

**JOURNAL REVIEW**

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It is by now undeniable that Greek cinema is in the spotlight of the international film festival network. *Kynodontas/Dogtooth* (Lanthimos, 2009) and *Attenberg* (Tsangari, 2010) were not just mere exceptions. Although we would definitely need to conduct an exhaustive research to comprehend and analyze the reasons for such a flourishing, we can state that, as a phenomenon, New Greek Wave (or Greek Weird Wave as it has been called in reviews, press conferences, interviews and film festival catalogues) feeds, and is fed by, media and it has been raised to prominence by an international communication network. This makes me wonder where Greek Film Studies stand. It almost goes without saying that they are not in the spotlight of the world-wide academia. The truth is that, as Lydia Papadimitriou and Yannis Tzioumakis have noticed, scholarship on Greek cinema has done little to cross the borders (2012: 9), while quality is not always first-rate. As Papadimitriou has eloquently expressed it, “the quantitative wealth of publication on Greek cinema does not coincide with work on Greek Film Studies” (2009: 51). It seems, therefore, that Greek Film Studies are still striving to find their place within a competitive world-wide publishing environment.

One can identify many reasons for this introversion and delay. Academic research and writing are time-consuming and sometimes monotonous procedures and usually come to materialize some time after the cinematic and social phenomena they deal with. Academic research also needs appropriate funding and a nurturing environment, something that most Greek researchers are deprived of. Moreover, up until fifteen or so years ago, we could scarcely speak of a Greek film scholars’ community. Greek Film Studies have been constrained to parochialism, exceptionalism or simply the Greek language. And finally, what has become obvious is that, in trying to produce Greek film history

and criticism, researchers have left film theory behind. Most of Greek scholars do not produce film theory or a theory of film historiography, something that, first of all, could revive interest in their other writings. If the concern for film theory remains minor, Greek film scholarship's work is endangered to remain a hushed discourse for a peripheral field of study that does not propose new concepts, not even de-familiarize old ones that could be used outside the field of Greek cinema.

Within this rather disappointing context, the latest publications on Greek Cinema in English, including several texts and essays spread in different collections and journals not exclusively concerned with Greek cinema, as well as monographs and edited volumes within the field of Film Studies (such as *Greek Cinema: Texts, Histories, Identities* [Papadimitriou & Tzioumakis 2012] or *A History of Greek Cinema* [Vrasidas Karalis 2012]) are really welcome. And hopefully they will prove to be the beginning of an expansion of this specific academic field that will grow in parallel with the international interest in Greek cinema, and not remain a short-term exception in a milieu where academic research in humanities and arts is becoming less and less popular and financially alluring. The double issue of the *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* (vol. 37, 2011), edited by Stratos E. Constantinidis and Dan Georgakas, occupies a prominent position among the recent English-language publications dedicated to Greek Cinema, and is the subject of the following review.

Going through the introduction of this special issue on Greek cinema, one reads a rather exhaustive description by Constantinidis of the process of reviewing the papers for an eventually aborted volume of the *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* turned into the editing of the *Hellenic Diaspora's* volume under consideration. Constantinidis gives perhaps too much of inside information about the process of selecting and reviewing the essays and thus the reader becomes unfortunately opinionated, already from the beginning, by learning why the essays were not initially accepted as high-quality papers by the *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*. In my view, a discussion on the trends of recent Greek Film Studies or some critical reflection on the subjects of the essays would be more interesting and fruitful.

The latter is exactly what I would like to elaborate on with my review, setting aside the fact that the publication has some typing mistakes, missing titles in its bibliography, wrong dates and so on. I would like to focus on the strengths and weaknesses of the overall issue as a work that is comprised of selective essays of the general field of Greek Film Studies. More importantly, I would like to focus on the possible methodologies of historiography and film criticism that the papers explicitly or implicitly suggest or should have suggested.

