

*Matchbox, Knifer and the 'Oikographic' Hypothesis*¹

Evgenia Giannouri

University of Paris 3 (IRCAV)

ABSTRACT

This article makes the hypothesis of an 'oikographic' tendency that overlaps the recurrent theme of the family and family-related dysfunctions as seen in many contemporary Greek films. It argues that, beyond the ethographical trend deep-rooted in the core of Greek culture, contemporary Greek films present the 'noxious oikos' as a symptom of a society in collapse. The article relates the 'oikographic' hypothesis to two films by Yannis Economides, Spirtokouto/Matchbox (2003) and Macherovgaltis/Knifer (2010) and focuses on the way these films portray borderline household settings in terms of both narrative and form. It exemplifies the role of architecture that allows the camera to negotiate space delimitations together with framing effects. It finally points to the classical Aristotelian diptych oikos/polis that comes in the diegetic form of 'oikopolitical' merging. The article concludes that by making a case of the figure of the 'noxious oikos', contemporary Greek film-makers perform contemporary versions of the 'oikographic' drive which historically navigates across Greek cinema.

KEYWORDS

Economides

family

home rhetorics

'oikographic' drive

Oikos/Polis

¹ The current article is a work in progress. Modifications are expected to result from the ongoing research.

There stood the middays and the sicknesses and the exhaled breath and the smoke of years, and the sweat that breaks out under armpits and makes clothes heavy, and the stale breath of mouths, and the fusel odor of sweltering feet. There stood the tang of urine and the burn of soot and the grey reek of potatoes, and the heavy, smooth stench of ageing grease. The sweet, lingering smell of neglected infants was there, and the fear smell of children who go to school, and the sultriness out of the beds of nubile youths.

Rainer Maria Rilke (1992: 47-48)

NEWS FROM HOME

The portrayal of the family and family-related issues has been a central theme in films since the earliest days of cinema. This is the main reference point in Murray Pomerance's *A Family Affair: Cinema calls Home* (2008), a collection of film essays about Hollywood cinema. The book discusses the American family's many cinematic fluctuations, its symbols, values and myths either as a locus of domestic bliss or as a dysfunctional source of drama and torment. In *Living Room Lectures* (1995) Nina C. Leibman aims to explain the reasons for the media's obsession with family life. She examines American feature films and TV series dating from 1954 to 1963. Emanuel Levy, on the other hand, investigates 'The American Dream of Family in Film: From Decline to a Comeback' (1991: 187-204). He is particularly interested in the interplay between screen images and the social structure from 1967 to the 1990s. The family rhetorics are also Sarah Hardwood's main research topic. In *Family Fictions* (1997), Harwood showcases the 1980s Hollywood engagement with the debate over the "crisis in the family", both feeding and resisting the dominant ideologies. However, the dysfunctional family as a prominent thematic axis for films² becomes even more noticeable within the context of a specific cinematographic genre: the horror film. According to Reynold Humphries (2002), the representations of the 'toxic household' in the 1960s, together with other cinematic depictions related to sexuality and the death impulse, modernised the face of horror by transforming the family myth from the comforting "Home is where the heart is" to the uncanny "Heaths of Darkness".³

² See also: Desbarats (ed.) (2001) and Poirson-Dechonne (ed.) (2009).

³ Reynold Humphries refers to two bibliographic landmarks in the field of Film and Gender Studies: Christine Gledhill's *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama*

With regards to the new generation of Greek film-makers, one element that unites their otherwise diversified approaches to film style is the preoccupation with family. In his much discussed article '*Attenberg, Dogtooth and the Weird Wave of Greek Cinema*', Steve Rose (2011) questions Greece's enduring obsession with the family and its systematic deconstruction. What was hitherto considered as the key to stability and social cohesion now appears twisted and disintegrated. Contemporary Greek film-makers stage the family's breakdown. Whether depicted clinically or in a baroque and exuberant manner, the family stands for the allegorical *analogon* of national schizophrenia and corruption, the root cause of individual and collective paroxysms. Despite the film-makers' claim that there is no such thing as an aesthetically homogeneous Greek film agenda regarding film genre and form, critics and film historians agree that there is prevalent dramaturgic preference for relationship depictions and family dynamics combined with a reluctance towards theorization and strong ideological statements. Commenting on the occasion of the 51st Thessaloniki International Film Festival, Petro Alexiou (2011) characterizes the so-called 'new Greek current' as realistic and innovative at the same time. The film-makers of the 'new current' are aware of the codes of popular culture, as well as of the technological advances of their medium. They master the film language and experiment with form. On the same path, Maria Chalkou (2012: 243-261) discusses the 'emancipation' of contemporary Greek cinema and draws attention to two significant readings of this particular trend: one by the film critic and former director of the Thessaloniki International Film Festival Michel Demopoulos (2011: 52), the other by the film programmer Dimitris Kerkinos (2011). Both readings share the opinion that:

