

BOOK REVIEW

Contemporary Greek Film Cultures from 1990 to the Present

edited by

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Peter Lang: Bern, 2017

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Undoubtedly, every new book on Greek Cinema is a valuable and risky contribution to the area of Greek Film Studies which is still at its infancy. The area has remained for long almost unknown and neglected. Every new volume on the subject attempts therefore both a practical-historical and a theoretical task: to offer a narrative exploration of a cultural field in its historical formation and to investigate its structural forms, aesthetic values, reception by the audience amongst others. Since Greek Film Studies are still young, they offer possibilities and avenues which can be extremely fertile and precarious simultaneously. The truth, however, is that we need more books on Greek Film Studies which will explore aspects that have been so far undetected or even swamped under generalisations and simplifications. Unfortunately we haven't investigated systematically the diversity and the dynamism of the Greek film industry and its creative imaginary.

Indeed we haven't studied the construction of this creative imaginary and its codes of articulation. But the present book, edited by Tonia Kazakopoulou and Mikela Fotiou, *Contemporary Greek Film Cultures from 1990 to the Present*, is a bold testimony to the wealth and the complexity of the new field of Greek Film Studies and delineates the potential new orientations through fourteen studies which deserve close reading and attention. As a collective volume based on the papers offered at a conference in 2013, the papers are different in their approach and perspective. However, they all indicate that something distinct and

innovative has emerged in Greek Film Studies recently which might lead to further explorations not only of its history but also of the necessary conceptual frameworks we need in order to interpret the specificity of the cinematic production in the country.

It would be pointless and futile to try to find a common ground amongst the contributions. Each one of them is unique in its specific way of dealing with a phenomenon which is itself diverse, anarchic and in search of its own structural analogies. Talking about Theo Angelopoulos, Antoinetta Angelidi, Yorgos Lanthimos, Panos Koutras, Yorgos Tsemberopoulos, Olga Malea, Tasos Boulmetis, Lakis Papastathis, the documentary tradition amongst other topics and films frames in itself an extremely wide area of studies and indicates certain persistent questions about Greek Film Studies especially in English.

For example, a similar collection which came out in Athens this year *Apo ton Proimo ston Synchrono Elliniko Kinimatografo/From Early to Contemporary Greek Cinema* (Gutenberg 2017), edited by Maria Paradeisi and Afroditi Nikolaïdou explores similar ground in a diachronic approach starting from the 1960s until today. The comparison of both collections is highly indicative of the differences between the way that Greek scholars perceive and interpret the cinematic tradition in Greece and how the same production is seen through the lens of presenting it to international reading public.

The editors state in the introduction that “in fulfilling its aims of making new inroads in Greek Film Studies, the book contains contributions which are innovative, covering a wide range of topics and analysing films that have had limited attention or have never before been explored in Greek Film Studies (in Greece and abroad)” (p. xvii). This is extremely important in the writing of all the articles in the volume. The inroads are philosophically informed, with complex theoretical backgrounds and attempt not only to see Greek cinema within its own parameters but also to connect it with international movements, ideas and problematics.

The book starts with a very substantial problematisation of the concept of contemporary and that of Greek cinema based on Lydia Papadimitriou’s essay on the search of identity in Greek Film Studies (2009). These two questions are connected with current discussions about new forms of production, dissemination and marketing as well as ongoing debates about the notion of ‘national cinema.’ The articles themselves address these questions effectively in different ways. Some of them approach their subject through a form of close reading of the filmic texts and its underpinning discourses.

The first contribution to the volume by Ulrich Meurer and Maria Oikonomou is extremely significant as it addresses the rather forgotten, even in Greece,

documentary tradition both contemporary and older. By analysing Aran Hughes and Christina Koutsospyrou's documentary *Sto lyko/To the Woolf* (2013) and Barbash and Castaing-Taylor's *Sweetgrass* (2009), in a personal and idiosyncratic style, they point out the new possibilities of cinematic language as explored in such novel and radical re-inscription of reality beyond the traditional mimetic dichotomies.

I would like to point out Stavros Alifragkis's article on Theo Angelopoulos's Thessaloniki, an intense and complex exploration of the cinematic language of Angelopoulos vis-à-vis the urban landscape and its archetypal transposition. Ben Tyrer's contribution on Lathimos's *Kynodontas/Dogtooth* (2009) is also significant for exploring the unique undercurrent psychodynamics detected in this seminal film. Angie Voela and Tonia Kazakopoulou address questions of gender and family structure in their contributions on Tsemberopoulos and Malea, two directors who deserve more attention and have already contributed substantially to a new cinematic language. Marios Psaras's contribution on Koutras's *Strella/A Woman's Way* (2009) is a sophisticated analysis of homosociality in the public sphere and the radical redefinition of gender and its representations.

