

Cinematic Urban Trajectories: Documenting the Shifting Athenian Experience in Greek Road and Travel Films

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ABSTRACT

In the present article,¹ I focus on the cinematic documentation of the metropolitan lifeworld in contemporary Greek feature films which posit travel and mobility as central narrative axes. Focusing on filmic texts spanning a broad stylistic gamut, across key socio-political transitions from the 1970s onwards, I will trace the diverse spatio-temporal modalities structuring the visual encoding of the Athenian topos. In explicating the various ideologically invested and historically marked cinematic renderings of urban space in these visual narratives, I will draw primarily on Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the "chronotope" and its theoretical elaborations and reworkings. This will allow me on the one hand to link the temporal and spatial elements comprising the social mappings of the city within each film, and on the other to sketch out the connections between the real and the reconstructed time-space configurations of the Athenian microcosm. My analytical endeavour will be underpinned by a series of signifying oppositions (center/periphery, exterior/interior, public/private, centrality/marginality, inclusion/exclusion, etc.), which will be shown to define the narrative construction of Athens as a manifold, hierarchically structured, lived and observed space in Greek films which foreground the chronotopic motif of the "road". Articulated around mobility and location shooting, and predicated on realist aesthetics, Greek "urban road films" will be shown to enact complex visual negotiations between actual and imagined space, registering the mutations in the physical and symbolically constructed Athenian topography during the recent decades.

KEYWORDS

Chronotope
travel and mobility
urban films
location shooting
realist aesthetics

¹This research is co-financed by Greece and the European Union (European Social Fund-ESF) through the Operational Programme «Human Resources Development, Education and Lifelong Learning» in the context of the project "Reinforcement of Postdoctoral Researchers" (MIS-5001552), implemented by the State Scholarships Foundation (IKY).

INTRODUCTION

As a self-evident choice of natural location shooting, the Athenian cityscape has constituted a staple in New and Contemporary Greek cinema whenever filmmakers decided to venture beyond stylised studio settings, the interiority of various types of urban domiciles and the countryside. From early endeavors to capture Athenian landmark (primarily monumental) topography through automotive means, such as *Oi peripeteies tou Villar/The Adventures of Villar* (Hepp, 1924), *Koinoniki Sapila/Social Decay* (Tatasopoulos, 1932) and *To tragoudi tou chorismou/The Song of Separation* (Finos, 1939); to more static depictions of urbanicity, reflecting on the modernised social and residential aspects and the vicissitudes of post-war reconstruction through a public, neorealist or urban ethnographic gaze during the 1950s; to the semi-public gaze at the turn of the decade and successively to the inward-inflected, private gaze of the 1960s, seeking to profile and engage with the rapid transformations and accentuation or mitigation of polarities marking individual and collective life (see Milonaki, 2012),² Athens never quite ceased to feature in various terms in Greek cinema – although such production presents remarkable fluctuations in quantitative and qualitative terms– acquiring the status of an “expressive space” (Penz & Lu 2011: 9), drawing on, and renewing in its turn, pre-existing socio-historical and cultural discourses.

Filming Athens as an unstaged geographical location, shifting cinematic background and terrain of unscripted social practices necessitated or provided the opportunity for the infusion of otherwise fictional narratives with an intention of documenting social reality through various aesthetic approaches, at differing degrees and perspectives, depending on whether the focus of social critique rests on the micro- or macro- social aspects, thus enriching the films with factographic elements drawn from contemporary urban reality. Adopting an unobtrusive, discreet filming position, the camera tracks slices of everyday life, registering in a seemingly unmediated and transparent manner the rhythms and the soundscapes punctuating social practices within the metropolitan city-space.

Similarly, during the late 1990s and early 2000s, Athens returned to the cinematic spotlight in a cluster of primarily dramatic films, which thematise social uses of urban space, blurring the distinction between the private and public realms. These films, which have been termed “urban films” or “Athenian urban films”, and which present, albeit with a certain belatedness, an indigenous variant of the French “banlieu films” and the African-American “hood films”, are situated primarily in the broader region of the city center and constitute, in essence, road movies (Nikolaidou 2013). On the one hand, films foregrounding

² In tandem with the concomitant intense and pervasive transformation of the urban architecture and its embedded social practices, the Greek filmic production of the 1950s onwards has attracted wide research interest. See for instance, Poupou 2007 & 2011; Sotiropoulou 2001; Sifaki, Poupou & Nikolaidou 2011.

mechanical or physical mobility allow for the emergence of a subjective itinerant mapping of the urban topography, thus calling for a relativist approach in the construction of contextually-specific social identities and giving prominence to the urban landscape's lived aspect as a social terrain of embodied practices. On the other hand, such films also introduce an element of self-reflexivity with regards to the selectivity and assemblage, and thus the productive function, entailed in the cinematic creative process itself. As Richard Ingersoll (2006: VII) aptly notes, 'driving a car is somewhat like editing a film'. At a slower pace, perhaps, walking operates in a similar fashion.

From my part, I adopt a wider chronological timeframe, engaging with Greek films which register complex visual representations of the metropolitan Athenian lifeworld in motion, as set against and within a shifting urban landscape from the 1970s onwards. In this regard, Greek filmic production is considered within a transnational perspective, as a national manifestation of more generalised, global phenomena, echoing similar aesthetic and ideological tendencies in other national, US and European, cinemas during the same period. As Lawrence Webb has noted, these touch upon various themes related to the growing crisis in urban spatiality, in dialogue with advancements in urban theory and in the aftermath of the May '68 revolts, which marked the establishment of a new relation between cities and political subjectivity (2014: 14, 10, 15). In the Greek case, what these films have in common, despite their stylistic and technical divergences, is that they feature characters inhabiting the Athenian urban space in an itinerant fashion, situating trajectories in real, city spaces, thus forming the backdrop for differential forms of social critique from the part of the directors-*auteurs*.

