

FILM REVIEW

Park (2016) by Sofia Exarchou

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Around a half-hour into *Park* (2016), Sofia Exarchou's debut feature film, teenagers Markos (Enuki Gvenatadze) and Dimitris (Dimitris Kitsos) are playing with their dog in a disused Olympic swimming pool. The sports facility is part of a fictional patchwork of existing Olympic venues strewn around the Greek capital, edited into a single neighbourhood for the purposes of the film. This is the legacy of Athens 2004, a complex of infrastructure mostly built from scratch for the Games and largely abandoned in their aftermath. In the film, as in reality, the houses of the Olympic Village became home to a large number of mostly low-income families. Coupled with the vicinity to Olympic-scale sports facilities, the Village had the potential to become a model popular housing neighbourhood. As the scene of the empty swimming pool suggests, this promise was not necessarily realised. On the far wall behind the teenage boys, we discern one of the many spray-painted messages peppering the film's background: *ΜΟΛΙΣ ΦΥΓΑΜΕ* (we just left/you just missed us).

In 2004, the Olympic Games were held in Athens, where they were first reinstated in their modern form in 1896. The city's bid to win the Games was built on a narrative of return, as had been the one proposed by Pierre de Coubertin, the French aristocrat and founder of the International Olympic Committee who revived the ancient Greek ritual in the 19th century, focusing on the athletic event and divesting it of its religious character. The spectacle of the Olympic Games returning to what is not only the proverbial birthplace of the Games themselves, but the phantasmatic cradle of the Western ideological construct, had the potential to captivate minds and hearts. Visitors from around the world arrived in Athens, responding to the heart-warming Olympic motto of the 25th edition of the event: "Welcome home".

Yet as the spray-painted message suggests, far from homecoming, or home-making, *Park* deals with a missed encounter. In the sequence described above, the clash between the scale of the infrastructure and its current state of disuse evokes the sense of a recent departure, as if the post-Games Village occupants had arrived at the scene of a wild party the morning after, when everybody had left. The thwarted continuity of the Olympic return to Greece has had uneven consequences for different communities of people. Building on Tony Collins' argument that nineteenth-century sport was an integral part of the expansion of capitalism both in economic and ideological terms (Boykoff 2013: 35) and Naomi Klein's theory of disaster capitalism (Klein 2008) – the idea that neoliberalism capitalises on catastrophe by instrumentalising trauma –, Jules Boykoff develops the idea of “celebration capitalism” to describe some of these consequences. Celebration capitalism, he says, is “disaster capitalism's affable cousin”, thriving on social euphoria rather than collective shock (2013: 159). The Games are a prime example of this type of capitalism, a franchise of festivities shouldered by public money but producing mostly private profit. As Boykoff points out, disaster capitalism and celebration capitalism both occur in states of exception: catastrophe and exuberance (ibid: 166). In both the former and the latter, moments of collective frenzy are produced and then made use of for private accumulation. In the case of Greece, disaster followed closely on the footsteps of exuberance, activating that other narrative that has tended to follow the nation closely: modern Greece's refusal to live up to its ancient glory.¹ With the arrival of the global financial crisis and the first bailout in 2010, the trope of lazy Greeks who feasted on European money until it run disastrously out played forcefully in foreign media, especially in Germany, the ant to Greece's grasshopper (see, for instance, Bickes, Otten and Weymann 2014). In the international media landscape, as well as in dominant political discourse, appeals to Ancient Greece became the jumping board for “deliciously ironic” quips about modern Greece's remarkable ability to disappoint. As Johanna Hanink, amongst others, noticed, “political cartoons about the Greek economy nearly always feature a broken marble column or two, and journalists can rarely resist the temptation to contrast the country's current sorry state with its celebrated past” (Hanink 2017: 6). Badly maintained Olympic infrastructure became a particularly useful symbol for this rhetoric. “Athens' new ruins” were ultimate proof that modern Greece failed to live up to its own ancient standards.

