

## BOOK REVIEW

***The Stage of Emergency: Theatre  
and Public Performance under  
the Greek Military Dictatorship  
of 1967-1974***

by Gonda Van Steen

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**Some Thoughts on How Rewriting the  
History of New Greek Theatre  
Unearths a Genealogy of the Greek  
Weird Wave**

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The monograph *Stage of Emergency* by Gonda Van Steen is not solely a study of the theatre and public performances that took place under the dictatorship (1967-1974) – as it is indicated by its subtitle. It does not merely reshape Greek theatre history nor does it just shed light on the cultural and intellectual life of an era shaped by politics, censorship and bold creativity – as it is mentioned in the back cover. *Stage of Emergency* is so thoroughly crafted in its methodology and so rigorously and clearly written in terms of language and argumentation that at the same time constitutes a blueprint for research in cultural and art studies and invites for a passionate reading.

To be more precise, this book that converses with the works of Kostis Kornetis (2013), Dimitris Papanikolaou (2007), Philip Hager (2008) and Karen Van Dyck (1998) rekindles the discourse on the cultural production of the *eptaetia* (the

seven-year-long dictatorship) by focusing on a specific cultural field presented dialectically and in detail, namely on theatre under the Junta and public performances staged by the Junta. Moreover, the book highlights this twofold field both macroscopically and microscopically: macroscopically, because Van Steen forms typologies of writing, theatrical expression and censorship; microscopically, because she includes testimonies from prolific actors of the period and analyses of specific plays, performances and archival material. More specifically, Van Steen reveals the agents, texts, actors, venues, audiences and practices of the New Greek Theatre that converse with the, then, contemporary international trends, namely the Brechtian theatre and the Theatre of the Absurd while at the same time reevaluating the traditional culture. In terms of methodology, the asset of her work is that she combines analysis of formal elements with cultural criticism and even reception studies and mixes archival work with interviews along with a strong knowledge of the cultural context and historical background (civil war, experience of exile, and events that led to the dictatorship), addressing them all with academic soberness. Furthermore, the publishing of such a research at this point in time proves to be also extremely topical. Reading Van Steen's positioning on the significance of the theatrical production in a period of severe political and socio-economic crisis that only Agamben's "state of exception" could describe (pp. 14-25), one cannot but make the connection with recent discourses on Agamben, the Greek crisis<sup>1</sup> and the renewal of artistic activity in the fields of theatre, cinema, literature and poetry.

What becomes thus most intriguing, especially for someone with a Greek film studies background or interest, is that this book provides indispensable insight for New Greek Cinema and at the same time a genealogy of the "Greek Weird Wave"<sup>2</sup>, the cinematic wave that sprung in 2009. In this perspective, the "performative aesthetics" (Nikolaidou 2014) and the "weird aesthetics" (Poupou 2014) of contemporary Greek cinema should not be interpreted as a mere reaction to the contemporary socio-economic situation. Rather, it can be understood as the re-appropriation and re-contextualization of an aesthetic and narrative toolkit that was produced during an earlier period of crisis, one that has been initiated and explored during the New Greek Theatre and New Greek Cinema. Therefore, and not surprisingly, this book provides a possible answer as to why this particular (and not another) type of art-cinema emerged during this particular crisis at this particular moment in time.

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance Costas Douzinas (2013), Athina Athanasiou (2012) and Dimitris Papanikolaou (2017).

<sup>2</sup> A term coined and used by film critics and festival programmers, sometimes broadly and loosely used. I prefer the term the Greek New Wave, suggesting a larger, aesthetically diversified category. It is true though that the Greek Weird Wave as a label has been proved stronger in journalistic discourses and therefore sometimes becomes all-inclusive.

In what follows, I shall briefly refer to the findings and arguments of the book that I believe support the above idea. In her first chapter, Van Steen contextualizes the theatre production, places the plays within their historical and artistic context and detects the “cultural and political work that they performed” (p. 45). Van Steen stresses that there were two trends, or strategies rather, that led to the effective communication of the Greek theatre’s liberating and anti-oppression discourses, in spite of censorship: the first is the re-appropriation and re-readings of classical dramas (for instance Aeschylus’s *Prometheus*, Sophocles’s *Antigone* and *Electra* or Euripides’s *Medea*) and the second is the staging of foreign and Greek plays that appertain to a Western leftist and avant-garde tradition. The role of Koun’s *Theatro Technis/Art Theatre* in the formation of these trends, the emergence of new stages and venues (*I piramatiki skini tou Kratikou Theatrou Voriou Elladas/The Experimental Stage of the National Theatre of Northern Greece*, the *Theatro Stoa/Stoa Theatre*, *Elefthero Theatro/The Free Theatre*), the promotion of a youth culture in touch with equivalent international movements, led to a renewal of themes, to a *performative turn* and thus, to a theatrical experience that invites to a political, social and personal awakening.

