser, Derrida, Kristeva, Lacan et al. The importance of the signifier, and then of the semiotic and extra-semiotic substance, is meant as a truthful relation to the Real, as opposed to

aesthetic realism which can be construed as nothing more than a kind of philosophical idealism. Finally, to alter what people thought as eternal and as self-evident, changes the way the world is perceived. This notion is linked to the Russian formalists' concept of 'defamiliarisation'. Questioning the given and proposing new forms may open up the possibility for the new and the unforeseen, which is arguably the real meaning of revolution.

There is a significant difference between 1925 Eisenstein's claim that "form proved to be more revolutionary than content" (in Sitney 1987: 15) and 1970 Jean-Luc Godard's declaration that it is not enough to do political films, "we should do films *politically*" (in Brenez 2006: 78). What is implied by Godard's statement is that the 'way' that films are made may include not only their form but also the practice of filmmaking. A conception of films as acts may also be implied. Already since Eisenstein and his 'Kino-fists', avant-garde films often sought to be more than merely a political discourse; they aspired to be political acts. This desire is resonant in Angelidi's words:

I have tried to embody my political positions in my writing. The fact that I write in the way I do, and not in any other, is a political act. The ideal would be those two [writing and action] to be completely indistinguishable. (Angelidi 1978: 98)

This notion expresses the desire of fusion between art and life. Theoretically, it is partly founded on the performative function of discourse in general and partly on the particular radicalness of avant-garde filmmaking. What is implied is that avant-garde films are not just political acts (all films are), but that they should be progressive, even revolutionary acts. The bases of this conversation combine the Marxist-inspired debate about the relation between the superstructure and the economic base of a society, as well as the structuralist-inspired debate about the relation between semiotic practices and the extra-semiotic world. What is at stake is the function of art in relation to society, particularly in the context of the avant-gardes' radical questioning of the traditional categorical separation between the two realms. In order to better understand the intricacies of this problematics, it may be useful to use J. L. Austin's distinction of speech act functions into "locutionary", "illocutionary" and "perlocutionary"; that is, the act *of* saying something, the act *in* saying something and the act of producing consequences *by* saying something, respectively (Austin [1955] 1962). Avant-garde films aspire to be revolutionary in all three senses. The first sense is what has been mostly analysed in this text: the political discourse that the films articulate in their own cinematic language. The second sense is the degree in which the films constitute a revolution by themselves. Avant-garde art in general and avant-garde cinema in particular have constituted a revolution. More specifically, in Julia Kristeva's (1974) reformulation of the Formalist principle,

they constituted a semiotic revolution by breaking with the rules of the semiotic system that supported them.

The important question, getting to the perlocutionary sense of speech acts, is in which way such a revolution changes the world at large. The most extreme answer was given by the Situationists, who would immediately identify the two kinds of change. The opposite extreme answer was given by dogmatic materialism, which considered the superstructure immediately determined by the economic base. A dialectical Marxist position would propose a more complicated relation between the two, stressing the mediating function of ideology. Althusser's reformulation of Marx has been the most influential, as well as his conception of how ideology functions in a concrete manner in everyday life (Althusser 1970). Both Sfikas and Angelidi keep the distinction between their filmmaking revolutions and the change of the society's economic base, while also implying the multiple ways in which their films may bring changes in the world. Angelidi, in particular, in *Idées Fixes*, as in the rest of her films, deals with the functioning of ideological constructions. Furthermore, she has repeatedly revealed the importance that Marx's third thesis on Feuerbach holds in her thought:

The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances and that it is essential to educate the educator himself. (in Marx & Engels [1845-1847] 1964: 665-6)