Drawing on this premise, the film lays out its main impetus heavy-handedly from the first scene. We are in the Olympic village, prime site of celebration capitalism

1 Modern Greece's habit of disappointing the European visitor might have its roots in Victorian British travel literature: in 1854, one such visitor was lamenting how “the traveller is grieved and disappointed (...) at beholding beautiful districts of most fertile land only half cultivated, by a scanty, uneducated, lawless population” (in Hionidis 2014: 34).

in 2004, left to decay after more than a decade. Twelve years after the Athens Olympics, the Village has become the unlikely playground of a group of teenagers, presumably lodgers at the Village flats, which were distributed through a lottery to disadvantaged families. The boys (Exarchou lays out a distinctly gendered social space, as I will discuss below) hold their own games, taking advantage of the decrepit aspects of the infrastructure to come up with challenging feats for less-than-willing recruits amongst them, who are in turn forced to race each other barefoot, scraping their feet on rough stones and broken glass. The ominous score, hand-held camera and quick editing drive the point home that we're meant to feel uncomfortable as the scene skirts the limit between kids' play and hazing, far from the sleek and stable images of televised Olympic aesthetics. The tension piles on during the improvised awards ceremony, when a makeshift wreath is slapped violently upon the winner's head, whereas a shot of the defeated boy is deliberately cropped to reproduce the trope of a dead body being dragged off the field.

Tense scenes like this one recur to establish the sense of a dystopia, one in which discomfort does not stem from frantic action culminating in tragic results, but from endless waiting and restless tension that is the stuff of life. The one literal victim in the film is Aris, the boys' dog, whom the young Markos found abandoned along the national highway eight months before and whose pure breed appears to provide one of very few sources of income for the boys – more than once we're shown people in sleek cars drive up to the Village with their dogs to pay for Aris's reproductive services. The camera insists on little scars – under Markos's foot, on both his and Dimitris's hand, on Anna's elbow and knee – with studied calculation. Slightly older than the boys, Anna (Dimitra Vlagopoulou) is a former gymnast who had to abandon her sports career after a series of injuries, one of which she tells Dimitris about with painfully unconvincing levity. The focus on scars is one of the ways in which Exarchou's film uses an everyday trace – a teenager's scraped knee – to walk the line between play and violence.

Throughout the film, tension builds irrevocably. Rather than following the structure of genre-filmmaking, such as comedy or horror – tension, release, tension, release – it develops a protracted anxiousness that just won't give. The only exception to this rule, in the penultimate scene, serves to reinforce it: more than once, Anna and Dimitris escape to a seaside resort where they attempt to join in the fun with tourists of different nationalities and age groups. During these visits, Dimitris grows increasingly anxious and flirts with violence, which drives Anna away. In a long scene, Dimitris returns to the resort on his own one last time, and joins in the antics of a group of drunk conference participants. He ends up drinking the night away in the room of a Danish man, Jens (Thomas Bo Larsen), in a tense scene that cleverly swings our emotional investment back and

forth between expectations of bonding and violence. Dimitris ends up hurting Jens, and for a moment, it seems like he is about to leave him for dead and walk off, definitively doomed, at least morally. Instead, Dimitris turns back and helps Jens onto the bed, discovering he's only mildly hurt and black-out drunk. The audience is spared a tragic event that would have overpowered the crux of the film – that violence is not an event, but a situation.

The averted murder, however, does not provide release either. To the contrary, it refuses us the convenience of a watershed event and plummets us back into the stuffy waiting of a world suspended decidedly above the threshold of tragedy. In separate closing scenes (a decision that fits in interestingly with the gender politics of the film, as I'll discuss briefly below), Anna and the boys are left exactly as we found them, killing nothing but time and making up ways to pass it. The film's distance from tragedy appears to me a very conscious choice, and a critique of the easy optics mined by most political commentators about the Greek crisis, and some recent Greek films, too (e.g. *Oi aisthimaties/The Sentimentalists* [Nikos Triandafyllidis, 2014], *Na kathesai kai na koitas/Standing Aside, Watching* [Yorgos Servetas, 2013]). One could be forgiven for thinking, for example, that the film situates Dimitris's mom's boyfriend as the owner of a marble refinery only so as to call attention to its lack of Ancient Greek-style marble columns and busts. Exarchou is careful to disengage her narrative from any evocation of the ancient Greek ruin, suggestive of the founding myth of Western modernity, so as to critique the latter. The ruins of 2004 are those of a globalised neoliberal system, one that often uses those other, older ruins as a justification for violence and exploitation.

