

**BOOK REVIEW**

# *The Cinema of Yorgos Lanthimos: Film, Form, Philosophy*

Edited by Eddie Falvey

New York and London: Bloomsbury Publishing  
Inc, 2022

Eleftheria Rania Kosmidou

Lecturer in Film  
University of Salford

The success of a number of Greek films since the early 2010s<sup>1</sup> has fostered great interest in the study of contemporary Greek cinema and the Greek Weird Wave<sup>2</sup>. Coupled with the global success of Yorgos Lanthimos's recent films, conversations around representations of power, isolation, sex, trauma, gender, and violence in this new phenomenon in Greek cinema provide a critical framework of this emerging area of study. Eddie Falvey's edited collection *The Cinema of Yorgos Lanthimos: Film, Form, Philosophy* published in 2022 by Bloomsbury is a welcome addition to the scholarly study of Yorgos Lanthimos's work for two reasons: firstly, it is, at the moment of writing, the first book in the

---

<sup>1</sup>Films such as *Dogtooth* (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2009), *Strella/A Woman's Way* (Panos H. Koutras, 2009), *Akadimia Platonos/Plato's Academy* (Filippos Tsitos, 2009), *Attenberg* (Athina Rachel Tsangari, 2010), *Hora Proelefsis/Homeland* (Syllas Tzoumerkas, 2010), *Wasted Youth* (Argyris Papadimitropoulos and Jan Vogel, 2011), *Alps* (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2012), *L* (Babis Makridis, 2012), *I Eonia Epistrofi tou Antoni Paraskeva/The Eternal Return of Antonis Paraskevas* (Elina Psykou, 2014), *Luton* (Michalis Konstantatos, 2014), among others, have received attention in the international film festival circuit.

<sup>2</sup> A term coined by Steve Rose in his article "Attenberg, Dogtooth and the weird wave of Greek cinema" published in *The Guardian* in 2011.

English language dedicated solely to the filmmaker's work; secondly, it offers a wide range of essays that provide both broad as well as niche and at times intriguing insights into the subject matter, which it explores from an array of critical, analytical, and in some cases polemical perspectives. The book is divided into five parts: origins and identity (I); experiencing Lanthimos (II); forms and authorship (III); genre and variation (IV); and gender, sex, and sexuality (V).

This book comes at a time when the academic study of contemporary Greek cinema has increased in film studies, locally and internationally. However, despite the increase in scholarly literature on the Greek Weird Wave on the one hand, and the study of individual contemporary Greek films on the other, so far the academic study of Yorgos Lanthimos's films in the English language has been limited to journal articles and chapters in books on contemporary Greek cinema or the Weird Wave. Here I am referring to London's (2011) article "Greek Cinema: Dark, Haunting and Wonderfully Weird", Angelos Koutsourakis's (2012) article "Cinema of the Body: The Politics of Performativity in Lars Von Trier's *Dogville* and Yorgos Lanthimos' *Dogtooth*", Afroditi Nikolaidou's (2014) article "The Performative Aesthetics of the Greek New Wave", Stamos Metzidakis's (2014) article "No Bones to Pick with Lanthimos' Film *Dogtooth*", Liviu Lutas's (2015) article "Weirdness, Feel-Bad and New Extremity in Contemporary European Film: the Examples of Greece, Austria, France and Romania", as well as to Marios Psaras's (2016) book *The Queer Greek Weird Wave: Ethics, Politics and the Crisis of Meaning*, Tonia Kazakopoulou's and Mikela Fotiou's (2017) book *Contemporary Film Cultures from 1990 to the Present*, and Dimitris Papanikolaou's (2023) book *Greek Weird Wave: A Cinema of Biopolitics*. In this climate, Eddie Falvey's edited collection with a sole focus on the filmmaker's work opens up a critical space for the study of Yorgos Lanthimos's films within the English language literature.