In pondering on the visual imagery of such filmic narratives, I aim to piece together complementary, evolving or even competing discourses of spatiality related to the Athenian *topos* in a diachronic fashion and within single filmic texts, designating lived space as an arena of often conflicting social practices and cultural politics. The city in general –Athens in our case– provides a thick, heterogenous and multivalent web of materiality and signification, by means of which socio-political and cultural reality can be dissected, corroborated or contested. In other words, "the 'reel' uses the 'real' to contest the meaning of history" (Millington 2016: 26).³ Although a brief discussion of the stylistic and formal features of Greek urban road movies produced during each successive decade will be offered, in conjunction with parallel developments in the socio-economic and cultural context, I will mainly focus on individual films, chosen because they embody representative aesthetic tendencies of Greek filmic production, present a certain level of complexity in terms of narrativisation of

³ This formulation might convey a misleading polarity between the "actual" and the "represented", in the sense that, as elaborated below, the two are not merely engaged in a relationship of mutual feedback, but crucially, "mutually constitutive to a point that renders the study of one without the other incomplete" (AlSayyad 2006: xii).

urbanicity and achieve a remarkable status of artistic accomplishment, thus profiling a genealogy of cinematic “athenicity”.

MOBILITY AND CHRONOTOPES

In explicating the interweaving of situated social practices, subjectivities and the various Athenian cityscapes in recent Greek cinema, the Bakhtinean concept of “chronotope”, appositely multivalent and versatile, appears particularly relevant. Although Bakhtin himself never provided so much as a conclusive definition of the term, the following formulation of his appears succinct enough for our purposes:

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. The intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterises the artistic chronotope (1990: 84).

Two points concerning the above formulation require further elaboration: first, the adjective “literary”, which seemingly delimits the potential field of application of the term for analytical purposes and second, the adjective “artistic”, which would point to imaginary, rather than real life situations and surroundings as the composite elements and points of reference of the chronotope. With regards to the first reservation, I follow Michael V. Montgomery’s (1993) conviction that the category of chronotope is applicable to film without requiring major adjustments and even,⁴ in this regard, Robert Stam’s (1989) assertion that in some respects the chronotope is more pertinent as analytical tool for film compared to literature, since the photographic quality of the filmic medium permits the time-space compound to be deployed in a more direct, unmediated manner, compared to literature’s dependence on lexical expression. Regarding the second issue, which is the insistence on the qualifier “artistic”, Bakhtin himself offers a clarifying formulation, insisting on the “sharp boundary” between the world as source of creative representation and the represented world, hastening to add, however, that this boundary is not

⁴ Without disregarding the formal and expressive particularities of each artistic realm (in this case, literature and film), my emphasis on the interlacing of landscape and narration is further corroborated by dominant approaches in Critical Geography, Urban Studies and Film Studies, for which “landscape as text is the metaphor of the late 20th and early 21st centuries” (Lukinbeal 2005: 4). It should be noted, however, that the conceptualisation of landscape in textual terms has been widely contested by theorists such as Tim Cresswell and Deborah Dixon (2002), who argue that the pictoriality of the cinematic medium cannot be properly accounted for by the static quality of textuality, instead calling for discursive elaboration of landscapes based on fluidity, as embodied by mobility.

impermeable or absolute, in that “out of the actual chronotopes of our world (which serve as the source of representation) emerge the created and reflected chronotopes of the world represented in the work”, (Bakhtin 1990: 253).⁵ His designation of the category “actual chronotope” sits perhaps a little uneasily, suggesting the possibility of direct, ideology-free access to social lifeworlds; in that, I find myself more in tune with Richard Seaford (2012), who employs a scheme of socially constructed chronotopes. In any case, as Jennifer A. Vadeboncoeur also notes (2005), the spaces and the temporality represented on textual level are based on real or imagined life experiences. In other words, and shifting my focus on the cinematic imagery, I hold that extra-filmic perceptions of social space necessarily inform the intra-filmic production of space and vice-versa: that the intra-filmic production of space offers, and indeed relies on, a synchronic, contextually-specific documentation of the extra-filmic space in a seemingly objective and unmediated manner, producing what – following Roland Barthes’s formulation of “reality effect” – has been termed “documentary effect” (Le Roy & Vanderbeeken, 2016: 199), that is, the illusion that representation can indeed convey a truthful and undistorted view of raw reality. When objectivity and verisimilitude are deliberately evaded or undermined, when, in other words, the representation of urban setting appears tampered with or overtly emotionally tainted, the directors-*auteurs* seem to insinuate that social reality itself has become a simulacrum or wish to highlight the cleavage between the subjective, experiential aspect of social reality and its dominant form of discursive construction.

The obscurity of the concept and the lack of a clear-cut, widely accepted definition of chronotopes, has given rise to a proliferation of different approaches and concomitant terminologies. In drawing on Bakhtin’s theory of the chronotope for our analysis of recent Greek urban road movies, I identify the following primary signification of the term, as designated by Martin Flanagan (2009: 12), which involves “localized renderings of time and space”. This resonates with what Morson and Emerson (1990: 374) have termed “chronotopic motifs” – alternative appellations include the terms “minor” or “local” chronotopes (Ladin 1999: 216). Bakhtin himself has identified several chronotopes, which incorporate varying degrees and types of mobility, such the chronotope of the encounter, the chronotope of the castle, that of the road, of the threshold, the provincial town, the public square, etc., which designate sites and locales for the delineation of narrative action within specific time frames and act as “condensed reminders of the kind of time and space that typically function there” (Morson & Emerson 1990: 374). The second theoretical elaboration of the

⁵ Bakhtin seems to adopt a rather rigid approach to the separation between the real and the represented world, which, nevertheless, he himself undermines, stating that the boundary is not “absolute” or “impermeable”, as the two are “indissolubly tied up with each other”, finding themselves “in constant mutual interaction” and in “uninterrupted exchange” (1990: 254).

chronotope which I will employ, and which incorporates mobility at the level of narrative development, is encapsulated in the term “plotspace chronotopes” and has been proposed by Bart Keunen (2011). Plotspace chronotopes refer to temporal developments in the totality of the represented world and can be grouped in two subcategories: the first one is the teleological – or monological – chronotope, which structures goal or end-oriented plots. As Nele Bemong & Pieter Borghart (2010: 7-8) explain, within the frame of monological chronotopes, suspense is built through a succession of chronotopes of equilibrium and conflict. In contrast, in “dialogical chronotopes”, the second subcategory, there is no endpoint of the plot in sight, only a series of conflicting networks which communicate with each other. The focal point of the narration concerns not a final resolution of an overarching conflict but distinct, critical moments, mostly psychological in nature.

