

BOOK REVIEW

**Contemporary Greek Film
Cultures: Weird Wave and
Beyond**

Journal of Greek Media & Culture

Special Issue edited by

**Vangelis Calotychos, Lydia Papadimitriou, Yannis
Tzioumakis**

Vol. 2, Number 2, 2016

Petrina Vasileiou

Independent Researcher

Georgia Aitaki

University of Gothenburg

This special issue of the *Journal of Greek Media & Culture* engages with one of Greek Film Studies' most recent obsession, the Weird Wave, but also promises to address contemporary Greek film cultures beyond this very powerful point of reference. Edited by Vangelis Calotychos (Brown University), Lydia Papadimitriou (Liverpool John Moores University) and Yannis Tzioumakis (University of Liverpool), the issue contains six articles based on reworked contributions presented at the Contemporary Greek Film Cultures conference in 2015 (8-9 May, Seattle). In general, one could say that it is characterized by some of the dominant concerns already addressed by other scholars of Greek cinema (including a noticeable emphasis on the study of certain works and filmmakers). However, its significance can be located in its attempt to further disambiguate the contested relationship between a given body of cinematic works and its sociocultural, political and economic context; in this case, we are talking about the relationship between the emergence of the Weird Wave (and its aesthetics, thematics and politics) and the financial crisis that has been defining both the perception and the reality of Greece since 2009. In addition to these articles, the

issue contains an interview with Athina Rachel Tsangari, where the issue's editors and the filmmaker truly go beyond the notion of the Weird Wave and reveal the value of the creator's perspective for a more complete understanding of what contemporary Greek cinema is a case of.

This endeavour, the effort towards a deeper understanding of the appeal of the Weird Wave, paradoxically begins with an article which actually has little to do with contemporary (with a narrow understanding of the term) Greek cinema. Panayiota Mini's contribution focuses on the post-1974 historical panoramas, that is feature films whose plots spanned many periods, as an example of another era's prominent cinematic wave which has left its trace in both filmmaking practices, as well as critical and popular consciousness. The author registers a variety of ways in which history appears in films such as *O thiasos/The Travelling Players* (1975), *To livadi pou dakrizei/The Weeping Meadow* (2004), *Petrina hronia/Stone Years* (1985) and *Kristallines nihtes/Crystal Nights* (1992) and argues that the above examples positioned themselves away from classical cinema's paradigm of historical developments as centered around goal-oriented heroes. Mini discusses the afore-mentioned films as instances of David Bordwell's notion of "supraindividual historical causality", which emphasizes the "impersonal forces" which motivate history, the plot's logic and its formal substantiation (p. 135). The inclusion of the post-1974 Greek historical panorama in this anti-paradigm is associated with a gradual depoliticization of the auteur Greek cinema, a conclusion which very subtly introduces some of the concerns which are expressed by other authors in this special issue, namely the question of the politics (in its various interpretations) in/of contemporary Greek films and waves.

In the article that follows, Tatjana Aleksić asks one of the most obvious and at the same time powerful questions that can lead an enquiry into the specificity of the Greek Weird Wave; that is, why is it so focused on family? She challenges the idea that there is a direct connection between the contemporary Greek crisis and the emergence of films such as *Kynodontas/Dogtooth* (Lanthimos, 2009) and *Miss Violence* (Avranas, 2013). Aleksić recognizes these films as possible to be read with a particular social reality in mind (she even hints towards the possibility of such intentionality on behalf of the creators); however, she promotes as a more plausible scenario that the family-centered plots point towards a more decontextualized critique which the creators want to bring to the light. As the author explains, "the aesthetics of confinement and deliberate atemporaneity of their family stories point to a more universal link between family and society regardless of the ideological or political context" (p. 156). She reads *Dogtooth* as a film primarily characterized by an unsettling feeling caused by claustrophobic aesthetics and atemporal settings. Violence becomes a defining element of the domestic and familial environment through absurd (but at the same time so

painfully recognizable) relations of dependence and coercion. In this sense, she does not see any obvious link with a given social reality; on the contrary, she suggests that such an approach is characterized by a sort of ideological flexibility, the kind of critique that can be applied to different contexts. In *Miss Violence*, the film's depiction of a sick familial environment sheds light on another instance of relations of power associated with a pathologized image of the institution of family. The overall argument is that despite (or maybe because of) these overly confined aesthetics, the films cannot unproblematically be associated with one reading or one direction of critique; on the contrary, it seems that this feeling of confinement eventually leads to wider and flexible understandings concerning what the films are a critique of.

