

Going Backwards, Moving Forwards: The Return of Modernism in the Work of Athina Rachel Tsangari

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the aesthetic trajectory of the filmmaker Athina Rachel Tsangari from 1995 until today, so as to trace the main characteristics of her style. The starting point of this examination is her first feature film The Slow Business of Going (2001) that will be discussed as an example of post-classical narration perfectly in tune with issues that became central in the discourse of post-modernism. The examination will continue with Attenberg (2010), as a return to a modernist vocabulary with references to the art-house film of the 1960s and 1970s and will conclude with her recent project, The Capsule (2012), as an example of experimental avant-garde cinema. Furthermore, I trace the influences from international modernist directors, specifically Chantal Akerman and Jean Luc Godard, and at the same time establish a link with the Greek directors of the generation of the New Greek Cinema. One of the questions to be answered is how, despite the seemingly radical changes in her style, Tsangari's work gives the impression of evolution and continuity through stylistic forms of antithesis and opposition, and how the filmmaker deals with authorship. This study aims at helping to define the Greek 'weird' wave in terms not only of topics, production, promotion, or its relation to the crisis, but in terms of aesthetic choices.

KEYWORDS

art house cinema
auteur
Greek 'weird' wave
modernism
parametric narration
Tsangari

INTRODUCTION

Almost twenty years ago, film theorists and film critics referred to Theo Angelopoulos as ‘the last modernist’, a title that was also given to established auteurs such as Andrei Tarkovsky and Michael Haneke:¹ in the era of post-modernism, which is identified with the end of grand narratives and the ‘death of the auteur’, modernist cinema was represented by a few veterans who continued to deal with serious moral, ethical, political and ideological issues. However, it could be argued that recently there has been a significant tendency in the international art-house film festival scene represented by a younger generation of artists who re-establish a dialogue with the modernist tradition, and reevaluate and re-use respective forms, genres and themes of modernist cinema. Striking examples of this phenomenon are the films of the new Greek ‘weird’ wave (Bradshaw 2011; Cox 2011; Rose 2011), made by young filmmakers who, with their form and themes, arguably refer to the concerns of the first and second periods of modernism, and experiment with various materials from visual and performative arts, in and out of the cinema theatre, between the theatrical stage and the museum gallery. The work of Athina Rachel Tsangari is exemplary of this tendency displaying a direct relationship to modernist aesthetics. It could be suggested that, at least in the context of Greek cinema, the ‘last modernist’ gave way to a ‘return to modernism’, expressed by the generation of the ‘weird’ wave.

With this in mind, this article will focus on Tsangari’s aesthetic trajectory from 1995 until today, in order to trace the main characteristics of her style and her ‘retrograde’ journey towards the forms of modernism and the avant-garde. The starting point of this examination is her first feature film *The Slow Business of Going* (2001) that will be discussed as a film in tune with the theoretical discussion on post-modernism. *Attenberg* (2010) will then be examined as a return to a modernist vocabulary with references to the art-house films of the 1960s and 1970s, and I will conclude with her recent project, *The Capsule* (2012), as an example of experimental avant-garde cinema. Furthermore, I will briefly trace the influences from international modernist directors, specifically Chantal Akerman and Jean Luc Godard, and at the same time establish a link with the Greek directors of the New Greek Cinema of the 1960s and 1970s. I will argue that despite the seemingly radical changes in her style, Tsangari’s work gives the impression of evolution and continuity through forms of antithesis and opposition in her stylistic choices. This study may help define the Greek ‘weird’ wave in terms not only of topics, production, promotion, or its relation to the ongoing Greek financial and sociopolitical crisis, but of aesthetics as well. Furthermore, Tsangari’s example can be used as a case study in order to trace similar ‘retrograde’ trajectories, from post-modernism to modernist and avant-

¹ See Horton (1997), Kovács (2007: 387), Wheatley (2009: 22).

garde attempts, evident in the work of other contemporary Greek filmmakers, such as Alexandros Voulgaris, Stella Theodorakis and Angelos Frantzis.²

'WEIRD' AESTHETICS

Tsangari's *Attenberg* was one of the establishing films of the Greek 'weird' wave³. From 2011 to 2014, participations and retrospectives of Greek films and projects in major film festivals triggered a discussion on the term 'weird' and the common elements that recent Greek films share, a process which arguably leads to a uniformity and a 'genrefication' of art-house films. On the one hand, this kind of evolution is a common process where the structural and morphological traits of a national cinema conclude to the formation of a particular genre, born and fed by the festival circuit,⁴ gaining at the same time industry-wide recognition (Farahmand 2010: 265). On the other hand, Greek directors and producers deny this description and insist on the particularities of each film and filmmaker although they understand the beneficial role that genrefication has played in the promotion of these productions.