Overall though, one has to admit that most of the papers (with a couple of exceptions) either do not provide clear methodological strategies or have a weak theoretical framework, which they do not develop sufficiently in their attempt to connect an analysis of cultural phenomena with Film Studies. Furthermore, most essays do not succinctly place Greek cinema in wider cinematic contexts, subsequently treating it as an exceptional phenomenon condemned in self-containment and enclosedness.

Reading the *Journal of Hellenic Diaspora*, one can detect that the field of Greek Film Studies has flourished since the respective issue of the *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* in 2000 by combining different types of methodological approaches and covering different kinds of subjects: star studies (Athena Kartalou), the city in film (Angeliki Milonaki and Anna Poupou), film criticism (Achilleas Ntellis), narrative analysis (Tonia Kazakopoulou, Maria Paradeisi and N. Y. Potamitis), study of the modes of production (Giannis Skopeteas) and, most importantly, a neglected area of Greek film history, the history of censorship that is proposed by a most interesting essay by Panayiota Mini.

Half of the essays use narrative analysis of specific films, a practice that is definitely not something new to Greek Film Studies. Narrative analysis is one of the most common methods for understanding film and there are many ways to conduct it, although all of them finally seem to stem from, or, in a way, communicate with the early Russian formalism. What one notices here is that, in the end, narrative analysis, as used by Greek Film Studies, does not limit itself anymore to the revelation of implicit or symptomatic meanings of a self-existent reality outside discourse. Narrative analysis – with a focus on plot, story and visual mechanisms – is used as a framework for film historiography and cinematic (not social) criticism. Therefore, it is interesting that some authors, like Kazakopoulou and Paradeisi, apply it to recent films at last, while others, like Potamitis use narrative analysis to suggest new taxonomies or new criteria for historiography.

Kazakopoulou's essay focuses on the narrative and character construction of the popular comedy *O Orgasmos tis Ageladas/The Cow's Orgasm* (1997) – made by a female director, Olga Malea – by highlighting the balance between the juxtaposition of opposites (both in themes and visual composition); a balance hard to keep that will be deconstructed at the end of the film in order to convey a strong ideological meta-commentary on its theme (namely patriarchy in Greek rural society). One can also read, between the lines, exaggeration (or excess) as a rhetoric trope for comedy and for gender performance, something that could lead to further elaboration.

With a more formalist approach, Paradeisi's paper suggests the concept of the "minimalist" narrative for some recent Greek films, made mostly by young directors, analyzing *Roz/Pink* (Alexandros Voulgaris, 2006) and *Valse Sentimentale* (Constantina Voulgari, 2007). The concept, as far as I am aware of, has not been previously used for Greek cinema breaking thus a new ground in terms of suggesting such a categorization within the corpus of contemporary Greek film. It would be interesting to complement this premise with the analysis of more films, in order to get a concise definition of the "minimalist" narrative's specific characteristics, which distinguish it from other types of narrative in Greek cinema. Plus this could clarify subtle distinctions that may exist within the label of cinema *d'art* narration, a troubled and blurry-treated concept even in the prolific David Bordwell book *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985).

A new kind of taxonomy of *Palios Ellinikos Kinimatografos*/Old Greek Cinema is suggested by Potamitis. His essay asserts, through narrative structure analysis, the existence of a hybrid generic category of Greek film. Potamitis argues that apart from the two dominant Greek genres of melodrama and comedy there are films that transcend the clear distinction of these categories and migrate inter-generically. This means that both narrative structure and the construction of space and time derive from either a melodramatic or a farcical world, which are presented in a functional rotation. One of Potamitis's essay's strengths is the examination of the melodramatic and the comical as witnessed in both the "state of narrative and the visual tension" (p.154) of two films, i.e. *Grousouzis/The Jinxed Man* (Yorgos Tzavellas, 1952) and *Despinis Eton 39/A 39Year-Old Maiden* (Alekos Sakellarios, 1954). Potamitis's essay surely contributes to a better understanding of the taxonomies of Greek cinema, as well as to a reconsideration of Greek film history and generic categorization.