What these films seem to have in common is a 'new gaze' and a 'new ethos', which constitutes a clear break with the past. In terms of theme there is a shift away from history, ancient drama and issues of Greekness to the present reality [...] with the family and anxieties of identity as recurrent concerns. (Chalkou 2012: 244-245)

For Vrasidas Karalis (2012) however, plotting the family drama can easily grow into an 'Achilles heel' for Greek cinema, a weakness in spite of the overall encouraging signs. Towards the end of his 2012 history of Greek Cinema, he refers to the absence of explicit political statements as a flaw that can ultimately affect the ways in which contemporary Greek cinema is understood. Karalis (ibid.: 280-281) observes that despite the social nature of most contemporary films, none of them addresses openly the recent sociopolitical events. On the contrary, they restrict themselves in sanitized depictions of misery that renders their social critique and political intervention harmless. That is to say:

and the Woman's Film and Tony Williams's *Hearths of Darkness: The Family in the American Horror Film*.

Instead of revealing to the viewer what happens, by foregrounding the radical potential within the real, this new episodic realism fizzles out into either inconsequential fragments or cute micro-histories by wasting its energy on incomprehensible screams or doleful complaints. (ibid.: 281)

Karalis requires a cinema explicitly engaged with the nation's political claims, the need to bring back to the foreground the radical potential within the real, by undoing the 'domesticated', *intra-muros* social critique. Yet, it is this 'domesticated' discourse, which for Dimitris Papanikolaou establishes the very core of social emancipation by shaping a new kind of political engagement. In his article 'Greek Family, Representation and the New Crisis Archive', Papanikolaou (2010: 96-98) discusses the "family turn" in recent Greek literature, film and playwriting. Family drama takes less the form of everyday 'doleful complaints', but rather stands for the metonymy of a "Greece in crisis". It is the allegorical transfiguration of a society in ordeal.

The house, and not just the family portrait, has always been present in Greek cinema. Popular films of the 1950s and 1960s showed a particular interest in the portrayal of the working and middle-class domestic interiors. Angeliki Milonaki (2012) investigates a wide range of these films. Her book *From the Courtyards to the Living-rooms*⁴ summarizes the relocation of film settings from the chaotic city of postwar reconstruction to the confined space of the modern apartment. For many years, the domestic space represented the protective shield of traditional values. In postwar Greece, it was undoubtedly a low budget film set, yet significant for its capacity to create symbolic images of the Greek society. In the years following the dictatorship, however, "home" acts more as a metaphor. Films use the house in order to allegorise the social and political landscape (*Taksidi sta Kythira/Voyage to Cythera*, Angelopoulos, 1984). "Home" can also be crafted to match the characteristics of dystopian systems of power and control (*Evrudiki BA 2037/Euridice BA 2037*, Nikolaidis, 1975). In other occasions, it may become the reflection of the mind, the outer envelope of the subconscious; or represent an utopist enclave of resistance within the very realm of authoritarianism (*Glykia Symmoria/Sweet Bunch*, Nikolaidis, 1983)⁵.

From *Stournara 288/288 Stournara Street* (Dimopoulos, 1959) to *I Apenanti/The Ones Across* (Panousopoulos, 1981) and *Spirtokouto/Matchbox* (Economides, 2003), an invisible thread connects films over time regardless of style and genre.

⁴ A documentary, based on the book by Angeliki Milonaki, describing the close relationship between the filmed and the historical reality was made by Panagiotis Kountouras and Dionisia Arvanitou in 2012.

⁵ *Sweet Bunch* is the story of four young people whose behavior brings them to the attention of the State. It is a sensuous study of the love for freedom, shedding light on alternative forms of life governance opposed to what Nikolaidis considered to be the new face of autocracy and world fascism.

From *I The Gyni na Foveite ton Antra/And the Wife Shall Revere Her Husband* (Tzavellas, 1965) to *I Tempelides tis Eforis Koiladas/The Idlers of the Fertile Valley* (Panayotopoulos, 1978) and *L* (Makridis, 2012), an “oikographic”⁶ drive seems to historically navigate across Greek cinema, mapping the domestic beyond the family realm, and not merely with a view to set the action in space. An “oikography” which, in its latest manifestations, may also discuss the *ekistic*⁷ function (Attenberg, Tsangari, 2010), take into account issues of “homelessness” (*To Agori Troei to Fagito tou Pouliou/Boy Eating the Bird’s Food*, Lygizos, 2012), problematise the interrelation between “home” and “homeland” (*Akadimia Platonos/Plato’s Academy*, Tsitos, 2009; *Hora Proelefsis/Homeland*, Tzoumerkas, 2010), or reflect the fluctuating ambiguities of national identity, the “un-homely” state of nomadic “statelessness” (*Xenia*, Koutras, 2014).

