

## FILM REVIEW

# *Digger* (2020)

by Georgis Grigorakis

## and ecocinema

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If eco-art is the outcome of art's response to the degradation that has been caused by human interference in nature in order to make money, ecocinema then raises awareness of environmental ethics for our planet through film (Brereton, 2020). Climate change has been a decisive step for world cinema, especially for Hollywood, as some famous blockbuster films by Roland Emmerich indicate (i.e. *The Day after Tomorrow* [2004] and *2012* [2012]), showing us the future risks and also being able to make audiences more sensitive concerning people's safety. Likewise, the profound environmental pollution plaguing China is the reason why Chinese cinema has taken an early eco-turn. Ecocinema flourishes when and where there is an imbalance in the surroundings and that applies to all countries (Rust, Monani and Cubitt, 2013).

Greek cinema has a rather limited but distinct strand of films discussing environmental issues including two older movies dealing with economic interests and the consequences for the public's health caused by environmental pollution: *O Exthros tou Laou/An Enemy of the People* (1972), an adaptation of the eponymous drama of Henrik Ibsen by Giannis Dalianides, and *Ypogeia Diadromi/Underground Passage* (Apostolos Doxiades, 1983), co-written by Apostolos Doxiades and Petros Tatsopoulos. Dalianides sets his film in Greece just before World War II when a sensitive doctor has to protect the public from water pollution in a spa town, where the mayor, his first cousin, is on the opposite side. As Greece in the post-war period was a political quagmire, filmmakers were interested in politically neutral subjects, so as not to become entangled in the censorship mechanism of the authorities; from that perspective, the film adaptation of Ibsen's drama by Dalianides during the Junta was an allegory *per se*. Water pollution as a part of a film's political agenda was also the main theme of the aforementioned ecofilm by Doxiades, a political thriller that deals with the profound ecological threat posed by a factory which is responsible for the leakage of toxic substances. Local people demand that the government

close down the chemical factory and, again, a doctor plays a key role. Likewise, the middle story “Last Lesser White-Fronted Goose” in the portmanteau film *Ola einai Dromos/It's Long Road* (1998) by Pantelis Voulgaris makes biodiversity a key issue. The lesser white-fronted goose (*anser erythropus*) is faced with extinction and today only some breeding pairs are left in Scandinavia. This short story, set in the biotope of the river Evros, and starring Thanassis Veggos, is about the real protection of the birds, seasonally coming south for the winter in Greece, such as the white-fronted goose.

A pioneering short film on the important environmental issue of deforestation was recently released in Greece and is entitled *To Dasos/The Forest* (Lia Tsalta, 2018). A group of tourists is guided around a dystopian museum where the botanical display is artificial and even the doves have become extinct. Plants and animals are described as a distant memory, seemingly to be a genre for science in a meta-world made of stone, on a dystopian cold and white background. Nevertheless, in the end, the same group of tourists completes their guided tour in a real forest. The director decides to take us on a tour into the woods, an allegory of a dystopian future, provided that nature might soon be a touristic attraction. This short ecofilm by Lia Tsalta makes natural habitats a subject to study in a world of rare species and non-wild genres.

Many environmental documentaries have also been produced by Greek filmmakers and professionals engaged in scientific or investigative journalism. Environmental journalism, and not only that in Greece, tends to be ahead of its time. The emblematic *Megara* (Sakis Maniatis and Yorgos Tsemberopoulos, 1974), a documentary about the olive tree owners of Megara struggling to protect their land from expropriation caused by the decision of the Junta to allow the construction of an oil refinery in the area, opened up the way to documentary ecofilming in Greece. Moreover, a new auteur, Yannis Economides, emerged when filming the devastation caused by forest fires in Attica with his extreme eco-reality *Kalimera Nyxta/Good Morning, Night* (1990). Recently, artist and filmmaker Kyriakos Katzourakis renewed the public's interest in environmental issues, especially in the energy transition within the European Union, in the documentary *I Epistrofi tou Promithea/ The Return of Prometheus* (2019). Similarly, the water culture and European and Greek hydropolitics are the topics of the eco-documentaries *STagones/ WAtedrops* (Nelli Psarou, 2014) and *Mehri tin teleftaia stagona: O mystikos polemos tou nerou stin Evropi/Up to the Last Drop: The Secret Water War in Europe* (Yorgos Avgeropoulos, 2017), the latter being the latest out of the twelve films of Avgeropoulos's team about the environment by Small Planet Productions—films which heighten our sensitivity with respect to the ecosystem.