Equally useful, from an analytical point of view, is Bakhtin’s theorisation of the spatial coordinates of the plot within a narrative, which have been presented in a more systematic manner by Eduard Vlasov (1995). The latter distinguished three types of spatial chronotopes: the first is chronotopes on an objective level, a category which resonates with Chris Lukinbeal’s (2005) elaboration of cinematic landscape as place, i.e., as a concrete location, through on-location shooting, infusing the filmic narration with geographic realism and contextual information, whether place acquires a specific significance within the plot or not.⁶ The second category concerns the levels of relationship between the protagonist(s) and the spatial forms within the text. Vlasov sketches two variations: a) the “alien chronotope”, wherein the surroundings seem either strange or hostile to the protagonist and b) the “native chronotope”, which designates a familiar chronotope for the protagonist, in other words his “own real homeland” (Vlasov 1995: 43). The third category refers to the static or dynamic quality of the space in terms of change and transformation.

A GENEALOGY OF GREEK URBAN ROAD MOVIES FROM THE 1970S OMWARDS

1970s-1980s: Rebelliousness and Assimilation

Positing urban crisis and restructuring as his central research axis, Lawrence Webb envisages 1970s as a “long” decade, spanning roughly from the urban revolts of the late 1960s to early 1980s and the consolidation of the neoliberal paradigm (2014: 14). Allowing for slight temporal variations to account for

⁶ In explicating the functions of cinematic landscape, Chris Lukinbeal (2005) builds on Andrew Higson’s taxonomy (1984; 1987) to also designate landscape as space, i.e. as social space, where action and social relations unfold; landscape as spectacle, which conforms to, and re-inscribes, the economy of pleasure and power relations of a scopophilic regime; and finally, landscape as metaphor, either “small”, through which human qualities and emotional states are attributed to the physical surroundings, or “large”, which bestow an overarching cultural meaning on the landscape.

national particularities, I adopt a similar timeframe, which covers political and social unrest during the mid-1960s, as well as the student revolts against the Junta regime during the early 1970s;⁷ the concomitant diffusion of mass consumerism and relative prosperity; the smoothly-implemented restoration of democracy on a new, more politically liberal basis, and the subsequent advancement of social and economic modernisation, reaching until the mid-1980s. This is when a series of more or less visible, yet in any case pivotal, phenomena signaled the introduction and subsequent consolidation of profound changes pertaining to the character of political antagonism, the configuration of various political cultures and attitudes and the designation of public policies, in tandem with similar developments in more advanced countries (Voulgaris 2008: 259). During this era, political radicalism went hand in hand with cultural anti-conformism and aesthetic innovation, producing non-linear, disjunctive, non-classifiable films in the trails of other *avant-garde* European currents, such as the French Nouvelle Vague, the British Free Cinema and the Czechoslovak New Wave and thus defining an indigenous politically conscious, low-budget, *auteur* cinema, at the fringes of New Greek Cinema.⁸ Conspicuously absent from the majority of Greek films produced at the time, it is mostly in such experimental visual narratives that Athens figures both as “social space”, i.e. as the culturally-encoded and power-invested terrain where everyday practices unfold, and as a “large metaphor”, to signify an overarching (mainly negative) appraisal of the overall social and political circumstances in Greece, or of the level and type of political engagement of the “generation of the Polytechnic School”, as young people who reached maturity during the early 1970s were labelled, during the early years of *Metapolitefsi*.

In both Andreas Thomopoulos’s *Aldebaran* (1975) and Thanassis Rentzis’s and Nikos Zervos’s *BLACK + WHITE* (1973), the main protagonists embody marginal, sophisticated and most often artistically endowed characters

⁷ If there indeed was a Greek equivalent of western European and US May 1968, to what extent, and which events would correspond to it remains a topic of hot dispute for Greek historians, political sociologists and commentators alike, inextricably tied to the hermeneutics of May 1968 itself. Whether one holds that the sweeping wave of social protests and strikes which erupted in July 1965, following a string of political upheavals, widely known as “Ioulia”, actually constitutes the Greek equivalent of May 1968 as argued by Christoforos Vernardakis and Yannis Mavris (1989), adheres to a more reserved assessment of this period of civil unrest, regarding it merely as a buoyant request for increased democratisation, adopts a middle ground, claiming that Ioulia consisted in “conflicts of unspecified dynamic” (Athanasatou, Rigos & Seferiadis 1999: 18), or, as Kostis Kornetis does, estimates that the imposition of military junta all but provided, especially after 1971, an antagonistic space for youth resistance to unfold, imbued with a spirit of rebelliousness and an emphasis on subjective emancipation, which “likens it to the gestalt of ’68” (2013: 6), it is safe to argue that the Greek public space did indeed experience, and was reencoded by, its specific version of urban contestation during the late 1960s – early 1970s.

⁸ See, for instance, the special tribute titled ‘The Anticonformists of Greek Cinema’ organised by the 27th Panorama of European Cinema (16-26 October 2014).