Films by Yannis Economides, Yorgos Lanthimos, Alexandros Avranas depict borderline household settings. Margarita Manta’s first feature film *Hrisoskoni/Golden Dust* (2009) explores the memory of the idealised home in a capital city that has fallen prey to real estate contractors and the rapid changes of the global world. In line with *To Proksenio tis Annas/The Matchmaking of Anna* (Voulgaris, 1972) and *Les Abysses/The Abyss*⁸ (Papatakis, 1963), Athanasios Karanikolas’s *Sto Spiti/At Home* (2014) tells the story of a housemaid in the detached emotional style of a “dry melodrama”⁹. *To Dentro kai I Kounia/A Place Called Home* (Douza, 2013) discusses a family’s many uncovered secrets with regards to Greece’s postwar political history, whereas *September* (Panayotopoulou, 2013) depicts a more intimate setting: interiors unraveling the desolation of the human soul.

⁶ An “oikos” (οἶκος) is the ancient Greek equivalent of “house” and “household”. In ancient Greece, each person was attached to an “oikos”, a correlation of the extended family unit and the agricultural and artisanal unit of production. My use of the terms “oikographic” and the “oikographic hypothesis” derives directly from this particular use of the term that distinguishes itself from “oikogeneia” which, in Modern Greek, means “family”. See section “Oikos, Polis” that follows.

⁷ The term ‘Ekistics’ (Οικιστική) is coined by Constantinos A. Doxiadis in 1942. It applies to the science of human settlements (including community planning and dwelling design) with a view, on the one hand, to geography and ecology and, on the other, to psychology, cultural anthropology and aesthetics. See also Doxiadis (1968).

⁸ The film is based on the play by Jean Genet, *Les Bonnes/The Maids*, 1947.

⁹ Athanasios Karanikolas describes his film as “dry melodrama”. For the film critic John Anderson, *At Home* proceeds to a “clinical dissection of the hypocrisy of Greece’s upper reaches” living in homes of glass and antiseptic surfaces. The full comment is available at <http://blogs.indiewire.com/thompsononhollywood/at-home-review-berlin-athanasios-karanikolas>. Posted 12 February 2014. Accessed 26 March 2014.

I argue that, beyond the generic theme of the deconstruction of the family-centeredness as a core value of Greek society, contemporary films prolong the persistent 'oikographic' drive of Greek cinema. What contemporary films add to the equation is a substantial dose of cynicism and introspection with regards to social toxicity and its moralities. They suggest a kind of social pathology performed in the rescaled field of the domestic. It is not just about the toxic family, but moreover about the 'oikos': a home not only considered as the family's external calyx, but rather constituting the essential precondition of its inner structure; a home whose lacerations and internal tensions do not just stand for the concise representation of the world, but signify, as Papanikolaou (2010: 96) points out, the world's metonymical other, the epitome of its flaws and dysfunctions.¹⁰

Greek-Cypriot filmmaker Yannis Economides, is fond of interiors, particularly houses¹¹. His cinematic narratives are limited to the basics: people and their spaces of interrelation. Homes in his films are repeatedly treated as settings of confinement. They correspond to real locations which, instead of being treated as spaces of laboratory experiments, represent genuine settings of everyday living. The film-maker's sense of the real produces accurate emotional states of being, yet destined to deliver incidents of frantic behavior: depictions of hysteria and *pathos* that enact contemporary versions of Greece's ancient drama legacy. These instances can be clearly seen in all his films, especially in *Spirotokouto/Matchbox* (2003) and *Macherovgaltis/Knifer* (2010). *Matchbox* explicitly suggests a collectivity's rapid decline to insanity from within a petty-bourgeois home. In *Knifer* though, existential vacuity is "housed" behind locked doors. It is secluded inside living-cages of impunity (immunity). In what follows, I examine these two films that I consider to be in line with the hypothesis of an "oikographic" drive which overlaps and exceeds what is now habitually regarded as the dysfunctional family *diegesis*.

HOME SWEET HOME: FROM BOX TO CAGE

Matchbox, Economides's first feature film, takes place in a working-class apartment in Korydallos, over a short period of time (in less than 24 hours). Situated in the greater Athens area, Korydallos is a northern suburb of Piraeus and home to the Korydallos prisons: a crucial choice of location. Like the

¹⁰ Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) also confronts the microcosm of the home with the macrocosm of the world. In his 1916 novel *The Home and the World*, he sets the story of a romantic relationship involving three people during the *Swadeshi movement* era in Bengal in India. Literally meaning 'home-made' or indigenous, the *Swadeshi* movement marks the period of concerted Indian demand for self-government and the boycott of British goods.