Therefore, an important change that avant-garde films bring is their influence on their audience. This influence has many facets. Firstly, films encourage change by providing knowledge to their audience; accurate knowledge as precondition for political action. Secondly, and more specifically, they 'raise consciousness', as the activist *lingua* would have it; they provide a particular kind of knowledge that changes the person who receives it, and consequently the way s/he will act in the future. Thirdly, in the Formalist tradition, they change the way the audience sees the world, which is related to consciousness raising. A fourth way films may affect their audience is by structurally demanding an active way of reception by the construction of their reception as an active act. This is produced by films that demand an effort of interpretation and position-taking on the part of the spectator, that do not use identification, lulling and luring techniques, that reveal their own construction. The aim is an "emancipated spectator", as Angelidi often puts it (e.g. 1998). Finally, the ultimate ambition of avant-garde filmmaking relies on the acts the audience may do in its turn, using their experience of the film: from literally fighting a revolution to, even more importantly, possibly change the way they live.

What remains as a question, with regard not only to avant-garde films, but all emancipatory texts, is their historical conditionality. In other words, do they lose their radicalness along with their novelty? This used to be believed by many avant-garde artists. In a messianic style, resonant of Hegelianism, it was even thought that their *raison d'être* will disappear after the success of the revolution. Let us not enter here in the complicate debate about the meaning and potential of revolution, whether it will come or is or has been whether it can ever be a finished state or is a perpetual process, or a Derridian 'to-come'. In any case, the question of context is valid even outside the problematics of revolution. Texts change their meaning when the context changes. However, despite the multiple changes in the audiovisual languages and technologies since the 1970s, *Modelo* and *Idées Fixes* I argue, have not aged. They still point to untried potentialities of the language of cinema. And maybe, when all their novelty is gone, they will still be radical because of their beauty.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Antoinetta Angelidi and Takis Saslidis (who worked with Kostas Sfikas in many of his films) for allowing me access to their personal archives and sharing their memories with me.

REFERENCES

- Albera, F. (2005), *L'avant-garde au Cinema/Avant-Garde in Cinema*. Paris: Arman Colin.
- Althusser, L. (1970), 'Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'état (Notes pour une recherche)/Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)', *La pensée*, p. 151.
- Angelidi, A. and F. Liappa (1978), interviewed by Ch. Vakalopoulos and M. Demopoulos, *Synchronos Kinimatografos*, 17/18, pp. 89-98.
- _____ (1979), 'Autoparousiasi/Self-Presentation', *Film*, special issue on *Women & Cinema/Cinema & Women*, 17, pp. 171-172.
- _____ (1996), 'Ke to Cinema Oniro Ine/Cinema too is a Dream', interviewed by V. Georgakopoulou, *Eleftherotypia*, 20 January.
- _____ (1998), 'Pagidevmeno ke Chirafetimeno Vlemma ston Kinimatografo/Entrapped and Emancipated Gaze in Cinema', invited talk at the conference *City-Citizen-Civilization*, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece.

- Austin, J. L. ([1955] 1962), *How To Do Things With Words*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Brenez, N. (2006), *Cinémas d'Avant-Garde/Cinemas of the Avant-Garde*. Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma.
- Bäckström, P. (2007), 'One Earth, Four or Five Words. The Peripheral Concept of 'Avant-Garde'', *Nordlit*, special issue on *Centre Periphery: The Avant-Garde and the Other*, 21, pp. 21-44.
- Bürger, P. ([1974] 1984), *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, original in German, trans. M. Shaw, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Derrida, J. (1967), *L'Écriture et la Différence/Writing and Difference*. Paris: Seuil.
- Eisenstein, S. ([n.d.] 1964), *Skepsis mou gia ton Kinimatografo/My Thoughts on Cinema*, original in Russian, trans. A. Moschovakis, Athens: Fexis.
- _____ ([n.d.] 1967), *Provlimata Skinothesias Kinimatografou: Dialektiki tou Film – Montage/Issues of Film Direction: Film Dialectics – Editing*, original in Russian, trans. M. L., Athens: Kinimatografikes Ekdoseis.
- _____ ([n.d.] 1969), *I Aisthitektiki tou Film/Film Aesthetics*, original in Russian, trans. M. Laertis, Athens: Rougkas.
- Freud, S. ([1900] 1953), 'The Interpretation of Dreams', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volumes IV & V, trans. J. Strachey & A. Freud, London: Hogarth Press & Institute of Psychoanalysis.
- Huysen, A. (2005), 'Geographies of Modernism in a Globalizing World', in P. Brooker & A. Thacker (eds), *Geographies of Modernism: Literatures, Cultures, Spaces*. London / New York: Routledge.
- Koliodimos, D. (1980), 'O Piramatikos/Protoporiakos Kinimatografos stin Ellada/Experimental/Avant-Garde Cinema in Greece'. *Cinema*, pp. 3-7.
- Kristeva, J. (1974), *La Révolution du Langage Poétique/The Revolution of Poetic Language*, Paris: Seuil.
- Le Grice, M. (2001), *Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Marx, K. ([1867] 1976), *Das Kapital*, vol.1, original in German, trans. Ben Fowkes, London: Penguin.