In interviews, Exarchou has emphasised the importance of the encounter between her characters and the space they inhabit (Wonderland Magazine, 2016). What happens when you place a group of young people full of energy and potential in a built environment that has exhausted its usefulness? This confrontation is the partial cause of the combustions of energy that manifest as play, violence, and sexual desire. With very few exceptions (such as the tenderly shot scene of Anna masturbating in her bathtub), this energy takes the form of traditional gender performance: the boys are violent, playfully or otherwise; Anna displays her sexuality on demand (by the boys). With a little effort, we might be able to detect an awareness of the futility of these behaviours, especially in Anna, less so in Dimitris. Anna rejects Dimitris's violence when it crosses the line of play, she occasionally looks dejected when boys ask her to exhibit her gymnast's tricks or when they wolf-whistle at her, but she plays along. Her last scene is near-identical to the ones in which we first meet her, showing off her curves to teenagers on motorbikes who perform their own virility for her from afar. Similarly, in the closing scene of the film, the boys are back to their routine. Hanging out at an abandoned sports field, they throw

pebbles and shout sexist and ableist abuse at a friend who is pretending to be an old lady for laughs. Dimitris's absence from this closing scene is perhaps to be read as a rite of passage completed: last we see of him is in a sustained close-up shot at the conclusion of his duet with the Danish tourist, where, arguably, his realisation that he is capable of real violence propels him into adulthood. Again, however, the sense of coming full circle in the last scene is not undercut, because the production of adults like Dimitris, with very limited access to beneficial uses of their youthful energy continues unchanged – in that sense, perhaps their fates are meant to be seen as concomitant with that of the built environment that hosts them.

To return to the scene that opens up this analysis, I conclude that *Park* is part of a group of contemporary Greek films that connect the fates of young protagonists to built space. In Athena Rachel Tsangari's *Attenberg* (2010), the Aspra Spitia complex in Boeotia stands for the promise and failure of modernism, and the effects on this failure on a new generation of middle-class youth. As for *Wasted Youth* (Papadimitropoulos and Vogel, 2011), which also shares the "lost generation" trope with Exarchou's film, we find another teenage protagonist who gets creative with an empty swimming pool. In one of the strongest visuals of this film, Harris practices his skate moves in the empty swimming pool of his parents' well-off friend, before skating back to the city to encounter familiar tensions and frustrations linked to the sociopolitical situation in austerity Greece. Also situated in the dead of summer, *Park* seems to echo *Wasted Youth* directly in its premonition. As Harris skates away, the family friend cautions him that heat makes people crazy, foreshadowing the boy's assassination by a cop in the closing scene. In *Park*, Anna similarly announces to Dimitris with a smile: "Θα πάρουν όλα φωτιά έξω, θα καούν από τη ζέστη" (everything will burn outside, the heat will set it on fire). *Park* evokes the premonition of *Wasted Youth* but steers clear of its tragic ending, instead stretching that disquiet over the entire film. The swimming pool has received its fair share of attention in recent cinema (as the edited volume *The Cinema of the Swimming Pool* [2014] attests), and not without good reason. In both *Park* and *Wasted Youth*, the empty swimming pool becomes a material manifestation of the thwarted promise of good times. More specifically, in Exarchou's film, the pool, as well as infrastructure in general, is represented as the empty and useless wreckage of celebration capitalism. Yet, what distinguishes *Park* is its ability to expose that wreckage to us whilst steering clear of ruin porn – the fetishisation of ruins both old and new. The interplay hidden in its playful title, suggesting the possibility of play along with something stationary, set aside and stagnant, is reflected in the relationship between the ruins of sports infrastructure and the generation growing up amongst it.

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