¹¹ Online interview with Yannis Economides and Errikos Litsis available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ac7k49hdvgE>. Accessed 14 April 2014.

detainees in the nearby prison, the “protagonists can’t afford the luxury of an Odyssean journey to escape or work out their alienation, but are forced to deal with it in the place where it was created and continues to exist” (Akritas 2008). The film tells the story of Dimitris (Errikos Litsis), a middle aged, quarrelsome *paterfamilias* who owns a cafe and has ambitious plans to expand his business into a chic piano-restaurant lounge. He and his disgruntled wife, Maria (Eleni Kokkidou), have two adult children who still live with them. His mentally disabled sister also lives under the same roof. Throughout the film, the apartment is being transformed into a battlefield, with verbal and physical violence unsettling the viewers’ nerves. The family members are ferociously aggressive, screaming, swearing, and insulting each other. Additional characters arrive and take part in this endless chain of physical and psychological abuse. The architectural delimitation of space restricts the characters’ body movement. Their indoor detention also affects their mental condition. The protagonists are physically, intellectually and emotionally confined within the limits of their toxic surrounding. Economides’s style enforces this idea. The film-maker uses mostly close-ups and medium shots. The carefully composed establishing shots do not precede, but rather follow the close-ups. Their function is thus modified. This happens because the establishing shots do not just display the elements needed for the scene to function by merely setting up the relationship between the important figures and objects. On the contrary, they are used in a way that rather cancels and/or invalidates the information provided in the preceding close-up. These establishing shots are introduced by a moment of stillness during which the characters are filmed while just staring at each other; a brief lull before the storm that eventually bursts out on the screen.

The opening sequence of the film is symptomatic of this procedure. Dimitris yells over the phone in a long take sequence of his face. His eyes are covered with thick glasses. Sweat drips down his cheeks. The close-up cuts to a long establishing shot of the entire living room. Dimitris is now in the background, behind a coffee table, with a pile of clothes next to it. A vacuum cleaner also stands on the right-hand side of the frame (**Fig 1**). Dimitris sits in his underwear amidst bits and pieces that can be identified as signifiers of femininity. The first close-up cuts out the character from his immediate domestic environment, thus allowing him to perform verbal stereotypes of virility, namely a macho, authoritarian way to address his employees over the phone. The long shot which follows liberates him from the tight framing of the close-up, only to bring him face to face with another kind of “tightness”: the one determined by his own chronic sense of failure and the constant attacks launched against his already afflicted ego.



Fig 1: Dimitris in his living-room: close-up and establishing shot

The characters do indeed experience a double confinement, both within the camera frame and the apartment room. Architecture in conjunction with the use of the close-up suggests different layers of enclosure. The characters are not only subjected to chamber detainment (within the matchbox), but also to camera frame delimitations (within the black box).¹² As Afroditi Nikolaidou (2014) observes:

The close-ups are overloaded with information, overflowing with tension, bursting with cries whereby the characters seek to exceed the imposed limits [...]. All elements, both living and nonliving, strive to exceed the frame

¹² The cinema's technical means of recording goes back to the Latin *camera*, the 'vaulted room', also used as a short form of 'camera obscura'.

and ultimately expand beyond the walls of the apartment. (My translation from Greek)

Nikolaidou discerns a diastolic, expansive force expressed mainly by the vocal explosions and the abrupt movements that constantly push the limits of the frame outwards.

Nevertheless, tight shots in *Matchbox* coincide with tight direction mainly operating around the face and the mouth. The *mise-en-scène* is engineered to serve the articulation of speech. The abuse of meaning and language – the verbal carnage that Economides describes as “accurate but never provocative”¹³ – together with the useless and constant repetition of phrases and words, epitomizes the symptom of a society stripped of its language, its vital relation to reason (*logos*) and consequently to verbal communication and speech. With *logos* as the basic social bond broken down, *polis* dismantles in scattered pieces. The expansive force of the verbal and physical overflows within the *oikos* meets its contractive other, a shrinking force empowered by language disorder and mental dysfunction. The outside world is plunged and condemned inside the closed circuit of the house-hold psychosis.

When *Knifer* was first screened in Greece, critics detected signs of moderation and verbal softening: the insults were fewer than in *Matchbox*, while at the same time, Dimitris Katsaitis’s black and white cinematography¹⁴ constituted a key determinant for the aesthetic appreciation of the film. *Knifer* is the story of three people: a couple, Alekos and Gogo (played by Vangelis Mourikis and Maria Kallimani) and the husband’s adult nephew, Nikos (Stathis Stamoulakatos). After his father’s death, Nikos leaves his natal Ptolemaida, the smoked lignite mines and the cooling towers of the nearby power plant. He moves in the west suburbs of Athens, and more specifically in an area known as ‘Wild West’. His uncle lets him live in the basement studio of his house and gives him a job: to watch after the two purebreds that watch after the house. Nikos becomes the daytime watcher of the watchers. Confined in the house yard, he is tied down by an invisible leash. If in *Matchbox*, Korydallos prison was never explicitly mentioned

¹³ In an interview given to the Greek Public Television (ET 1, 16 December 2010), Economides describes the dialogues in his films as ‘natural and truthful’ while at the same time he refers to the ‘pornographic use of language’ as a means for inflicting harm. The comment is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ljTi79Zd5dA>. Accessed 15 April 2014.

¹⁴ The film is in black and white, except for the extract from Spiros Peresiadis’s play *Golfo*. Economides’s short film *Stadiaki Veltiosi tou Kairou/Gradual Improvement of the Weather* (1992) is also in black and white. *Matchbox* was initially intended to be shot in black and white, but the idea was then considered inappropriate for this particular film and was abandoned. The information is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ac7k49hdvgE>. Accessed 14 April 2014.