Chapter 1 is the introduction to the book and as such it sets out the aims and the methodology proposed while presenting a snapshot of the chapters that follow. One of Falvey's first tasks is to problematise the Greekness of Yorgos Lanthimos's cinema, a recurring theme throughout the book indeed. While one might question whether his book overlooks the value of his collaborators when it comes to positioning the filmmaker as an auteur, Falvey goes on to discuss Lanthimos's authorial continuity in terms of form and content. Various scholarly works have situated Lanthimos's films within different waves and cycles, and the argument most commonly put forward has been that his films allegorically comment on the complex sociopolitical and economic crisis in Greece. However, as Falvey argues, the locality of Lanthimos's films is not a given since his later works move from the local to the global. Lanthimos's work is interconnected, he says, underlined by postmodern hybridity, influenced both by Greek as well as European art cinema, with a revisionist take on the genre. After briefly introducing Lanthimos's films in chronological order, their production details, and revisionist generic elements, Falvey uses Warren Buckland's "storyworld"

method to point to a number of recurring themes in the filmmaker's work. The above approaches are then used in the subsequent chapters.

In chapter 2, one of the stronger chapters in the book that touches upon the Greekness of Lanthimos's early work, Afroditi Nikolaidou divides Lanthimos's career into three phases: his experimentation phase (second half of 1990s to the early 2000s); his second phase when he establishes his unique style in *Kinetta* (2005), *Dogtooth* (2009) and *Alps* (2011); and his third phase when he establishes himself as an international auteur. She considers here the first phase. Using Martin Jay's concept of the "scopic regime", she examines Lanthimos's early material in which she discerns two interweaving scopic regimes, namely intertextuality and intermediality, the latter being a pastiche evidenced in Lanthimos's video dances. Both intertextuality and pastiche are not only integral to postmodernity, but also a dominant trend in Greece at the end of the twentieth century as Nikolaidou argues. Connecting contexts, paratexts and texts she contends that intertextuality and intermediality in his early works address specific scopic regimes of the late 1990s to the early 2000s manifested also in the performative and kinesthetic forms of his later work.

In chapter 3 Vrasidas Karalis, through an examination of *Kinetta*, argues that Lanthimos's work belongs to global cinema, while his most recent films are truly transnational and global. However, he goes on to, paradoxically, claim that it is through the prism of "glocality", namely "a blend of the local and the global", that we can explore Lanthimos's status as a contemporary global auteur. After problematising the existence of a Weird Wave, he sees affinities between *Kinetta* and the Greek cinematic tradition, namely what he calls "parodic absurdism" since the 1980s, a trend of anti-illusionist and antinaturalist cinema with narrative ellipsis and expressionism. For Karalis, this style reaches its peak in *Alps*, while his later films utilise narrative emplotment, concluding that *Kinetta* hovers in space between a narrative in search of a story and a purely visual form exploring its limitations.

In the following chapter (4) Asbjørn Grønstad examines *Alps*. As the author claims, while Lanthimos's *Dogtooth*, *The Lobster* (2015) and *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2017) are infused with an experience of confinement and spectatorial detachment, it is in *Alps* where confinement is explored in full. As the author argues, Lanthimos's provocative cinema addresses and criticises powers of governance and biopolitical regimes, distinctions between the absurd and dystopian, and the familiar and the uncanny. His characters both conform to and resist such powers as they blur the boundaries between authenticity and performativity. Hence, his films invite spectators to think about the relation between theatricality and ethics. Grønstad finds that Lanthimos's work shares similarities to the European modernist cinematic tradition of the stylised, the dedramatised and the depsychologised as well as to the European transgressive cinema of the extreme and the minimalism of Dogme 95. The film then is analysed in relation to post humanism and uniform societies where difference

has no place, anything can be replaced, and identities are nourished by performativity and pretence, themes also evident in Lanthimos's other films.