Nick Poulakis explores the use of music in Boulmetis's *POLITIKI kouzina/A Touch of Spice* (2003), a highly important aspect of the cinematic experience which we usually disregard. Extremely challenging is Philip Philis's study on the 'Greek hospitality' towards the Albanian other in Greek society. Taso G. Lagos study addresses the general stereotypes and the expectations formed about Greek cinema after Cacoyannis's *Zorba the Greek* (1964). Afrodití Nikolaidou explores systematically the marketing strategies for the promotion of Greek film production, something that needs further investigation as it is the first time we find it stated as a research project. Erato Bassea's contribution on the cinematic adaptation of a literary masterpiece of Greek literature is a significant study of the underlying processes and strategies employed by Papastathis to bring out the identity question we find in the story. Mikela Fotiou's contribution on Nikolaidis's *Those who Loved a Corpse* is a thorough analysis of one of the most ground-breaking and challenging filmmakers in the country who definitely deserves a closer look.

Finally I would like to stress the bold theoretical scope of Rea Walldén's study on avant-garde Greek cinema and her intimate collaboration with Antoinetta Angelidi which provides an appropriate final chapter to the collection. As they state at the final paragraph of their common contribution: "Each filmmaker poses the question of what is cinema anew. Nothing is given and there are no rules that cannot be subverted" (p. 389). And this can be the conclusion to all the discussions we see in this highly recommended volume.

As mentioned earlier there are many approaches in this volume and some of them need more discussion or indeed further elaboration. Some of the contributions over-rely on theoretical positions (which, of course, is the perpetual sin of Film Studies in general) without paying enough attention to the historical context around the film or indeed the specificity of their filmmakers. Somehow, we seem to forget that there is a subject behind all texts; sometimes more or less complex, but the subject is firmly there and any attempt to ignore is, as Chesterton would have said, like talking about Antarctica without ever mentioning the snow. In the collection some contributors attempt close readings of specific films without giving enough cinematic analysis of its *mise-en-scene*, script, performance style or other compositional qualities. Others deal with films primarily as social texts and not as visual and pictorial experiences of a kinaesthetic kind, as now becomes the dominant norm in Film Studies. The agenda of Film Studies in general changes dramatically every year as new perspectives are constantly added in order to explore the continuing relevance of cinema as visual field.

However, there are other thematic threads that come out of such diversity of topics and approaches. The question of the *auteur* tradition, for example, the question of identity, collective memory, political identification and ideological formation. I notice the complete absence of the greatest thinker on the cinematic language André Bazin, of David Bordwell, and even Sergei Eisenstein, the theorist who is mentioned only by Angelidi and Walldén. I point out these names not to criticise the writers but in order to show the different lines of investigation taken in this collection and the marked departure from the dominant approaches to cinema as defined by the French tradition after Bazin and even Jean Luc Godard insisting on montage and distantiation. In some of them new theoretical paradigms are elaborated, explored, and to a certain degree constructed. We can see this very ambitious and exciting possibility in the contribution by Ulrich Meuer and Maria Oikonomou: the style of writing and references indicates a new perception of the 'politics of the image' as found in a documentary which presumably is about reality by definition. The writers explore how this documentary "...redefines the interval as the legitimate 'non-place' of reality" (p. 8). Despite their overreliance on Jacques Rancière a new paradigm about the interstitial language of contemporary documentary is suggested. The same approach towards a new theoretical paradigm can be seen in Stavros Alifragkis's essay on Angelopoulos's urban landscapes, especially in his final trilogy. The writer concludes that, "[w]e are tempted to place Angelopoulos's mythical landscapes somewhere between a utopia and a 'heterotopia', a threshold between the 'non-places' of perfected societies and their potential realization" (p. 65). Of course, Angelopoulos's use of space changed over time: the illusory space of hallucinations that we find in *Oi kynigoi/The Hunters* (1977) or the condensed palimpsestic space of *O Megalexandros/Alexander the Great* (1980) are different

to the disrupted spatiality of his last films and indication of the fundamental changes that have taken place in his political and aesthetical ideas and practices. But the article is a crucial step towards the redefinition of Angelopoulos's topographic visuality, in a field of studies which has been predominantly preoccupied with Angelopoulos's sense of time.

Rea Walldén's contribution on avant-garde cinema is also pointing towards that direction. Through the analysis of four films, Walldén wants to articulate from within that what avant-garde utopian films "needs to do is to propose alternative constructions of space and time, by enacting them itself, and thus crossing the line between utopia and revolution" (p. 77). The idea of alternative constructions of space and time inspires Walldén to explore the 'formal radicalism' (p. 97) of the films she approaches. And probably this is the beginning of a new cinematic project precisely because of the subtle but extremely dynamic experimentation with cinematic language that contemporary film-makers have been embarked upon especially after the so-called crisis of the last ten years. Ben Tyrer's Lacanian reading of Lanthimos's *Dogtooth* is also challenging as it explores the 'paternal metaphor' as the permanent structure in the subconscious and what happens when the structure collapses. The essay is really interesting as it avoids the rather facile label of 'weird wave' and plunges into the deep structure of the film.