- _____ & F. Engels ([1845-1847] 1964), *The German Ideology*, original in German, trans. S. Ryazanskaya, Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Metz, Ch. (1971), *Langage et Cinéma/Language and Cinema*. Paris: Larousse.
- Michael, S. (1986?), 'Mia Trilogia tou Kosta Sfika: Apospasmata apo Dokimia pano stin Trilogia/A Trilogy by Kostas Sfikas: Fragments from essays on the Trilogy', programme of screenings.
- _____ (2009), 'Mimisi ke Alligoria: Skepsis pano ston Kinimatografo tou Kosta Sfika/Mimesis and Allegory: Thoughts on Kostas Sfikas's films', *Ta Nea tis Tehnis*, 181, pp. 17-20.
- _____ (2010), 'I Anikia Architektoniki tou Onirou: Skepsis ston Kinimatografo tis Antouanettas Aggelidi/The Uncanny Dream Architecture: Thoughts on Antoinetta Angelidi's films', *Ta Nea tis Tehnis*, 185, pp. 15-17.
- Noguez, D. ([1978] 2010), *Éloge du Cinéma Experimental/Eulogy for Experimental Cinema*. Paris: Centre Pompidou, 3rd edition.
- Poggioli, R. ([1962] 1981), *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, original in Italian, trans. G. Fitzgerald, Harvard University Press.
- Saussure, F. de ([1916] 1972), *Cours de Linguistique Générale/Courses in General Linguistics*. Ch. Bally, A. Sechehaye and A. Riedlinger (eda), critical ed. and intro. by T. de Mauro, Paris: Payot.
- Sfikas, K. (1974a), 'O Kostas Sfikas gia to *Modelo*/Kostas Sfikas about *Modelo*'. *Film*, 3, pp. 427-429.
- _____ (1974b), interviewed by Fr. Liappa and Tz. Konidou, *Synchronos Kinimatografos*, 2/3, pp. 54-61.
- Sitney, P. A. (ed.) (1987), *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, New York: Anthology Film Archives.
- Theodorakis, S. (1995), 'L'Anatreptikos' dans le Cinéma Grec/The 'Subversive' in Greek Cinema', in M. Demopoulos (ed.), *Le Cinema Grec*, Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, pp. 118-125.
- Thibaudeau, J. (1979), presentation of 'IDEESDIES/FIXESIRAE un film de Antoinetta Angelidi'/ 'IDEESDIES/FIXESIRAE a film by Antoinetta Angelidi', *Cahiers Critiques de la Littérature* (nouvelle série), 1/2, pp. 35-52.
- Vakalopoulos, Ch. (1978), 'Oi Meres Orgis na Ginoun Emmones Ideas (I i thavmastes parallages tis Antouanettas Angelidi)/The Days of Wrath

Should Become Fixed Ideas (Or the Miraculous Variations of Antoinetta Angelidi', *Chroniko 1978*, Athens: Ora.

Voguel, A. (1974), *Film as a Subversive Art*. New York: Random House.