Already, this chapter contains many footnotes with references<sup>3</sup> to New Greek Cinema suggesting a communication with New Greek Theatre and therefore opening up a yet unexplored field of study for Greek film history. Usually, histories of New Greek Cinema connect cinema to the political and intellectual milieu of the period, but they do not consider the formal and thematic affinities with the theatre of the time, apart from the references to Angelopoulos and his Brechtian approach. The next step to a research that picks up on Van Steen’s thread would be the examination of the role of the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ in New Greek Cinema. Not only because playwrights (remember Skourtes’s script *Dyo fengaria ton Avgousto/Double Moon in August* [Ferris, 1978] and Markaris’s collaboration with Theo Angelopoulos) and acting styles (Minas Hatzisavvas, Yorgos Kotanidis) are part of the formation of New Greek Cinema and its aftermath in the 1980s, but, most importantly, because the ‘Greek Absurdism’ (p. 58) in theatre, in my opinion, seems to be a common and nodal point in the work of Nikos Panayotopoulos, Nikos Nikolaidis, Stavros Tsiolis and Stavros Tornes. The absurd universe or absurd circumstances in the films of the above auteurs form a cultural hoard that circulated in local film festivals and film clubs, was broadcasted in National TV and even infiltrated popular culture. Hence, this yet unexplored trend might also be the lost link between the filmmakers of the recent Greek New Wave and their so-called “weirdness” and the filmmakers of the New Greek Cinema.

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<sup>3</sup> Footnotes in the Van Steen’s text are equally important and constitute a sparsely written book within the book.

In her second chapter, Van Steen discusses the mechanics of censorship, its types, its content, as well as the strategies used to circumvent it. Research on how and what is censored and banned offers a vantage point, namely it can deepen “our understanding of theater’s potential under totalitarian regimes but also stimulate theater to better define its role in fragile or threatened democracies” (p. 97). After the first period of intentional silence on the artists’ part and Seferis’s public protest statement, writers and directors turn to themes that can be interpreted allegorically, to more performative stagings and to the acculturation of ancient myths in order to circulate anti-oppressive perspectives.

Van Steen mentions in particular that preventive censorship led to the use of family relations as a theme that could easily overcome censorship prohibition. Family dynamics or “family-related absurdities” (p. 93), as Van Steen states, start to function as metaphors for the state power machinery and “the dysfunctional sociopolitical structures” (p. 93) and therefore lead to more allegorical readings of the plays. Reading about this tactic cannot but call Lanthimos’s *Kynodontas/Dogtooth* (2009) to mind and many other contemporary Greek art-films that have dealt with family as a subject. In recent Greek films, the admittedly recurrent theme of family<sup>4</sup> has been variously used as a metaphor, a metonymy and a symbol for the current socio-political system. The family malaise becomes the cause that has led the country to austerity, exemplifies the sinister and even gloomy socio-political environment, and symbolizes the structures that suppress and ‘traumatize’ – literally or not – the nation. Consequently, the thematics of family in different types of plays like *To pedi...milise/The Kid...Spoke* (1972/3) – a revue (*epitheorese*), where the three main personages are dressed like children – and Loula Anagnostaki’s *I parelasi/The Parade* (1965), where a brother and sister stay enclosed in the safety of their house, reveals a transtextual motif that has been revived during the crisis in the films of the Greek Weird Wave.<sup>5</sup>

The same can be argued for some other themes Van Steen mentions in her fourth chapter where she discusses plays like *Oi ntantades/The Nannies* (1970) by Giorgos Skourtes and *I istoria tou Ali Retzo/The Story of Ali Retzo* (1965) by Petros Markaris. Entrapment, bodily decay and deformation become means for unmasking the extreme capitalist modes deployed by the paranoid regime that combined the illusive growing prosperity of Greek society and the extreme “cosmopolitan consumerism” (p. 228) with deprivation of an open and free

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<sup>4</sup> The topic of family as a core thematic element of the films has been noted and explained by many critics and scholars. To name two, see Dimitris Kerkinos (2013) and Dimitris Papanikolaou (2010).

<sup>5</sup> Consequently, I do not think it is a coincidence that there has been a resurgent interest in staging Anagnostaki’s, Pontika’s and Skourtes’s plays by contemporary theatrical groups after 2009.

circulation of people and ideas. Entrapment and decay have metaphorical functions and stand for moral and societal degeneration. During this period, as Van Steen says, the sense of imprisonment “becomes a Greek dramatic re-creation of moral impasse and existentialist claustrophobia” (pp. 229-230). Again, many of the recent Greek films that limit their narratives in a specific locale (hotel, villa, island) re-create this sense of personal and national entrapment within the economic and political crisis.