In chapter 5 Ina Karkani discusses *The Lobster* and its affective adriftness. Using Jean-François Lyotard's notion of "drifting", a style that connotes non-linearity, unpredictability, transformations and becomings, the author argues that the film creates a viewing experience that makes the spectator feel adrift. Making an unfortunate comparison at the beginning between *The Lobster* and the film essayist Chris Marker's film *La Jetée* (1962), she finds that Marker's patchwork diegesis is evident in *The Lobster*'s opening scene. This mishap of comparing *The Lobster*, which clearly is not an essay film, to *La Jetée*, is, however, later on compensated by a detailed film analysis and a change of focus. As Karkani shows, the cold stylistic treatment of the opening scene, which sets the spectator adrift through a lack of agency due to narrative ellipses, creates paradoxically an affective charge, something that Lanthimos succeeds in throughout the film. The affective adriftness of the film comments on contemporary ruptures in the collective human experience and the oppressiveness of global sociopolitical structures. The author concludes that while the film's ambiguity opens up space for a multitude of readings, Lanthimos employs style in his film to point to what it feels to be human in contemporary societies: dislocated, disoriented and adrift.

The next chapter (6) sees Eddie Falvey discussing spectatorship, spectatorial distance and ethical film watching in relation to Lanthimos's work. He contends that Lanthimos's cinema is a cinema of apathy, and his dispassionate style calls on the viewer to become an active spectator who thinks about the ethical dimensions of what they are seeing. The weirdness of his films is often found in performances and an apathetic narrative that culminates in dislocation and otherness. While one would think that such an approach begs for the utilisation of Brecht, Falvey mentions Brecht only in passing and jumps to Jacques Rancière to explain the effect of Lanthimos's style. According to Rancière spectatorial emancipation is the result of the spectator returning agency to the self, and this is what Lanthimos's style fosters, Falvey argues. The author goes on to differentiate Lanthimos's cinema of apathy from the cinema of cruelty, since in the case of the latter there is passive acceptance of a film's morality. In Lanthimos's films, however, violence is ambiguous and not straightforward, and it is this affective ambiguity that promotes critical engagement. However, despite a claim that the form of the films will be discussed, the analysis offered is mostly on the level of narrative, as Falvey goes on to examine spectatorship by way of three case studies, namely apathy as the sole mode of communication in *Dogtooth* and the incestuous sex scene between the two siblings, the seduction scene in *The Lobster*, and the presentation of a monstrous mother who is incapable of sacrificing her own life to save her children in *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*.

In chapter 7 Angelos Koutsourakis explores *The Lobster* and contends that the film exhibits Kafkaesque themes and motifs. The film's motif of metamorphosis as a critique of neoliberal forces is analogous to Kafka's interest in animality as a critique of conformity, while other Kafkaesque traits in the film include the deadpan humour, the critique of liberalism and human compliance with repressive authority. Employing Deleuze and Guattari's idea of the animal as a way out, but not freedom, and the paralleling of the animal with bachelorhood in Kafka, as well as Danta's thesis that animals in Kafka are in-between and bachelorhood acts as a metaphor for the exclusion of a person from the human world, Koutsourakis argues that Lanthimos's embracing of animality in the film, much like Kafka's, speaks to broader contemporary political issues and humanity's inability to respond to the political impasse it is faced with.

In chapter 8 Michael Lipiner and Nathan Abrams explore Lanthimos's English language films and they find similarities between them and Stanley Kubrick's cinema. According to the authors, Lanthimos shares Kubrickian cinematic devices such as the "wandering camera" or the "camera gaze", the reverse zoom, and an unidentified narrator, while his camera with strange angles and fish-eye lens shots is voyeuristic and hidden, a spying spectator indeed. Such devices create claustrophobic feelings. According to the authors both filmmakers create an on-screen omniscient narrator who often makes judgements upon the society depicted in their films. They compare *The Lobster* to *Clockwork Orange* (1971), *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* to *The Shining* (1980), and *The Favourite* (2018) to *Barry Lyndon* (1975). The conclusion is that Lanthimos's work, which they call postmodern, raises questions about morality and ethics and builds upon Kubrick's cynicism about humanity as a victim of the absurdity and violence of the universe, while both filmmakers criticise both American and British (aristocratic or bourgeois) societies.