– although the apartment was metaphorically a prison – in *Knifer*, the house is systematically filmed as a cage, behind railings, barbed wire fences, and latticed windows.

During the first sixteen minutes of the film, while Nikos still lives in his hometown, pursuing a dull, and seemingly aimless, everyday routine, Economides films mostly outdoors with large depth of field and high contrast. These are long sequence-shots that form fragmented, self-contained units in an altogether discontinuous chain of random scraps of life; units arranged like pieces of an abstract puzzle. Katsaitis's black and white cinematography accentuates the picturesque qualities of the urban and peri-urban industrial north embellishing an otherwise less noticeable landscape. Human figures walk in the smoky landscape, crossing the frame from one side to the other. In one of the most characteristic shots of the film, Nikos walks across the frame with his body slightly hunched. His figure is reflected in a pool of rainwater. A forest of high voltage pylons and their reflection slices the images in vertical strips. Cables carve the landscape and the sky. Further back, an imposing chain of mountains divides the image in two horizontal sections. The overall allure of the picture finds an unexpected mirror-image in a photo showing the artist Robert Smithson¹⁵ walking along his famous earthwork, *The Spiral Jetty* (1970) (**Fig 2**). The land artist had expressed the wish to be filmed while walking along the jetty 'in order for the spectator to get the scale of the sculpture in terms of erratic steps' (Flam 1996: 148). Likewise, the walking figures in this first part of *Knifer* rescale the industrial site of Ptolemaida in terms of their own erratic steps. Their gait shapes the landscape by providing a sense of distance and depth. It measures the gap that separates people on the screen, the vacuum they seek to wipe out.



¹⁵ Robert Smithson (1938-1973) was an American artist, famous for his use of photography in relation to sculpture and Land Art. The earthwork *Spiral Jetty* is accompanied by an essay (1972) and a film documenting the project.



Fig 2: Above: Nikos in *Knifer*. Below: Robert Smithson walking on the *Spiral Jetty* (photo Gianfranco Gorgoni)

With the young man arriving in Athens, the film obtains focus, a central reference point. Nikos, the errant, adopts a more sedentary behaviour. At the same time, the erratic syntax of the film also obtains a teleological orientation. The shots still display an episodic and discontinuous line of editing, but something henceforth unites them. An internal guiding line crosses through. Ultimately, the film 'is heading' somewhere. The house does not only 'domesticate' the characters, but also the film's structure. It acts as an epicenter, an agent of (ar)rest that affects both the narrative and the structural features of the film.

Economides uses over-framing techniques throughout the film. Windows and doors, walls, beams, various objects of interior decoration, all participate in enclosing the actors in sub-divisions of the frame in ways that produce artificial (en)close-ups. Often, an out-of-focus element appears on the foreground. Its blurred outline 'pushes' the figures backwards or on either side of the frame. The building is treated here as a cinematic tool; architecture, as a framing device. The structural elements of architecture either separate the actors in distinct parts of the frame or reunite them in cut-off and, sometimes, remote sections of the image. Economides systematically films the characters behind layers of fences, protective shutters and railings that determine the house as a cage. The house's transparent surfaces reflect and multiply the grilles. The caging-effect is thus emphasised (**Fig 3**). A false sense of shelter is contrived and reproduced.



Fig 3: Inside the cage-house

In the closing sequence of the film, a wide-angle take of the exterior of the house cuts to an almost identical (except for some slight details) wide-angle take of the same exterior. Between the two shots, the time has flown by. Then, the camera moves inside the house. Nikos stands in the kitchen with his back turned to the camera (Economides films him through an aquarium), while his wife downstairs (his uncle's wife) puts the kids in the car. He drinks a glass of water slowly, then puts the glass away and activates the rolling shutters. The keys jingle in his hands. He and his family are about to leave. The knifer washes his conscience clean of his uncle's murder and succeeds his way into petty-bourgeois triviality. He comes out of the frame and locks the house, leaving the camera standing still in front of the pulled-down shutters. This closing shot is reminiscent of the opening scene of *Matchbox*¹⁶. In this early moment of the trilogy¹⁶, Maria stood in

¹⁶ In *Matchbox* (2003), *I Psychi sto Stoma/Soul Kicking* (2006) and *Knifer* (2010), Economides scrutinizes the Greek society. The films share a common thematic axis as

front of the kitchen sink drinking a glass of water. She then threw the glass in the sink smashing it violently to pieces. With the *Knifer's* closing shot, the trilogy's narrative comes to a full circle. Something has eventually come to an end. In the meantime, the abrupt explosion of the glass has been replaced by the meticulous and calm movements of a neat routine. The deconstruction of the *oikos* has successfully been exchanged for the rhetoric of reconstruction to the benefit of a murderous normality, credited with success and accepted by all and sundry.