Another strategy against censorship, mentioned by Van Steen, is the use of non-verbal components. The proliferation of gestures and postures, the use of visual symbols, of codes and tactics of nonverbal and bodily-focused expression used in order to “subvert the ‘truthful’ stage expression on which the Colonels insisted” (p. 141), enriched Greek theatre and led to a *performative turn* (pp. 140-144) already in motion in the Western theatre of the late 1960s. This set of formal techniques constitutes an apparent aesthetic tendency in most of contemporary art films such as *Park* (Sofia Exarhou, 2016) and *Nima/Thread* (Alexandros Voulgaris, 2016) – to name just the most recent.<sup>6</sup>

In her third chapter, the writer scrutinizes the intrinsic theatricality of the Junta’s rhetoric, their resort to public spectacle in order to redefine Greek history and reinforce their motto “nation, religion, family”. However, history as a theme becomes at the same time the trigger for an oppositional discourse that operates dialectically as an activist act in times of crisis. Under this prism, Van Steen delves into an analysis of the 1973 ‘popular hit’ *To megalo mas tsirko/Our Grand Circus* (written by Iakovos Kambanelles) as a paradigmatic play that dramatizes the people’s relation to history and points to the ideological impact of the conflict between vernacular memory and official history in everyday life (pp. 189-226). Dialectically opposed to the grand circus of the Colonels’s heroic Greek nation of a timeless grandeur and of historic continuity that exposed “history as creed” (p. 220), Kambanelles’s *Grand Circus* – performed by Tzeni Karezi and Kostas Kazakos – tells stories of self-sacrifice, stories of simple men and forgotten heroes of a nation that suffered many different kinds of oppression. This reworking of history proves to be a way for coping with and understanding the present but also an activist act, a way to resist to it. However, Van Steen is very careful in noticing that the “discontinuous fragments of history and patterns of victimization made up a new continuity, not of the fetish of glory but of loss” (p. 224).

The current use of history and memory as a means for coping with crisis has been pointed by anthropologists and cultural critics.<sup>7</sup> As Knight asserts the

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<sup>6</sup> I discuss extensively the performative aesthetics of the Greek New Wave in Nikolaidou (2014).

<sup>7</sup> See Daniel M. Knight (2012) and also Mimina Pateraki (2017).

“sewing together of past events with present circumstances serves numerous purposes, including endorsing collective suffering, identifying a common target of blame and reminding people that current circumstances can be overcome” (2015: 234). This trope of coping with crisis was a core thematic element in New Greek Cinema, especially in the oeuvre of Theo Angelopoulos and his long duration shot that literally put in proximity different historical times, History and history, connecting the present with the past on screen. Similarly contemporary Greek cinema historicizes the present, however not in an evident way. Most of the times, a certain type of historicization becomes visible through the use of archives or through the revival of props from the past that create a certain type of cultural and historical proximity. Furniture, old machinery, posters and wallpapers, old images and videos invade the décor and narrative universe of the Greek New Wave connecting the past with the present. Papanikolaou has explained the tendency of the archival use as an effort to “critique, undermine and performatively disturb the very logics through which the story of Greece – the narrative of its national, political, sociocultural cohesion in synchrony and diachrony – has until now been told” (2011, online). These films or the elements that stem from this tendency conduct an attempt towards a genealogy of the crisis. This genealogical cinematic mode (found, in stylistically different films like *Hora proelefsis/Homeland* [Tzoumerkas, 2010], *Tetarti 04:45/Wednesday 04:45* [Alexiou, 2015], *I eonia epistrofi tou Antoni Paraskeva/The Eternal Return of Antonis Paraskevas* [Psykou, 2013]) does not mean a linear and neat construction of the past. It is more a radical scavenging, an excavating process where props, materials and images of the past and the present mingle and come to the fore denoting a trauma that destabilizes logic, logos and causality.

To sum up, Gonda Van Steen’s book restages the history of New Greek Theatre by conducting a “cultural history of the dictatorship” (p. 304). Her work is valuable not only because it traces out a legacy of practices and thematic and aesthetic mechanisms that constitute the theatre of the last quarter of the twentieth century as she asserts in the last paragraph of her book. It is also valuable because, as I suggest above, the impact and legacy of this cultural production might be detected in other arts like cinema. Finally, it is also politically valuable since it provides proof for a moment in history when an art form had the dynamic and the momentum to shape social consciousness, to promote democratic solutions, to be a transformative power. In that sense, the book also stands as an excavation of our contemporary political imaginary.

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