– and thus evidently encompassing implicit autobiographical references from the part of the directors – perusing as *flâneurs* the social activity in the busy city center, the latter forming a chronotope on an objective level or marking the landscape as place. The itinerant protagonists, then, trail the signs of a changing socio-political reality, along with the viewer, who is called upon to act as an eyewitness to palpable social mutations. Despite the experimental and/or genuinely personal aesthetic composition of both films, they are infused with a “documentary effect”, based on a complex alternation of the expositional, observational and poetic modes, as identified by Bill Nichols (2010), especially when registering scripted or unscripted action within the city space. For instance, the extended use of voice-over as an explanatory or introductory cue enhances these films’ “expositional” intention, while the incorporation of city center shots bearing no diegetic relation to the filmic narrative accentuate their “observational” documentary inclination. Thomopoulos employs various camera angles and concocts a variegated soundscape (rock tunes, *zembekiko* sounds, the commotion of traffic jams) to invest his recording with everyday urbanicity, thus exploring and unearthing its multivalent social texture or experimenting with different stylistic approaches in order to discover a fitting and accommodating aspect of urbanicity by means of a “poetic” mode of documentarist vision; while Rentzis ironically accompanies nondescript tracking shots of Athens with a voice-over extolling its potential for cultural sophistication and personal growth.

In both films, the urban site is defined in a differential manner, through its juxtaposition with (the mostly unrepresented) provincial space, and as a point of destination, thus touching upon the sweeping wave of internal migration which led to the far-reaching phenomenon of sprawling urbanisation during the immediate post-war decades. By casting his lens on boisterous markets and nondescript city centre work offices, Thomopoulos adopts a deeply pessimist view of the Athenian topography, presenting it as a static (if not stalled) chronotope, mirroring his protagonist’s declining health and anticipated death. Athens downtown in *Aldebaran* appears swamped in mass anonymity and saturated with commotion,⁹ a site for the establishment of a depoliticised yet heavily supervised – as insinuated by the overhead street shots – public space, encroached by commercialisation and gluttonous consumerism; a densely-populated site, furthermore, which hampers movement and stifles individuality (bestowed solely by directorial generosity, by means of focused close-ups in particular faces of the crowd).

Accordingly, the countryside – or, more precisely, the natural habitat – features as an infinite realm of lonesome romantic recourse, which allows for

⁹ It is important to note that Athens is never registered or mentioned as such throughout the film, which is allegedly situated in “Almikandarate”, the imaginary capital of an imaginary country named “Aldebaran”, alluding to the cosmic star. However, the evocation of allegory constitutes a thinly veiled attempt to refer to 1970s Athens, thus investing the objective chronotope with existential overtones.

unfettered mobility (the protagonist breaks on a frenetic run in the forest). The chronotope of the encounter, genuine or less so, is reserved for closed spaces or semi-rural paths: interpersonal contact and communication occurs behind closed spaces (the underground music bar) or semi-rural paths, whereas the domicile is invested with a dubious signification, as it appears either as the site of amorous sexual exchanges (Magdalini, the protagonist's girlfriend, engages in prostitution with an unknown, white-collar male),¹⁰ or of deferred communication (the protagonist is featured typing a letter to a friend).

In contrast, in the opening sequence of *BLACK + WHITE*, Athens, as the endpoint of a young aspiring artist's trajectory, is designated by the narrator's voice-over as a place where upward social mobility and the attainment of material success seem feasible. Counterpoised to the static, archaic and quaint landscape of the countryside, the cityscape emerges initially as an energetic cluster of modernisation and boisterous, or even potentially subversive, activity, captured initially by a moving camera which tracks the protagonist's arrival to the city. Thus embedded in the cultural politics of stability versus change, the cinematic place in *BLACK+WHITE* is invested with a metaphoric signification, which, however, appears rather dubious in terms of ideological undertones. Readily identifiable within the course of the film are a string of prominent, politically or socially charged chronotopic motifs, such as the Athens Polytechnic School front courtyard and façade, the concrete apartment block, the salon (either as bourgeois living room or as political meeting point), the office and the street. If the first four constitute what D.G. Shane (2005) has termed as "enclaves", i.e. as bounded territories, which add friction to mobility, they are not, for that matter, equally sealed to their crisscrossing by "armatures", i.e., by channels and points of continuous traffic, such as the "street". The university setting and the political meeting parlor seem to be connected to the street, which either leads to the idyllic, unchanging chronotope of the countryside or, as "the dwelling place of the collective" (Benjamin 2002: 879), gradually – if only temporarily – becomes a politicised site of contestation against the dictatorial regime, and thus a vector for a socio-temporal rupture. In contrast, the minor chronotope of the office, as the locus of the sealed-off world of corporate advertising, and the upper floor apartment living room, as a symbol of bourgeois conformism, individualism and quietism, where the protagonist finds himself enclosed by the end of the film, are cut-off from the street. This eventual physical and mental fixity to private and material interests becomes on the one hand evident in the scene where, having occupied the profession of advertising executive, the protagonist browses through a glossy magazine with his back turned on the wall, while the off-screen soundscape of a demonstration rages, signifying the protagonist's transposition from an initial tentative concern with

¹⁰ The young woman's name and means of subsistence invest the narrative with an added substratum of allegory, transposing the Christian mythology to the social reality of Athens during the 1970s.

the political realm and the public sphere to the isolation of an egotistical careerist. Equally, his ground floor student room adjoining the street through a window view on street level is replaced with a hanging, upper floor balcony, which only permits a bird's eye, detached view of a gloomy cityscape dominated by concrete apartment blocks. Other symbolic spatial loci of bourgeois self-centeredness and pursuit of hedonistic recreation featuring in the film include the beach and the fractured chronotope of the night-club.