Milonaki and Poupou describe the images of Athens as they are conveyed from the so-called *Athinaiki Sholi*/Athens School, a term coined by Aglaia Mitropoulou in 1968 (42-68) to address a specific set of 1950s popular films that explored the Athenian iconography and the aesthetics of authenticity. Milonaki, starting from a broader perspective, categorizes the popular films of Old Greek Cinema as having either a "public view" or a "private view" and places the Athens School films in the first category. Milonaki is concerned with the referentiality of cinema (narrative as representation of an external world) and she premises the films' function as "survival kits for the newly urbanized audiences" (p. 99). Moreover, Milonaki, while also commenting on film form, asserts that the urban melodramas of the 1950s adopted "a neorealist style regarding Athens under the influence of two trends: Italian neorealism and Greek ethnography" (p. 99). It seems to me that a more thorough analysis of the concept of "ethnographic neorealist style" would have added some extra value to this essay. Milonaki contributes, with her categorization, to the periodization of Old Greek Cinema

and more precisely to Yanna Athanassatou's scheme that distinguishes three periods: one from 1950 to 1958 that represented a collective popular memory, a transitional biennium (1958-1960) when authentic popular codes contested with new petit-bourgeois popular elements, and a third one from 1960 to 1967 when authentic popular culture turned into mass mainstream culture (Athanassatou 2001: 383-385).

Poupou examines the spatial representation of Athens School from a different approach. She begins her argument by providing a context of the field that connects the city with cinema. As she mentions, films are the "sociological" and "historical records" for remembering and forgetting the cities. Her interest is then turned towards three Athens School films and their "narrative geography" that derives from a combination of narrative and aesthetic analysis, a geography that finally confines the action within the borders of *Plaka* (the old historical neighborhood of Athens) creating an "urban village", a safe haven and an oppressive environment. Her findings are important for Greek film history because she reinforces the consistency of spatial narrative of Athens School, she adds to the general historiography of Greek film the notion of the "films of the alley" (and not the street) and she tracks the traces of the Athens School back to the French films of the 1930s that presented the notion of the '*quartier*'.

Betty Kaklamanidou, using transtextuality, studies four Greek blockbusters and reveals in them immigration as a 'hypotext' presented "with a touch of the Hollywood narrative mode and visual splendor" (p. 36). But, as she conducts her analysis, the concept of 'hypotext' becomes rather blurred in the main corpus of the essay, although there is a very clear and useful description of it in the footnote no 2. For example, a question raised is whether the 'hypotext of immigration' is a historical discourse, a subject matter or the earlier films on immigration. Perhaps a longer essay would have clarified immigration as a theme transtextually motivated in Greek film narratives and have revealed the changing cinematic codes of expressing it.

Beyond narrative analysis one can identify other methodological trends in this special issue. Through a feminist approach, the representation of women in Greek cinema – a beloved theme of Greek Film Studies – is the subject of Maria Komninos's essay. However, the research field of this paper is too broad (from the silent era to contemporary Greek cinema providing also an equally broad historic and cultural framework) and the exegesis of the female representations often seems to have come out too easily and even include the director's motives, as in the case of Michael Cacoyannis (p. 83). Nevertheless, this essay provides an interesting analysis of feminist discourse in *Stella* (Cacoyannis, 1955) and helps the reader get an overview of the changing roles of women throughout the history of Greek cinema.