One of the team's eco-documentaries entitled *Hrysos sta hronia tis krisis: O thisavros tis Kassandra / Golden Times-Cassandra's Treasure* (Yorgos Avgeropoulos, 2012) explores the tremendous effect of the goldmines on water and the sustainability of the forest in Skouries in Northern Greece. The mines in

Skouries, in the Greek Macedonian region of Halkidiki, have been under foreign control since 1995, and from 2012 until today there has been a renewal of interest in the mines. The same environmental issue attracted European media attention at that time, including for example the investigative journalists of the “Envoyé spécial” (France 2) from national television in France. Furthermore, anonymous, but influential sources in activist journalism renewed the interest of the public in gold exploitation in Skouries with works such as *Xryses Yposxeseis/Gold Promises* (2013).<sup>1</sup> The case is reminiscent of other countries where foreign gold mining companies exploit the indigenous people—for example of Shor in Siberia,<sup>2</sup> and the locals of the Rosia Montana in the Carpathian Mountains of Romania, where there are the largest gold deposits of Europe.

Around 2020, new international ecofilms were released, being also the directing début of their directors: *Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom* (Pawo Choyning Dorji, 2019), *Veins of the World* (Byambasuren Davaa, 2020) and *Digger* (Georgis Grigorakis, 2020). All three films were transnational co-productions—Bhutan/US, Mongolia/Germany, and Greece/France respectively—providing a strong showing for ecology globally. All three were also nominated for the international list of the American Academy, but only *Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom* was actually short-listed.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly *Veins of the World* is about how a non-Mongolian private gold company manages to relocate the nomads away of their homeland. By promising compensations or just pressuring the natives, the company makes them relocate and stop any resistance. This is an emotional story between Erdene, the activist father—the local leader of a nomadic people refusing to leave their land—and his son Amra, who in need of money, after Erdene’s death in a car accident, joins a provisional team of ninja miners in the grassland.

The golden veins of Mongolia are a significant thematic equivalent for *Digger* while civil resistance is the common link for both films to protest against the exploitation of gold resources under the ground in their countries. *Digger* deals with the environmental imbalance at Skouries in Halkidiki caused by the operation of goldmines in the area, not by making an activist documentary as previously discussed, but a fiction ecofilm. The scenario by Georgis Grigorakis, enriched by Maria Votti and Vaggelis Mourikis, who did some additional rewrites on the script, achieves social realism. Ecocinema is a transnational category; thus, *Digger* is an ecofilm speaking with a global voice.

The main character of *Digger* is Nikitas Kontaxis (Vangelis Mourikis), a 65-year-old man who survives as a farmer, living alone and without any luxuries

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<sup>1</sup> Available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vjfx8\\_4Cmwg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vjfx8_4Cmwg).

<sup>2</sup> ADC: Anti-Discrimination Centre Memorial Brussels (2021).

<sup>3</sup> Regarding the ecofilm for *Lunana* and the climate change in Bhutan, see more in Tsatsani (2021).

in a small cottage in a forest in northern Greece where the locals are under pressure to sell their properties to a foreign gold company. There is nowhere an emphasis on the name of the area, but a single shot of a distant road sign, pointing towards Agion Oros, denotes the location in the background; the director asks for keen-eyed viewers to catch the detail given—that the real place is actually Skouries in Halkidiki. Nikitas's only son, Jonny Doukas (Argyris Pantazaras)—he carries his mother surname—has lived apart from his father for two decades, with his mother Eleni Douka in Crete. Unexpectedly and riding his motorbike, Jonny returns to his birthplace stating from the very beginning his purpose: his mother has recently died and there is a mortgage which is due to be paid off soon. Jonny, according to his mother's will, is to receive a great deal of money with which to secure his future, but his father does not agree. This is a movie about family that turns into a stark confrontation between a father and his son regarding whether they plan to sell their land to the gold company.

In *Digger* the *modus vivendi* of the protagonists is a calm and mainly a standard, but poor, life on their farms, living from their animals and the cultivation of the land, selling their vegetables in local markets or at the main road; agriculture and livestock are the two key points for the local economy. All the residents are also active agents concerning whether or not to sell their own land to the private gold company, as they often discuss in the local bar; the civil resistance against the international trust is strong in the movie and the decision for each plot of land is taken individually by its owner. Thus, the ecological dilemma is different in comparison to the activist documentaries discussed above; the real-life protesters in the two similarly-themed documentaries, *Golden Times—Cassandra's Treasure* and *Gold Promises*, struggle against the official granting of their homeland to foreigners by the Greek state with regards to forest exploitation, water pollution and alternative models for the local economy, such as ecotourism or beekeeping. In *Digger*, by contrast, what is emphasized is the relationship of humans with nature with regards to symbolism: nature is our family mirroring the mutual although potentially conflictual bond between the father and his son.