At the end of *BLACK+WHITE*, the young protagonist's reckoning with his heretofore life-course is played out through jump-cut editing, leaving him pondering on an uncertain self-reflecting state; at the end of *Aldebaran* the protagonist meets with an old gypsy woman, who contradicts medical reports prescribing a short lifespan for him, by predicting a long life well-lived and a married-happily-ever-after fate. At the film's finale, the scenes featuring the protagonist walking hand in hand with Magdalini in a wide avenue are undercut by scenes of a travelling showman shuffling his feet in shabby alleys with a chained monkey, thus endowing the chronotope of the (open) road with the symbolic undertones of a liberated (or even resurrected, given the Christian undertones of the narrative) existence, unfettered by social conventions, albeit beyond the urban fabric. Both films sketch dialogical chronotopes in terms of plot, concocting non-linear narratives of disrupted sequential order and episodic structure, thus seemingly allowing for a plurality of potential outcomes; however, whereas in *BLACK + WHITE* the protagonist was met at the beginning with different life choices, in the case of *Aldebaran*, dialogicity is introduced at the finale, when scientific, i.e. medical, findings are contradicted by serendipity and, despite the rigidity of social norms, individual noncompliance is seen to constitute the basis of personal liberation, in the face of consolidated social norms and practices and institutional rigidity.¹¹ Thus marked by a propensity for social commentary regarding the culturally fluid Athenian context, both films rely on unstaged documentarist shots, while engaging in ironic commentary by means of clashing or incongruous sonic investment.

Mid-1980s-1990s: Existential malaise and urban suffocation

In this regard, Stavros Tsiolis's 1986 film *Shetika me ton Vasili.../About Vassilis* and Frieda Liappa's *Itan enas isyhos thanatos/A Quiet Death* (1986), both featuring itinerant characters within the Athenian urban terrain, could be regarded as a fast-forward glimpse into an Athenian lifeworld where the aforementioned contextual and social tendencies have been firmly established. As mentioned earlier, the mid-1980s are regarded as a pivotal landmark of socio-political and cultural shifts, which include the erosion of the ethnocentric Keynesian reformism postwar consensus, the consolidation of *pragmatic*

¹¹ This sense of mobility seems to resound with *Aldebaran*'s cosmologic status as a moving star.

liberalism and narcissistic consumerism and the undermining of the Left's cultural hegemony, in their actualisation in a specifically Greek context (Voulgaris 2008: 277-285; emphasis in the original). At the same time, NGC filmmakers found themselves in an existential quagmire (Basteas 2002: 138-9; Bacoyiannopoulos 2002: 29-29), tormented by an increased sense of alienation, both in terms of weakened communication with a waning cinema audience and as committed intellectuals, occupying the standoffish role of observers-outsiders in relation to the wider cultural and social surroundings. A large part of *auteur* films produced at the time are marked by the encoding of urban landscape with poetic allegory, by an emphasis on impenetrable and undecipherable interiority in what concerns character construction (reflecting, perhaps, the directors' own artistic deadlock amidst a hostile socio-cultural environment) and an increased hermeticism of meaning. In this period, one could argue that the drive for witnessing and documentation occurs by means of a "poetic" or "existential" form of realism, which eschews the pretext of accuracy and emotional neutrality.

The underlining of perplexed individuality, however, need not be regarded solely in terms of resigned isolation, as one should keep in mind that it goes hand in hand with the undermining of realism by means of a *mise-en-scène* which favours obscurity, opts for generic landmarks of urbanicity and showcases everyday mundanity, thus providing an alternative view to, and discourse of, social reality, which counters the alleged transparency and the spectacularity of both commercialised capitalism and public political discourse. In other words, opacity may be regarded as a form of resistance to the vulgar counterfeit explicitness and sensationalism, which prevailed as wider cultural tendencies during this era, and as a reminder that social reality in advanced capitalism consists in a nebulous and impenetrable stratum. This becomes particularly apparent in *A Quiet Death*, which tracks the main protagonist's – a tormented and mentally unstable writer – evasion of the repressing house-confinement and supervision exerted on her by her ex-husband and her psychotherapist, and her subsequent roaming in a rain-swept and gloomy city. At one of her stops, she finds herself in front of a kiosk, a prominent urban chronotopic motif, in an indeterminable, misty and ill-lit area, skimming the front pages of the newspapers, which feature sensationalist and apocalyptic headlines such as "Fire", "Hell", "Night of violence", "Murder", thus inscribing a similar condition of suffocation into the public, urban landscape, which forms a deeply alienating chronotope.¹² The oppressive presence of police

¹² One can spot an inversion in terms of realism and symbolism when comparing the visual construction of Athens in 1970s and 1980s urban road films: It is perhaps quite telling that in *Aldebaran* Athens is captured on the basis of the realist epistemology pertaining to documentaries, but it is nevertheless invested with an allegorical quality and renamed, in the same lettrist spirit which transpires the protagonist's poetry, as "Aldebaran", thus allowing for a distant, potentially critical positioning with regards to the synchronic social context. In contrast, in *About Vassilis* and in *A Quiet Death*, even

forces, as evidenced in a scene where Martha, the protagonist, halts at traffic lights, only to find herself surrounded by police motorcycles, invests the landscape with a further symbolic streak, stressing the inner and outer, both domestic and public, suffocation experienced by the heroine.

A similar strict topographic duality between public and private space, one that nevertheless seems to collapse due to the establishment of eclectic affinities in terms of (bleak and desolate) emotional tone, in a process of parallelism or reflection, seems to pervade the film *About Vassilis*. Its main protagonist, a university professor of Sociology, finds himself immersed in a mid-life crisis, which leads him to abandon his family and career and retreat to his seaside cottage. When he does venture in the urban cityscape, he is either framed individually, rarely engaging in social interaction or appears against isolated or blurred surroundings, with either a dramatic, instrumental, extra-diegetic sonoral landscape or the aggressive commotion of the traffic jam, both elements being evidential of his intensified social alienation and inner torment. The Athenian topography is recorded in its lugubrious, wintery hues, where prominent landmarks of westernised commercialism (lit display windows) and impersonal habitation (hotels) alternate with humble street markets and a shady, underground pool-room (an old hangout of his, obviously part of an irretrievable lifestyle), which fail to provide any sense of emotional anchoring or social situatedness to the protagonist. In the third and final part of the film, the latter decides to embark on a trip back to his family roots and his origins (and seemingly back to memory lane), initiating Tsiolis's growing preoccupation with the cultural significance of the countryside as a locus of authenticity and undiluted Greekness – in other words, as a “native” chronotope – and his increasing anti-urban sentiment.¹³ A static shot of a railing, which cuts to the protagonist leaning over a grave in a provincial graveyard, epitomises the latter's psychic entombment within the Athenian lifeworld.