OIKOS, POLIS

In his 2006 book, *The Household as the Foundation of Aristotle's Polis*, Brendan Nagle argues that:

The polis households analyzed by Aristotle in his *Politics* and *Ethics* had little in common with the households of contemporary developed states. For Aristotle, modern households would not have been households at all [...] but weak reflections of the powerful, independent institutions that were the 'oikoi of poleis'. (2006: 2)

Aristotle stresses the role of the *oikos* far beyond the traditional nuclear family. Unlike the consumer-oriented reproductive unit of modern times, the powerful socio-economic and political entity of antiquity to which the household corresponded, included relatives, orphaned children, slaves and animals.¹⁷ Together with wife and children, they all belonged to a wide-ranging social construct, fluid in its composition, and subject to power relations embedded in its structure. Essentially self-sustained for its subsistence and that of its members, it depended on material resources originating from inside the household. At the same time, it was expected to internalize and reproduce the moral character and ideology of the state (the *politieia*) in its micro-environment. Considered as such, *oikos* was the social framework of ownership and wealth production, as well as the chief mentor of the public *ethos* (Cox 1998).¹⁸

well as a taste for subversive irony and sarcasm. In this sense, they can be considered as a trilogy. Economides's penetrating look also sets the tone in *Mikro Psari/Stratos* (2014), the film-maker's fourth feature film, presented in the competition section of the 64th Berlin International Film Festival.

¹⁷ For Angela Mitropoulos: "The closest approximation to the word and meaning of 'family' in Greek antiquity was *genea*, which connoted lineage but also the temporal sense of generation [...]. The current Greek term for family – 'οικογένεια' – points to the historical reconstruction required to specify the strictly modern understanding of the family as a correlation of genealogy and household" (2012: 49).

¹⁸ See also, Nevett (1999 & 2010).

Aspects of household management have been broadly examined, particularly in the field of cross-cultural anthropology. For Robert Netting (1984), the household in most pre-industrial agrarian societies around the Mediterranean basin and in western Asia is an entity of production, distribution, transmission, biological reproduction and co-residence. Tom Gallant adds a significant sixth parameter to these five aspects: consumption. With regards to the Greek paradigm, he argues that the household in ancient Greece is “a collectivity of individuals who were usually, but not necessarily, related to one another and who formed the central unit of production/consumption and reproduction” nevertheless continuously subjected to a number of reconfigurations and changes (Gallant 1991: 12-13).

For Brendan Nagle, it is necessary to consider the Greek household beyond the sphere of the private suggested by both Netting and Gallant. For Nagle, what gives the ancient Greek household its special character is the “interpenetration of economic, political, social, moral and religious aspects of life [...], in other words the melding – as he says – of public and private realms” (2006: 10). The household’s physical space remains fundamentally separate from the public space. It maintains its physical delimitations. However, as a *noetic* construct, the *polis* both nests in and embraces the *oikos*. The household is defined as the place where the fundamentals of the city-state are produced and reflected. What is bred within the framework of the *oikos* is conveyed to the *polis* in order for the *polis* to turn it back to the household in the form of a moral code of acceptable behavior. This two-way process is what Nagle describes as the interpenetration and merging of the public and the private.

For Aristotle, *oikos* is the basic social unit of the *polis* and the household, the foundation of politics. Nevertheless, *oikos* and *polis* belong in different spheres. In the ancient Greek world, *oikos* was juxtaposed to *polis* and, technically, *oikonomia* (the laws that govern the household) to *politikon* (the administration of the city-state). Their connection could be better described as one of mutual desire: the *oikos* seeks out for the *polis*, inasmuch as the *polis* performs structural analogies with regards to the *oikos*. Thus, the *polis* is not the built up version of the *oikos* but rather its expanded field. The political is embedded in the household, inasmuch as the household in the political form of organization of the state.

In her book *Contract and Contagion. From Biopolitics to Oikonomia*, Angela Mitropoulos (2012) examines the notional distance separating *oikonomia* in antiquity (household politics) and the *economics* of households in current usage. According to Mitropoulos, the Aristotelian diptych *oikos/polis* implies a subsequent pragmatic division between the management of the *oikos* and the administration of the *polis*. She emphasizes the fact that management of the

ancient *oikos* (oiko-nomia) is by no means an early form of the management of the wealth of nations (economy), and explains:

Where the ancients distinguished between economics and politics and located the former in the household and where, across the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, the household and factory were affectively and architecturally demarcated, Fordism and the Keynesian welfare state put them back together as a form of social accounting in the register of the family wage. (2012: 51)

In her article 'Oikopolitics, and Storms', Mitropoulos (2009: 66-82) coins the term '*oikopolitics*' in order to unfold an analysis of the reemerging of economy and politics. For this to happen, she argues, the household management and its micro-economics should be able to stand for the cornerstone paradigm of a nation's political governance in a way that one rescales and reflects the other in measurable criteria. Although the core of her argument remains the Aristotelian fraction, Mitropoulos invites the readers to rethink about the possible contemporary intersections of household and nation management. The concept of *oikopolitics* does not simply point to a blurring of the classical distinction between the public realm of politics and the private domain of the household. It establishes the possibility of a politics of the *oikos*, a socio-political horizon whose possible forms of relation are those of the national state conceived as home, the raising of a properly political subject on the grounds of the simultaneously familial and national.¹⁹