In chapter 9 Nepomuk Zettl explores the absurd in *Dogtooth*, *The Lobster*, and *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*. As the author states, in Lanthimos's films tragedy is combined with the banality of the everyday, absurdist situations are strange and familiar at the same time. Using the theatre of the absurd as a theoretical framework, Zettl argues that the nonsensical dialogue, the irrational action, the absurd and asymmetrical *mise-en-scène* as well as the enormous or claustrophobic diegetic spaces in Lanthimos's films, techniques evident in the absurdist theatre, create spectatorial alienation. Moments of closeness in the films in fact become uneasy. Using Derrida's notion of shame, the author states that Lanthimos's interest in human-animal relations has also an alienating effect on the viewer. Finally, as in the theatre of the absurd, his films do not offer closure or catharsis. Rather, the irrational becomes the new normal through which the now alienated spectator is invited to observe the weirdness of human nature and behaviour.

In the following chapter (10) Savina Petkova discusses animal metaphors in Lanthimos's films. In her account, his films portray rigid social orders and systems of discipline. Hence, they are political allegories. Animals in all his films are complex signifiers and metaphors for the human condition. In *Dogtooth* the animal metaphor is present in conversations about the dog training and/as parenting while the dog and the children are interchangeable. In *The Lobster* the metamorphosis is the metaphor for the impossible separation between animal and human. In *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* the metaphor of the absent deer is the cause of the violence in the film. In *The Favourite* the animals are a negative metaphor, a metaphor for the Queen's dead children. However, the author comes to a contradiction since, as she also admits, *Kinetta* and *Alps* are excluded; there are no animals in these films. Using the concept of metaphor, which is not mere substitution, the author concludes that animal metaphors in Lanthimos's films can take many forms and perform an ethical function.

In chapter 11 Geoff King is interested in *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* and genre, in particular the psychological revenge thriller. The author focuses on the combination of art cinema and genre in the film manifested at the textual level, narrative, style, characterisation, moral ambiguity, and music. According to King the art cinema characteristics of the film, namely the narrative ellipses and its form, challenge genre. However, the distance the film creates in terms of the characters and the subsequent distortion point to genre since distortion is associated with horror. Also, in the second half of the film, when the central plot is revealed, the film becomes clearly generic.

James Clauss in chapter 12 analyses Lanthimos's mythopoetic interests by way of looking at unnatural power dynamics and the theme of control in his films. Clauss argues that Lanthimos's central characters submit to empowered individuals. He analyses *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* by way of looking at guilt, proposing that we could look at Martin as an incarnation of Steven's guilt; perhaps Martin is not really there and is playing out in Steven's mind. Drawing analogies between Euripedes's *Iphigenia in Aulis*, Clauss contends that Steven, a respectable surgeon, is the equivalent of Agamemnon, and like Agamemnon will soon be under the control of a supernatural force. Similarly, *Kinetta* shows Lanthimos's interest in power, systems of control and violence, which often adopt mythical dimensions, as the officer in the film resembles Calchas and Odysseus in *Iphigenia in Aulis*. In *Dogtooth* the parents lose a child as a result of extreme control, something echoed in *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*. Sadistic control is evident in *Alps* too in the film's quest for identity, begging the question "who am I?", one of Oedipus's questions in versions of the myth. In *The Lobster* the main protagonist at the end is considering blinding himself, like Oedipus, while *The Favourite* clearly explores the power of control.

In the following chapter (13) Alex Lykidis interestingly and convincingly discusses *The Favourite* through the lens of the gothic and the grotesque. The film's obvious characteristics of the post heritage film, a more critical subgenre,

namely the focus on the absolutism of a British monarch, a foreign director, genre hybridity, historical anachronisms, queerness, performativity and a confrontational style, distance the film from its historical subject matter and the genre's conventions. Lykidis argues that Lanthimos's portrayal of Queen Anne's court allegorically reflects the sociopolitical dynamics of neoliberalism. Linking the film to the gothic, more specifically to neoliberal gothic, the author claims that Lanthimos succeeds in defamiliarising the context and so manages to criticise undemocratic systems of governance. According to Lykidis, the filmmaker does this through his alienating set design and *mise-en-scène*, and his emphasis on a cinematography that denaturalises the narrative space. Although one would expect more analysis of the grotesque in the film, the chapter's discussion of the gothic is illuminating.