If, in the case of 1970s urban road movies, such as *BLACK + WHITE* and *Aldeberan*, Athens appears as an alien and dynamic chronotope, on account of it being an unfamiliar and swiftly changing place, in the case of the 1980s version of the genre, in films such as *About Vassilis* and *A Quiet Death*, produced about a decade later and during the Socialist party's second term, Athens has acquired a more consolidated, and hence static, quality remaining, however, ‘alien’ to its inhabitants, to the extent that it embodies an estrangement with their youth

when not explicitly mentioned as such, Athens is the implied background of action; one, however, which is stripped of its identifying landmarks and presented as a generic, if somewhat nightmarish and claustrophobic, urban space, embodying the fundamental condition of homelessness experienced in the metropolitan centers of late modernity.

¹³ The countryside is encoded with a similarly idyllic quality in *A Quiet Death*, one that resonates with the idealisation of childhood, as the dimly lit interior shots of the female protagonist's domicile and the tenebrous exterior shots of cityscapes are intercut with sun-drenched shots of a carefree life in a countryside cottage, which corresponds to the protagonist's delirious reminiscence.

aspirations and cultural practices, as well with a wider sense of social belonging. Stripped of any familiar landmark or sign of historical stratification, the urban topography appears solely encoded in terms of an inescapable, suppressive present that lacks emotional anchors. Thus, the main preoccupation of its inhabitants seems to be encapsulated in Martha's obsessive inquiry: "How can I get out of this city?". Within this amnesiac, anonymous, decentered and fragmented, or else increasingly postmodern, urban chronotope, accordingly Martha wonders, reflecting on the erosion of time, or else on the undermining of narrative formation as the generating process of construction of a coherent sense of personal and social identity: "Are there no stories? There were never any stories? Just events, without a beginning and an end?", echoing the insecurity produced by the lack of duration as the horizon of a stable self-definition.¹⁴

Late 1990s-2010s: Multiculturalism, Modernisation and the Advent of Crisis

The designation of Athens as an "alien chronotope" is also a distinct feature of the majority of Athenian city-films produced during the following decades (2000s and early 2010s),¹⁵ although alienation in this case acquires a much more overtly and socially urgent hostile sense. Indeed, beginning with the late 1990s and throughout the 2000s, a profusion of city-films marked Athens as a regularly revisited cinematic topos wherein power imbalances and social, rather than personal, malaise are strikingly inscribed.¹⁶ The call for transparency and the need for an accurate and engaged form of social observation define a documentarist slant, which figures as a return to 1970's cinematic raw realism, albeit, this time, mostly devoid of any form of experimentation. Athens features

¹⁴ Within this deeply disorienting chronotope, movement as a progressive course or as a fluid, adaptive process is not arrested, but rather degenerates into oscillation. When asked by a passerby if she is lost, Martha retorts sharply: "I go back and forth".

¹⁵ Notable exceptions to this aesthetic and ideological trend would include Renos Charalambidis's *Ftina Tsigara/Cheap Smokes* (1998), which casts a highly stylised and romanticised gaze on night-views of downtown Athens and on prominent urban landmarks (Zonar's Café, Lycabettus hill, Panepistimiou Street, etc.) and Nicos Panayotopoulos's *Ta oporofora tis Athinas/The Fruit Trees of Athens* (2010), which complements the inherent viscosity of the cinematic medium and the vestibularity of the itinerant protagonist with a tactile, auditory, olfactory and gustatory experience of the Athenian space, as the protagonist, a naïve "everyman", roams in various districts, chancing upon different fruit varieties and social types, in a successive alteration of encounters, which emerge as the dominant chronotopic motif within a sun-lit Athenian space.

¹⁶ Apart from the films already mentioned and those analysed below, the rest are presented in the following list, which is inclusive, although potentially not exhaustive: *Apo tin akri tis polis/From the Edge of the City* (Giannaris, 1998), *Kleistoi Dromoi/Dead End Streets* (Ioannou, 2000), *Pes sti morfina akoma tin psahno/Still Looking for Morphine* (Fragas, 2001), *...Ki avrio mera einai/Tomorrow is Another Day* (Masklavanou, 2001), *Mia mera ti nyhta/Athens Blues* (Panousopoulos, 2001), *I poli ton thavmaton/The City of Miracles* (Athanitis, 2004), *Tsiou...* (Papadimitratos, 2005), *Diorthosi/Correction* (Anastopoulos, 2007), *Kolopaida/Jerks* (Kammitis, 2011), *Tungsten* (Georgopoulos, 2011), *L* (Makridis, 2012), *Plateia Amerikis/Amerika Square* (Sakaridis, 2016).

as a referential point of testimony for committed *auteurs*, who draw mostly from the “observational mode” (Nichols, 1991: 38-44; 2010: 172-179) of documentary, thus acting as uninvolved witnesses to social change. Balancing their testimonial and artistic undertones, these films exhibit a strong preoccupation with the ways coexistence with ethnic, religious and sexual alterity is (re)negotiated within a rapidly diversified metropolitan city, whose spatial restructuring is being spurred by opposing forces: on the one hand, public policy aligned to the essentially neoliberal dogma of “modernisation”, which favors technocratic management, streamlining and privatisation; on the other, the makeshift urban social practices of marginalised minorities, implicated in a politics of cultural and physical survival; on the one hand, the sweeping cultural uniformity of globalised, stateless cosmopolitanism, encapsulated in institutional architectural design; on the other, the discursive and material struggle for an “in-between”, lived diasporic identity, which produces hybrid cultural formations.