Following its constitution as a free nation, Greece was confronted with this old specter. Whether related to nepotism or to what we call in Greece the role of 'tzakia', literally fireplaces referring to a handful of notable *oikoi* that dominate the political and economic administration of the country from the 19th century onwards, the intervention of the *oikos* in the matters of the *polis* represents an enduring issue. Yet, in present-day Greece, while experts engineer political scenarios of economic recovery in the government's communication headquarters, the wide majority of households suffer from a dramatic income decline. Greek contemporary cinema absorbs the turbulences of a society in a state of expanded schizophrenia. The films assimilate, both in their narrative and cinematic structures, the paradoxes and absurdities of such bipolarities. Beyond the need to create allegorical links between the current national crisis and the

¹⁹ Mitropoulos suggests a "mega-*oikos*", an "*oikoplex*", or an "*oikostructure*", in other words a "world household", a "nexus of race, gender, class, sexuality, and nation constituted through the premise of the productive household" as a possible contemporary reading of the ancient *oikos*. For more details, the article is available online at <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/gbs/summary/v003/3.1.mitropoulos.html>. Accessed 12 April 2014.

deconstruction of home rhetorics as the symptom of the societal collapse, I claim that many contemporary films perform cinematic drama versions of the dialectical merging of *oikos* and *polis*.

Neither the box-house in *Matchbox* nor the cage-house in *Knifer* is meant to merely set the action in space. The portrayal of the *oikos* goes beyond the scenographic function. The house in Economides's films maps and operates mechanisms of power. It is itself a structure of power manifested through the physical, psychological and verbal violence it enclaves and reproduces. The camera framings systematically duplicate and over-determine the enclosing function of the house. Close-ups and over-framing techniques are agents of contraction. They obey a centripetal force that constantly brings the outside in, domesticates the errant, and concentrates the scattered. The *polis* seems to be contained in the house. The dysfunctional *oikos* depicted in the films is not merely the quantifiable reduced-size model of a *polis* in crises, the mirror-image of society's breakdown. It is the body where lurks the soul of the *polis*.

TOWARDS AN OIKO-POLITICAL CINEMA

Ekonomides claims to be particularly interested in Greece and the Greeks²⁰. *Matchbox* and *Knifer* make use of a particular set of cinematic tools on the grounds of an aesthetic that places the Greek household in the epicenter of both form and narrative (*oiko*-aesthetic). These particular two films organize *oiko*-systems administrated by their own set of (f)laws and disorders while performing at the same time a politics of the language. They are realistic depictions of ordinary individuals represented in living spaces contaminated by a disintegrating germ that they have themselves incubated. Economides attempts a critical approach to their existence as well as to the society of people they give rise to.

The conceptual shift from the family to the house, places the theme of the *oikos* in a historical continuity which allows contemporary concerns to be placed in perspective. It exemplifies the scope of the study beyond the question of the family, thus allowing for inclusion in the corpus, of films that reflect alternative modes of living. It gives emphasis to the role of architecture that allows the camera to negotiate space narratives in relation to the characters' evolution. Last but not least, it promotes the dialectics between *oikos* and *polis* which brings the underlying political dimension of the *oikographic* drive to light.

However, by making a case of the figure of the "noxious *oikos*", contemporary film-makers might be accused of displacing the debate on the political, from the social arena to the realm of the affect, thus reviving a household epos which

²⁰ Online interview available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3FKW_x7iCaM. Accessed 14 April 2014.

eventually brings to a standstill a whole era of explicit ideological film-making and strongly politicized discourses. I claim that by shifting the focus on the house, contemporary Greek film-makers do not turn away from the political scene, but rather invent an innovative narrative that modernizes the *oikographic* drive which historically navigates across Greek cinema. Rather than using the domestic as the displaced terrain for social criticism, the films tell stories that perform contemporary versions of *oikopolitical* merging. Gaston Bachelard had claimed that there is ground for taking the house as a tool for analysis of the human soul (1964: 37). There might also be ground for taking the house as a tool for analysis of the collective subconscious; for the diagnosis of a political subject in search of his lost soul.