Tonia Kazakopoulou in chapter 14 polemically examines Lanthimos's *Kinetta*, *Dogtooth* and *Alps*, and the representation of women in them. As she argues, the representation of women in these films is problematic despite female characters being central in them, and this is something that needs to be addressed in the literature. Although the films seem to grant agency to the women characters, and women at times rebel against patriarchal systems in the above films—after all, these films have been perceived as progressive in terms of form, content and politics—their rebellious acts ultimately lead them to their annihilation. In the films under study young women are systematically driven to their death literally or symbolically despite their acts of resistance. Such systems of representation then are in fact misogynistic and offer damaging notions about women even as the films set out to examine the failures of patriarchy, the author concludes.

In chapter 15 Alice Haylett Bryan is interested in the weird sex scenes in Lanthimos's films. The chapter argues that Lanthimos's depiction of sex and sexual acts in his films is where his work is associated with European extreme cinema through a combination of realism and emotional alienation. Sex in Lanthimos's films is a form of transaction, a way to achieve a personal goal, or a means of obtaining pleasure for the self. Bryan's first task is to theorise the Weird Wave, as indeed a contested category. Similarly, a satisfactory definition of European extreme cinema also proves difficult to achieve. The author contends that it is the lack of romance, the way sex scenes are depicted and their use to affect the spectator, that differentiates European extremism from pornography for example, and it is in this context where Lanthimos's films align with European extreme cinema. The argument works in the case of *Dogtooth*, but it stumbles, as the author also admits, in the case of *The Lobster*, while it also becomes problematic when the author discusses *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* and *The Favourite*, mainly because European extremism is a style that creates affect; it does not aim at distancing the spectator.

In the last chapter (16) Marios Psaras examines *The Lobster* and its queer posthumanism as a critique of the heteropatriarchal premises of humanism.

Popular culture's fascination with the posthuman, which is interested in "body-hopping", genetic manipulation, reproductive technologies, virtual reality, and concepts such as becoming, alterity, the transgression of boundaries and the position of humanity in general, challenges any focus on the individual self in relation to a particular body. According to Psaras, in the film, humanism's pervasive and repressive moralisation of sex and sexuality is a social construct. The film as the author concludes, is a queer, weird, posthumanist text that criticises any enlightenment, modernist or postmodernist ideas or fixations on what it means to be human.

This volume is the first book dedicated to Yorgos Lanthimos's work. Together these chapters offer a rich addition to the field, but it is notable that there remains a strong focus on the global in terms of Lanthimos's style and influences with relatively little consideration of the local, namely Lanthimos's affinities with Greek cinematic traditions. Also, a concluding chapter that draws together the main themes across the chapters would have been helpful. However, these are only small omissions. Eddie Falvey's edited collection is a valuable examination of the filmmaker's work. It is the different perspectives of the contributors and the theoretical framework that make this edited collection a valuable addition to the scholarship on Yorgos Lanthimos.

## REFERENCES

- Kazakopoulou, T. and Fotiou, M. (2017) (eds.), *Contemporary Film Cultures from 1990 to the Present*, Bern: Peter Lang.
- Koutsourakis, A. (2012), 'Cinema of the body: the politics of performativity in Lars Von Trier's *Dogville* and Yorgos Lanthimos' *Dogtooth*', *Cinema: Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image*, 3, pp. 84-108.
- London, V. B. (2011), 'Greek Cinema: Dark, Haunting and Wonderfully Weird', *The Economist*, 6.
- Lutas, L. (2015), 'Weirdness, Feel-Bad and New Extremity in Contemporary European Film: the Examples of Greece, Austria, France and Romania', *Ekphrasis*, 2, pp. 88-102.
- Metzidakis, S. (2014), 'No Bones to pick with Lanthimos' Film *Dogtooth*, *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, 32: 2, pp. 367-392.
- Nikolaidou, A. (2014), 'The Performative Aesthetics of the Greek New Wave', *Filmicon: Journal of Greek Film Studies*, 2, pp. 20-44.
- Papanikolaou, D. (2023), *Greek Weird Wave: A Cinema of Biopolitics*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Psaras, M. (2016), *The Queer Greek Weird Wave: Ethics, Politics and the Crisis of Meaning*, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rose, S. (2011), 'Attenberg, *Dogtooth* and the weird wave of Greek cinema', *The Guardian*.