Skopeteas's essay suggests the examination of the "modes of practice" and the "modes of production" of contemporary Greek cinema revealing an imperative need of Greek Film Studies. He is right to mention that, without this kind of research, Greek film history will be uncompleted and marked by several unanswered questions. But for this kind of work one needs a substantial description of methodology, something that is missing from this paper, which contains some very loose deductions. For example, he sets a rather unexplained argument, which states that the majority of the filmmakers who grew up before the television era and used the classical mode of filmmaking "later tended to ignore technological advances" (p. 188). Moreover, his interesting tripartite category (classical, auteur, intertextual mode) raises many questions in this paper as it is not clear how it came out and demands from the reader a previous knowledge of Skopeteas's earlier work where he properly explained these matters. This type of fruitful approach that has been influenced by the work of David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson and Janet Staiger should continue more concretely. It is necessary for Greek film historiography of this methodological attitude either to cover larger periods of film production and provide an extensive analysis of all its aspects (technological, economical, aesthetical, etc.) or provide thorough scrutiny of one small aspect that will explain deeply the paths taken in a film's production. In short, it seems to me that Roland Barthes's premise that "a little formalism turns one away from History, but a lot brings one back to it" (1972: 118) is essential to bear it in mind for this type of work.

Another topic, represented only by one essay, is the field of star studies as exemplified in Greek cinema. Kartalou writes on Greek comedians and Stardom and uses Lambros Constandaras as a case study, picking up on a discussion of the Greek star system that has already been treated by numerous scholars like Eliza-Anna Delveroudi, Athanassatou, Paradeisi and others. She focuses on a male star in order to uncover the relations between the mode of production, the generic conventions and the male star image. She defines very clearly the parameters by which one can trace and interpret a star's career and she concludes by referring Constandaras's lack of sex appeal. Her suggestions would definitely benefit in the future from more case studies and perhaps from taking into account another parameter, that of film performance.

Finally, two essays that definitely break new ground in the field of Greek Film Studies are those of Achilleas Ntellis and Panayiota Mini. Ntellis explores an unknown area of Greek Film Studies, one that deals with the history and ideological assumptions of Greek film criticism. He takes the journal *Synchronos Kinimatografos/Contemporary Cinema* as a case study and the film critic Vassilis Rafaelidis as a key figure of the period. He discusses how this generation of film critics constrained themselves to a schematic distinction between highbrow and lowbrow art. Ntellis's essay sheds new light on the historiography and reception

of the so-called *Neos Ellinikos Kinimatografos*/New Greek Cinema. Nonetheless, the word “Marxist” in the article appears devoid of both its depth and epistemological function since the essay lacks a theoretical background on the Marxist approach to Film Studies.

Original and meticulously written, Mini’s essay gives this volume a valuable status. She explores a rather neglected area of Greek film that rests at the crossroads of film and cultural studies, art and politics. She reveals a moment in the history of censorship, within the history of film distribution and exhibition in Greece, when democratic values seemed to prevail. In 1927, when Sergei Eisenstein’s *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925) premiered, its banning or not proved to be a major controversy as elsewhere. The newly formed coalition government, in order not to unsettle Greece’s reliance on foreign creditor, namely Great Britain, banned the film, but then again, in an attempt to disassociate itself from the previous dictatorship and under the pressure of the public discourse on the issue, it rescinded the ban (p. 117). Through newspaper archives, Mini examines this controversy and uncovers the “politics behind the screen” (p. 109): the political implications of a banning or not, the newspapers’ role in shaping opinions, the role of politics and ideology in a rather turbulent period and the belief in the strength of cinema as a medium that can provoke social and political agitation. The revelation of the political and historical context of a screening like that highlights those liminal moments in history when all possibilities of different kind of futures are possible.

To conclude I would like to make a more general statement. There are only a couple of research monographs devoted to Greek cinema that have been published in English. Even in Greek, literature on Greek cinema is scarce and usually focuses on Old Greek Cinema. Therefore what English-language literature on Greek film lacks is not so much autonomous essays, but extensive and attentive research (held perhaps even by more than one author) so that it could cover larger time frames, a wide-range archival work that could track stasis and kinesis answering middle-level questions, or delve deeper into small and neglected research areas. We should start producing more complete, circumstantial and critical arguments on parts of Greek film history using specific methodologies or, even better, for those well skilled, interdisciplinary and transnational perspectives. To use an elegant concept that Bordwell coined for Theo Angelopoulos: Greek Film Studies should start moving towards a “localized cosmopolitanism” (Bordwell 2005: 145).

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