Casting my focus on two representative films of the time, produced in successive decades, namely *Delivery* (Panayotopoulos, 2004) and *Wasted Youth* (Papadimitropoulos & Vogel, 2011), I note that both films could be identified as fitting the “adventure novel [film, in our case] of everyday life” chronotope, as designated by Bakhtin. This kind of chronotope, in variation to the simple “adventure chronotope”, structures narratives in which the hero does undergo transformation through decisive events, such as encounters, separation, escape, etc., which are intertwined with the spatial coordinates of the action. Nicos Panayotopoulos’s *Delivery* concocts a monological chronotope in terms of plot-space, a “fall from grace” or “loss of innocence” narrative for the main protagonist, a young man of unknown provenance and few words, who reaches Athens by bus one night and possesses no financial means or acquaintances to help him go by. After a brief stint as a street vendor, he ends up getting a job as a pizza delivery boy, before having his motorcycle stolen; he then becomes a beggar. No further information is provided throughout the film about either his past or his personality; he remains a *terra incognita*, a passive receptacle of his surroundings and interactions, a blank canvas where the chronotopic motifs of the “encounter” and the “street” can be imprinted undiluted and in full potency. By the end of the film, the protagonist, despondent and hopeless, finally decides to act, reflecting back to the world its image by going wild: he shoots to kill a random car driver and walks around Omonoia with a gun in his hand, only to be executed by police forces, before ascending upwards, in a dreamlike scene witnessed by his drug-addict co-worker, with whom he enjoyed a brief, unsatisfying fling. Having been acclimatized in an “alien chronotope”, he departs like an alien indeed.

Throughout the film, the camera records the protagonist’s wanderings as he tries to navigate his way across the labyrinthine cityscape of the gloomy Athenian city center. The film casts a dismal, unadorned glance on the 2004 Athenian underbelly, tracking the composite urban ecology around Omonoia

square, consisting of various types of deviant underdogs, from drug addicts to beggars to eccentric sages. Through Panagiotopoulos's poetic realist lens, Omonoia square and the surrounding streetscapes emerge as a *locus horridus*, a babel of multiculturalism gone bad, a morbid fresco of urban decay, whose inhabitants constantly reference death. This is indeed an infernal land where sinful or tormented souls are devoid of agency, hope and above all privacy. The public spaces (streets, arcades, bus stations, squares, apartment block communal areas) of the city center are appropriated by this motley human tribe and become the sites where private practices are normally executed (from love-making to fighting to drug-using to urinating to sleeping), in what amounts to an "intimisation" of the public or a transparentisation of the private spheres. Such processes run parallel to, and comment on, the concomitant growing privatisation and centralised control of the public sphere in the early 2000s, dominated by the advent and consolidation of modernisation as hegemonic ideological paradigm and the institutionalisation of a tight surveillance system on the occasion of the 2004 Olympic Games. The interchangeability and interpenetration of the private and the public sphere are further accentuated by the variegated soundtrack, both in terms of sonorous aesthetics and narrative function. Techno beats, oriental melodies, commercial *bouzouki* tunes and rock ballads echo throughout the film, in many cases starting off as diegetic sound in interiors (as performed by a singer or as radio-emitted music), only to be continued as extra-diegetic sound in outdoor scenes.

Despite the fact that Panayotopoulos showcases Omonoia's district multicultural façade, he ultimately subsumes cultural alterity under the umbrella of the largely undifferentiated category of the "subaltern", in an attempt to counter the dynamic, self-confident and celebratory modernisation and globalisation paradigms. In contrast, Argyris Papadimitropoulos's and Jan Vogel's film *Wasted Youth* establishes a plurality of chronotopes, through the use of intercutting, whereby an extraordinary day in the ultra-mobile life of an adolescent skater is juxtaposed to the tedious, mainly static life of a policeman confined within unhappy domestic and professional settings. Recording nondescript incidents of each character's daily routine in alternation, the chronotopic configuration of the film proceeds as a succession of dichotomous sets defined by clashing stylistic and rhythmic qualities. The opening sequence is telling in this respect. Temporally rigorous, energetic and bordering on a documentarist aesthetic, the sequences concerning adolescent antics feature mostly outdoor settings as arenas of flow within the city or indoor sites with passageways to the exterior, whereas the adult-centered scenes are steeped in an almost claustrophobic, slumbering atmosphere, whether they involve circulating in the street (filmed within the cramped bounds of a police car) or in the domestic habitat (obstructed horizons, lowered shutters). Crucially, when offered a chance to forge a business investment partnership, the policeman cowardly backs off, favoring a conservative attitude to risk. Even though, on a

first, deceptive level, this mirror-opposite chronotopic arrangement seems to structure a conflicting topography of the crisis-ridden Athenian metropolis, marking it as an eventual space of tragedy, it is in paying closer attention to the type of obstructed mobility offered by skating in the city that oppositions collapse. Banging against the walls of a swimming pool, pendulum swinging within wide tubes, unlucky jumps at the Syntagma Square steps, right to left and left to right trajectories within metallic enclaves: the urban space as inhabited by adolescents seems equally hostile and desire-thwarting, the most apposite setting for an arrested coming-of-age narrative or for a botched “adventure film of everyday life”, which does not offer any possibilities for transformation to the juvenile hero. The title of the film, *Wasted Youth*, corresponding to the stickers the group of adolescents print and inscribe the city space with, is not only indicative of the pivotal role spatial forms play in defining social affect, but is also reminiscent of another generation’s predicament, encapsulated in the title of an Athens-based novel, namely, Stratis Tsirkas’s *Lost Spring* (1960’s decade). As Angeliki Milonaki (2013) notes, the film resonates with the cultural discourse of what Vrasidas Karalis calls the “Athenian negative” (Faubion, 2006 in Karalis, 2012: 248-9), which focuses on the negative aspects of the contemporary urban frame and the destabilisation of social relations and characterises the majority of Greek city-films produced during this period.¹⁷