Nikitas is at first ambivalent, even negative about selling the land, but progressively after talking with his friends from the village in the bar, changes his mind. In the meantime, the son works for the gold company in an effort to make the extra money he needs and also in this way to contrast his father's "conservatism", his choice made not to sell the four hectares of land (officially named "Nowhere Land"). Nikitas, however, is a sensitive father who just needs some time to accept the new regime away from his property in the forest. Jonny, on the other hand, seems to be cruel enough not to forgive his father's choice, and so knocks down their small cottage. The son's behaviour, however, parallels that of his father, because Nikitas had previously destroyed his son's motorbike when he learnt about his affiliation to the company. The motorbike is an element of youth identity, a cheap form of entertainment, but as Jonny is a "solo rider" in

his life (probably as his father is) now—through the bike—he finds himself among peers. In the film, there is a race in the quarry where young people amuse themselves outdoors. This race indicates a collective, besides the personal, pathway in life. Thus, the damage to the motorbike harms Jonny's individuality and sense of freedom but also his sense of belonging. However, the aggressiveness between the two men underlines a deeper bond, fundamental leitmotifs and similarities in their character.

*Digger's* opening scene is a powerful flood in the forest, taking us directly to climate change as a pressing current environmental issue. The slow cinematography uses many close-ups to depict the forest as an enclosed space. The forest is not only scenery, but also the stimulus for human action. As Nikitas declares to his son, we should love the forest, because this is a compensatory approach to nature and its products. A crucial exchange between father and son during a car drive into the forest reinforces the ecological message of the film: we love and we also protect the sustainability of nature at all costs. If some calm after the storm is provided, the film ends in the woods as it started, but in an extremely different mode. The opening scene of the biblical flood indicates the revenge of nature on the human element that forcibly interferes with the ecosystem, while functioning also as a symbol for family crisis. In contrast, the final scene of serenity reflects the peaceful reconciliation between the father and his son, since Jonny decides to stand his ground together with his father. The major fight between the two men ends in the forest, the proving ground of many of the adversaries. However, in the end the son saves the father from death with an excavator that he takes into the middle of the woods. The excavator—indeed this is the digger—takes Nikitas out of the mud he is plunged in, but at a symbolical level, the whole film is about a company that digs underground for gold and precious metals.

All the characters are clear and open with one another concerning their emotional burdens: a dead wife, an aging husband still in love, a young son full of anger, a supportive but ignored girlfriend (Mary played by Sofia Kokkali), many local people in trouble, a whole region in an unreported civil war, a private company attempting to bend people to its will on the quiet, and a forest facing destruction. There is a focus on sentiments and on the recovering of family relationships as a final goal: the father is not just liberated, but completely happy, as he is alive while regaining his family and keeping his property at the film's end. Vaggelis Mourikis as the father succeeds in mastering a non-standard Greek persona in an agricultural context, a workaholic who labours essentially in nature and for nature; as a father, Nikitas is fair but not compliant and the same applies to his son. Argyris Pantazaras as the son identifies himself following similar patterns, but as a younger man he is full of anger, dreams and energy. Mourikis and Pantazaras perform extremely well two roles of great depth, covering the range of fundamental emotions from surprise, sadness, fear and finally affection.

The film narrates a powerful story of binary dilemmas, between peace and disaster, love and dispute, closeness and distance, past and future and, last but not least, nature and man. The film poses too the classic question of the Enlightenment, nature or culture, along with issues relating to gender. Nature symbolically is the feminine and culture stands for the masculine. This is a “buddy” movie, so for that reason women play only supporting roles; Mary as the girlfriend of Johnny is an excellent example how the young man makes her an object for sexual pleasure and not fully an equal partner in life—their dialogues are gender-based and their relationship has no happy end, but is incomplete. Violence appears in the relationship of the young couple as well as between the father and the son, so in this way gender-based violence is not a pressing theme for women only, but also for men, as the feminist agenda today indicates regarding the fourth wave. The sustainability of our future as human agents is under threat, so *Digger* depicts gender inequality in Greek society through an ecofeminist frame, which seems promising.

*Digger* actually responds in a new way to “family crisis biopolitics”, a difficult issue in Greek cinema, as it has been discussed by scholars primarily in relation to the Weird Wave (i.e. Papanikolaou, 2018). The finale is not an open-ended one, as we were used to from the directors of the Weird Wave, but now in *Digger* the final scene follows the line of traditional screenwriting, with the promise represented by a close father-son relationship: nothing else but love and the Greek family of course. This is one message of this family story in the forest, but the ecological message goes for all useful human communication with measures taken to prevent the exploitation of the forest, or even the disaster of any change in our habitats. As with *Veins of the World* from Mongolia, the Greek *Digger* is an excellent example how ecofilms are transnationally produced around the same themes within the global context of ecocinema. If this is a new beginning for Greek cinema, what follows should be studied carefully; from that perspective, *Digger* appears to be a very promising re-start.

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