The two articles that follow are concerned with a common presupposition regarding films that allegedly belong to the Weird Wave, that of their potential for political critique. Reading films such as Lanthimos's *Dogtooth* and Avranas's *Miss Violence* as dystopian allegories has tempted critics and analysts to see in them voices of criticism toward a certain (topical or universal) status quo. However, it is important to ask ourselves to what extent such expectations are reasonable – or at least fuelled by the films themselves. Along these lines, Rosa Barotsi challenges *Dogtooth's* reading as a critique against neoliberalism, arguing that class-related issues remain in fact outside its scope. Tonia Kazakopoulou, on the other hand, attempts a gendered reading of *Dogtooth* and *Miss Violence*, with an attentive eye on how the notion of motherhood is treated within the larger frame of patriarchal power. Kazakopoulou argues that the films do not manage to escape a “heritage of misogynist representations, even within their contemporary, self-conscious and knowingly examined modes and politics of representation and narration” (p. 191). What we have here, then, is two examples of scholarly discourse which dispute the films' progressive tone and provide us with analyses which allow us to discover even more aspects of the complex politics of popular and widely acclaimed films.

The issue's see-saw game with the relationship between Greek social reality and its cinematic appropriation continues with an article which follows closely the connection between contemporary films and the culture of recession. More specifically, Ina Karkani's analysis works toward supporting the existence of a 'cinema of crisis', albeit without an emphasis on its Greekness; through a comparative study of Athina Rachel Tsangari's *Attenberg* and Jaime Rosales's *Hermosa Juventud/Beautiful Youth* (2014) Karkani establishes a link between representations of public and private space with the Southern European experience from the recent financial crisis. Images of urban recession (shot in locations affected by the crisis) and the relationship between time and subjectivity (evident through visual choices and the manipulation of spatial powers) constitute according to Karkani key characteristics of a recession-

inspired cultural production which can be read as explicit response to a very specific socio-political condition.

The issue's collection of articles concludes with a very interesting overview of an understudied aspect of contemporary cinematic production in Greece. Mikela Fotiou introduces us to the Greek horror film by moving in two directions. First, she examines what 'the horror genre' means for the context of Greece and tries to identify characteristics that can allow us to speak of the Greek horror film as 'a thing'. A look on its past, by means of the horror elements present in Greek films from the 1950s onwards, and its present, through its association with crisis discourses, shed light on the general horror film culture in Greece. Secondly, Fotiou delivers a typology of recurring themes (including for instance religious iconography, rural and urban settings, humor and nationalistic discourses) and basically opens the way for closer analyses of the genre, its creators and specific films which have acquired some kind of emblematic status for the genre.

What follows is an extended interview with Athina Rachel Tsangari, which undoubtedly is one of the most attractive parts of this special issue, not only because the reader wants to hear the voice of an artist (in juxtaposition with the more academic approaches to contemporary Greek film cultures that preceded), but also because Tsangari is considered a huge part of what has been established as the Weird Wave. The interview is as stimulating and rich as promised in the introduction of the special issue and truly delivers insights which are not covered by the articles.

The interview begins with questions about Tsangari's activities in the US (including her studies, teaching, and research). The interview adopts the narrative of a life story, where Tsangari is given the space to express and reflect on her ideas and life events, addressing questions such as how living in the US has moulded her life and work. Tsangari places special emphasis on the role of serendipity in her life (her acquaintance with Lanthimos, her visits to Greece etc.). In general, Tsangari comes across as an honest and reflective creator, daring to admit that chance has played a big role in the turns that her life has taken. Apart from her connection with the US, Tsangari is asked about her relationship with Greece and the so-called Greek Weird Wave and is given the opportunity to position herself with regard to the Greekness of this particular body of work, as well as its production and distribution context. As expected, she feels uncomfortable with the label and, instead, chooses to focus on other characteristics associated with this particular body of works, such as the notions of solidarity, collaboration and independence. She explains that she does not like "to speak on behalf of a so-called 'Greek wave' as we don't see each other as part of a wave" and instead prefers to "[...] talk about a debt to a community, to a solidarity, without which our films wouldn't exist" (p. 242). Another interesting idea discussed in the interview is Tsangari's perception of the distributors which

support works like her own, whom she sees as “romantic collectors who wish to preserve and disseminate a type of cinema that is becoming extinct” (p. 243). Apart from her life trajectory and general discussions on the phenomenon of the Weird Wave, at times the focus is placed on specific aspects of her work, its defining characteristics and dominant concerns. In this sense, Tsangari talks about the cases of *Chevalier* (2015) and *Capsule* (2012), and her relationship with an all-male or all-female cast, as well as her attraction to fantasy and semi-fantasy worlds, and the symbolic power of confined spaces.

All in all, Athina Rachel Tsangari’s interview adds both variety and contrast to a special issue which is concerned with a topic which has enjoyed a proliferation of publications in recent years. The success of the interview is that it truly realizes what the title of the special issue promises, that is to go beyond the Weird Wave. The Greek Weird Wave can be recognized as the main theme of this special issue of the Journal of Greek Media and Culture, and the analysts and critics of the Weird Wave are in some way the Weird Wave itself. Tsangari’s interview succeeds in revealing the constructedness of the wave and the filmmaker appears to reject it as a project that she is working on consciously. In this manner, she invites all of us to also think beyond the label and to understand the cinematic production of a certain time period as a multifaceted cultural expression depending on social relations, as well as production and distribution opportunities and limitations, but also chance.