Loosely drawing inspiration from the incidents related to Alexandros Grigoropoulos’s assassination by a policeman in downtown Athens in 2008, the two directors mobilise cultural stereotypes based on binary oppositions, only to subvert them: the luscious, suburban upper-class domicile the young protagonist awakens in at the beginning of the film belongs to a friend of his mother’s,¹⁸ whereas he turns out to be of a more modest, lower-middle class provenance, just like the policeman, who is stripped of the sexual potency and the unbridled machismo normally attributed to the forces of the law. Eventually, the plotspace chronotope, initially geared towards a monologic trajectory, turns out to be partly dialogic, in the sense that the two directors eventually thwart audience expectations with regards to the attribution of culpability for the assassination. In the final scene of the film, the two characters find themselves in the same locality and engage in a minor dispute. Defined both in topographical terms as the distance between the two quarrelling characters and symbolically as a moment of crisis, the “threshold motif”, coupled with the “encounter” and “road”

¹⁷ The cinematic presentation of Athens in disapproving terms appears rather as a constant in recent Greek filmic production, as Nikos Leros notes that in NGC the city in general is presented as an inhospitable space, wherein the protagonists struggle to fit in and adjust (2012: 179).

¹⁸ In terms of topographic delimitation, urban films produced from the 2010s onwards gradually adopt a broader conception of Athens compared to the majority of city films, mostly targeting multiculturalism, racism and xenophobia, produced during the late 1990s-early 2000s, reconstructing it as an enlarged territory, which comprises, and is often exclusively identified with, the suburban area.

motifs introduce chance and contingency as the defining factors, endowing the chronotopic arrangement with the urgent and dramatic momentum of “crisis”, a time when knee-jerk reactions replace patterned behaviors and conventional rules. However, these do not, and cannot, concern the adult protagonist, the restrained hero; the triggering shot is finally fired by the policeman’s sly and expectantly unpredictable partner.

In fact, rigid divisiveness, both in spatial and social terms, and partisanship seem to prevail in many city films produced during, and reflecting upon, the years of economic recession, such as in the film *L* (Makridis, 2012), in which encounter with alterity takes place in an overtly hostile mood (members of the pro-motorcycle tribe abhor and attack members of the pro-car tribe, to which the protagonist initially belongs). Gated domiciles, starkly marked parking spaces, shady car windows swiftly raised, all refer to the imagery and the chronotopic motif of the “frontier”, this time displaced within the urban fabric and incessantly multiplied, in order to regulate the micro-management of everyday contacts and social practices. The protagonist rarely ventures beyond the confines of his car frame and leads a paradoxical, perennially transitory life, while all the while engaging in a highly patterned and recurrent set of professional and intimate practices and routines. Embodying the dissolution or at least the blurring of the exterior/interior division, both protecting the individual from, and allowing for the establishment of a contact with, the surroundings, the vehicle serves as a domicile for the protagonist. Thus, on the one hand the very sense of “home” is divested from the connotations of privacy, interiority and opacity, hinting at the increasing erosion of the private life in postmodernity. On the other, owing to a stylised, minimalist iconography, the public realm is framed as a disconnected sequence of generic any-spaces-whatever: the city center, with its defining features of historicity and ethnic differentiation is all but obliterated, the view from the window is out of focus or blurred, the protagonist commutes between a quintessential postmodern locality, a parking lot of an undefined shopping mall, a roundabout and a seaside cottage. If city films produced during previous decades reflected upon the gradual breakdown of the private realm/social domain division, in this case the cohesion and stability of each component is gravely undermined, to the point of rendering such division redundant. Taking, however, into account the fact that the vehicle also serves as a means of production for the protagonist, as his main occupation consists in transferring jars of honey to an exceedingly demanding customer, further lines of social critique are insinuated, which relate to the limits and the signification of national sovereignty within a context of stifling supranational control.

Within this temporally unstructured and spatially undefined chronotope, the formation of an inner, individualised sense of identity is precluded. Within this context, partisanship as subject positioning occurs and shifts arbitrarily (and, perhaps, for this reason, appears all the more extreme), whereas, devoid of

any emotional investment, subjectivity appears hollow, carried as an empty shell, through performative repetition (as evidenced in scenes where the protagonist is seen mechanically running through dialogue lines articulated during his interactions). If, during the first and the third period, accuracy and truthfulness of representation pertaining to urbanicity constituted much sought-after attributes of engaged *auteurs* – and, *mutatis mutandis*, this also applies to this particular period – a group of films produced during the crisis adhere compulsively to an overtly stylized depiction of urban space, almost questioning its ontological status as actual and pre-existing reality. In this respect, mirroring the emptied, performative subjectivity of their protagonists, such films paradoxically present a passing resemblance to the second period, bearing witness to the deconstruction of entrenched social certainties.

Throughout this article, I have attempted to assess the imagery of Greek urban road movies with regards to the Athenian urban space in key political and social moments of transition in recent history. Acknowledging the socio-cultural significance of the metropolitan topography as both setting and defining actor in the unravelling of social life, I have drawn on Bakhtin's concept of the "chronotope" as a means of elucidating the spatio-temporal coordinates of specific filmic texts and their ideological subtext. Shying away from a familiar tourist topography, the recent Greek filmic production has adopted a mostly realist and/or documentarist aesthetic in order to portray the gloomy and alienating aspects of the urban experience, thus purporting to assume a critical stance towards social reality. If mobility does not apply exclusively to geographical place but, most importantly, to social space (Cattan 2008: 86), then city films can be considered as astute socio-political critiques, which reflect upon the contradictions and aporias of the contemporary Greek social reality, in which the motif of regeneration or rebirth, as an enduring genre convention of road films (Sargeant & Watson 1999: 6-20 in Ireland 2009: 500), seems recurrently thwarted. From Athens as a place of social mobility and moral compromise to Athens as a place of existential malaise, anonymity and westernised commercialism, and from then on to Athens as a multicultural site of widening social cleavages to Athens as a disintegrating and oppressive container of human souls, Greek cinema seems to promote a less than flattering and inviting image of the national social life, encapsulated perhaps in the slogan: "Leave your myth in Greece".

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