A similar approach can be found in Angie Voela's close look at a rather controversial film *O ehtros mou/The Enemy Within* (Tsemberopoulos, 2013). Voela makes a systematic and highly suggestive investigation of the hidden psychodynamics of the film and concludes that "*The Enemy Within* introduced us to trauma, a break of time, a pause. Re-starting time, waiting if necessary, but not remaining entrapped into the eternal present of patriarchal loss, is our task and our challenge" (p. 148). It is indeed an underrated film exploring the dynamics of kinship and otherness in the country during a period of crisis when the dominant discourses of identity and ethnicity seem to be under intense pressure. Olga Malea's *Proti fora nonos/First Time Godfather* (2007) hilarious comedy is also analysed for its political and cultural underpinnings in Kazakopoulou's essay (although the film was made before the crisis in 2007). It is indeed a deceptively simple film but ultimately it "...observes, critiques, and satirizes a particularly Greek schizophrenic reality, capturing aspects of the country and its people, and their relation to gender, image-making, politics, generational conflict, and the conflict between modernity and tradition" (p. 176). It is really crucial to study the nature of comedies produced in Greece at the moment and throughout the crisis. They are the most commercially successful products of the industry and reflect dominant mentalities and ideological movements. In a way they deconstruct the dominant narratives more effectively than usually stated employing parody and irony.

Marios Psaras's study of Koutras's *A Woman's Way* is also a case that needs discussion. Koutras has been very lucky that a number of exciting approaches from the point of queer studies has produced some very relevant political commentary on the phobic discourses that have defined contemporary Greek gender depictions or conversations about gender. Psaras points out that *A Woman's Way* attempts the "radical reframing of the familiar familial and national space" (p. 183). The idea of reframing which permeates Psaras's essay can be also seen in the next essay by Poulakis who takes as the vantage point for his approach the music of Boulmetis's film *A Touch of Spice*. Evanthia Reboutsika's score, a hybrid of various musical tonalities, functions "not only as a form of othering but also as a kind of self-indentification" (p. 226). Poulakis offers a fresh reading of how music works as part both diegetic and non diegetic in a film especially a film which sits in the interstices of cultural identifications.

Finally Mikela Fotiou's study on Nikos Nikolaidis's diptych fairly examines his work as another auteur (which is usually forgotten) and his very conscious use of cinematic pastiche as structural elements of his *Singapore Sling* (1990) and *Tha se do stin Kolasi afapi mou/See You in Hell, My Darling* (1999). Nikolaidis's extravagant style which is made of a multiplicity of styles and references becomes for Fotiou an example of the plasticity and adaptability of Greek cinema to incorporate styles like that of the Hollywood film noir in its pragmatic realities and expectations. Despite the limited success of these films which are also opaque and hermetic, Fotiou indicates that they are "self-reflexive films" (p. 366) films that meditate on their constructive principles.

It's a pity that we don't have the space to talk also about all contributions in the collection. I would like to also stress Angelidi and Walldén's joint paper which examines the semantic potential of cinematic languages which, as they indicate, "are constantly re-invented" through teaching and learning. Angelidi is both a filmmaker and a lecturer so her testimony is extremely crucial not simply in understanding the avant-garde cinema but also how film-making as an act of offering (p. 389) to the spectators and ultimately to the culture that made them possible.

Concluding, I must stress that this is a collection of essays which opens up a new field of research projects in the area of Greek Film Studies. It offers us a map of where we are going by constructing a theoretical language for the cinematic experience of films made in Greece and by exploring the various conceptual paradigms we can employ in order to investigate "a semantic openness ... which encourages innovative, current reflections and explorations of Greek cinema as a whole" (p. xiv). The task is really challenging and somehow daunting but Kazakopoulou and Fotiou have published a book that will re-calibrate many of the questions we pose vis-à-vis recent cinematic production in Greece. Borrowing the title of the last essay the volume is a thorough examination of the

ethics of heterogeneity and experimentation as found in Greek cinema and the ways that are translated into diverse languages of interpretation. A collection which must be read by everybody who is interested in the future of Greek Film Studies.

REFERENCE

Paradeisi M. and Nikolaïdou A. (eds) (2017), *Apo ton Proïmo ston Synchrono Elliniko Kinimatografo/From Early to Contemporary Greek Cinema*, Athens: Gutenberg.