REFERENCES

- Akritas J. (2008), 'Greek Film: *Spirtokouto*', *Hellenic Antidote* [online blog] Posted 30 January, available at <http://hellenicantidote.blogspot.fr/2008/01/greek-film-spirtokouto.html>. Accessed 19 March 2014.
- Alexiou, P. (2011), 'Greek Cinema, Emerging from a Landscape in the Mist: 51th International Film Festival', *Senses of Cinema* [online] available at <http://sensesofcinema.com/2011/festival-reports/greek-cinema-emerging-from-a-landscape-in-the-mist-the-51st-thessaloniki-international-film-festival>. Accessed 12 April 2014.
- Anderson, J. (2014), 'Berlin Review: *At Home* a Quiet Manifesto with Political Anger Loud and Clear', *Indiewire* [online], 12 February, <http://blogs.indiewire.com/thompsononhollywood/at-home-review-berlin-athanasios-karanikolas>. Accessed 26 March 2014.
- Bachelard, G. (1964), *Poetics of Space*, Boston: Beacon Press.
- Chalkou, M. (2012), 'A New Cinema of 'Emancipation': Tendencies of Independence in Greek Cinema of the 2000s', *Interactions: Studies in Communication & Culture*, 3: 2, pp. 243–261.
- Cox, C. A. (1998), *Household Interests: Property, Marriage Strategies, and Family Dynamics in Ancient Athens*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Demopoulos, M. (2011), 'Neo aima kyla stis fleves tou Ellinikou cinema'/'New Blood is Flowing in the Veins of Greek Cinema', *Greek Film Journal Cinema*, N° 219.

- Desbarats, C. (ed) (2001), *Derrière la Porte/Behind the Door*, t. 1: *Les secrets de famille au cinéma/Family Secrets in Cinema*, St Sulpice sur Loire: ACOR.
- Doxiadis C. A. (1968), *Ekistics: An Introduction to the Science of Human Settlements*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Economides, Y. (2010), interview by ET1, 16 December, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IjTi79Zd5dA>. Accessed 15 April 2014.
- _____ & E. Litsis. (2010), interview by SevenArt. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ac7k49hdvgE>. Accessed 14 April 2014.
- Flam, Jack (ed) (1996), *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.
- Gallant, T. (1991), *Risk and Survival in Ancient Greece: Reconstructing the Rural Domestic Economy*, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
- Gledhill, C. (1987), *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, London: British Film Institute.
- Hardwood, S. (1997), *Family Fictions: Representations of the Family in 1980s Hollywood Cinema*, London: Macmillan Press.
- Humphries, R. (2002), *The American Horror Film: An Introduction*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Karalis, V. (2012), *A History of Greek Cinema*, London, New Delhi, New York, Sydney: Bloomsbury.
- Kerkinos, D. (2011), 'Young Greek Cinema, Greek cinema against social decay', in the catalogue of the 46th Karlovy Vary International Film Festival and online available at <http://www.kviff.com/en/about-festival/history-past-years/2011/program/?s=341>. Accessed 12 April 2014.
- Leibman, N. C. (1995), *Living Room Lectures: The Fifties Family in Film and Television*, Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Levy, E. (1991), 'The American Dream of Family in Film: From Decline to a Comeback', *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 22: 2, pp. 187-204.
- Milonaki, A. (2012), 'Apo tis avles sta salonia: Icones tou astikou chorou ston Elliniko dimofili kinimatografo (1950-1970)'/ 'From the Courtyards to the

Living-rooms': Representations of Urban Space in Greek Popular Cinema (1950-1970), Thessaloniki: University Studio Press.

Mitropoulos, A. (2009), 'Oikopolitics, and Storms', in *Muse* 3:1 'Global South', pp. 66-82.

_____ (2012), *Contract and Contagion. From Biopolitics to Oikonomia*, Wivenhoe, New York, Port Watson: Minor Compositions.

Nagle, B. (2006), *The Household as the Foundation of Aristotle's Polis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Netting, R., R. R. Wilk & E. J. Arnould (eds) (1984), *Households: Comparative and Historical Studies of the Domestic Group*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.

Nevett, L. C. (1999), *House and Society in the Ancient Greek World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

_____ (2010), *Domestic Space of Classical Antiquity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nikolaidou, A. (2014), 'AFTO DEN EINAI I ATHINA: I Poli pou Fenete, i Poli pou Den Fenete, i Poli pou Perissevei... / THIS IS NOT ATHENS: The City that appears, the City that does not appear, the City in Excess...', *Journal of Greek Film Studies Filmicon* (online blog) available at <http://filmiconjournal.com/blog/post/10/ayto-den-einai-athina>. Accessed 12 April 2014.

Papanikolaou, D. (2010), 'Kati trehi me tin ikoyenia'/'Greek Family, Representation and the New Crisis Archive', *The Book's Journal*, vol. 1, pp. 96-98.

Poirson-Dechonne, M. (ed) (2009), 'Portraits de famille', *CinémAction*, N°132, Condé-sur-Noireau: Corlet Publications.

Pomerance, M. (ed) (2008), *A Family Affair: Cinema calls Home*, London: Wallflower Press.

Rilke, R. M. (1992), *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, (tr. MD Herter Norton), New York and London: WW Norton & Co.

Rose, S. (2011), 'Attenberg, Dogtooth and the weird wave of Greek cinema', *The Guardian* [online], Saturday 27 August. Available at

<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/aug/27/attenberg-dogtooth-greece-cinema>. Accessed 19 March 2014.

Williams T. (1996), *Hearths of Darkness: The Family in the American Horror Film*, Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.