As many reviewers have noted, a major characteristic of this 'weird' wave is the tendency towards allegorical forms (Rose 2011). The subject of the dysfunctional family – an allegory for the nation, the society or the political system – becomes a central obsession in these films, in the same way that, for example, money (owed, forged, stolen, lost) emerges as the universal theme of Argentinian post-crisis cinema (Page 2009: 5); and in the same way that contemporary Romanian films are interconnected thematically by their critique of official institutions (such as the police, health system, church, education). Other recurrent topics of these Greek films are the linguistic distortion between words and meaning (signifier and signified), death, violence, loss, grief and nostalgia. These are often treated with irony, sarcasm, a sense of the absurd, morbid sense of humor and, finally, with a mixture of the grotesque and the sublime. In terms of aesthetics, most of these films are defined by minimalism, anti-naturalism, natural lighting, a preference for gray and pastel color palettes, sparse use of camera movement and spatial enclosure.⁵ All these morphological and thematic elements form a

² The discussion of the style in the work of Angelos Frantzis, Stella Theodorakis and Alexandros Voulgaris is beyond the scope of this article.

³ For the discussion of the various descriptions that appear during this period, see Chalkou (2012: 244)

⁴ Azahed Farahmand explains in his article this process of genrefication, or the concept of 'national cinema as genre', using Altman's theory about cinematic genres, based on the example of Iranian cinema in the 1980s and 1990s (2010: 264-266).

⁵ Thymios Bakatakis's photography in *Kinetta* (Lanthimos, 2005), *Kynodontas/Dogtooth* (Lanthimos, 2009), *Attenberg* (Tsangari, 2010), *L* (Makridis, 2012) and *The Capsule* (Tsangari, 2012) created a distinct style that cannot only be traced back to films belonging to the New Wave, as, for example, the recent films *Luton* (Konstantatos,

general 'tone' or a specific 'sensitivity' which unifies this corpus, creating a cycle, even if the films discussed are at first glance very different from each other.⁶ Therefore, my attempt to examine Tsangari's work is inscribed within a wider interest in the common elements and the genealogy of this 'weird' cycle. *Attenberg* can be considered as the blueprint of this cycle as many morphological, thematic and narrative features that are recurrent in this production can be traced in it.

Tsangari appears as a leading figure in the contemporary Greek film scene, not only as a director, but also as an acknowledged producer with an active participation in the festival circuit. Together with Matt Johnson, she founded the production company Haos Films in Austin, Texas in 1997. Relocating to Athens in 2002, the company has played a major role in the regeneration of Greek Cinema in the last ten years. Among others, Yorgos Lanthimos's films, *Kinetta* (2005), *Kynodontas/Dogtooth* (2009) and *Alpeis/Alps* (2011), were produced by Haos Films. Tsangari was also the director of the large-scale video projections for the opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympic Games in 2004, as well as for the opening ceremony of the New Acropolis Museum in 2009. In addition, she created a fundraising short film for the Benaki Museum, in collaboration with Faliro House Productions, as well as she had a brief appearance as an actress in Richard Linklater's *Before Midnight* (2013). In 2013, she was a member of the Jury for the 63rd Berlinale and she was invited to direct a 90-second clip for the tribute for the 70 years of Venice Film Festival. Finally, she is considered one of

2013), *Miss Violence* (Avranas, 2013), *September* (Panayotopoulou, 2013) and *I Eonia Epistrofi tou Antoni Paraskeva/The Eternal Return of Antonis Paraskevas* (Psikou, 2013) but also to music video clips and advertising videos after 2011, proving the fast diffusion of this style from art-house cinema to pop-culture. For example, in the video clip for the song 'Mpori na Vgo'/'Maybe I will go out' by Antonis Remos and Manos Pyrovolakis, directed by White Room, the *mise-en-scène*, and dance figures performed by two dancers are clearly imitating *Attenberg*. The video clip for the song 'Poso m' Aresei'/'How much I like it' by Helena Papparizou, directed by Apollon Papatheoharis, reproduces in both form and content *The Capsule* and *L'Apollonide, Souvenir d'Une Maison Close/House of Tolerance* (Bonello, 2011).

⁶ I borrow these concepts from Jeffrey Sconce who, in his attempt to describe American Smart cinema as a cycle or a pre-genre, uses the deliberately vague terms 'sensitivity', 'tone' and 'structure of feeling', explaining that the central idea that unites these films is the strategy of ironic disengagement (Perkins 2012: 5; Sconce 2002: 351-352; Thanouli 2009b: 7-8). Smart Cinema auteurs, such as Wes Anderson, Hal Hartley, Philip Kaufmann, Whit Stillman or Richard Linklater became major influences on the Greek filmmakers and many of the principal characteristics of the Smart cycle can be found also in the 'weird' cycle, as for example the establishment of a 'blank' style, the obsession with the middle class family, miscommunication, emotional dysfunction and absence of adult perspective, while the central idea of irony can be parallelized with the obsession of allegory, found in the Greek paradigm.

the most representative auteurs of the Greek 'weird' wave together with Lanthimos.

This multi-sided activity in a national and international context reinforces Tsangari's status as an auteur in the contemporary international art-house festival circuit. According to Thomas Elsaesser, the notion of authorship has undergone a major shift since the 1950s and the classical approach of '*la politique des auteurs*' – defined by the theorists of the *Cahiers du Cinema* and founded on the thematic or aesthetic consistency of the oeuvre of the auteurs at the end of a long career – to a kind of 'staged' authorship:

Authority and authenticity has shifted to the manner a filmmaker uses the cinema's resources, which is to say, his or her command on the generic, the expressive, the excessive, the visual and the visceral [...] auteurs are valued for their capacity to concentrate on a tour de force, demonstrating qualities which signify that they are, in a sense, 'staging' authorship [...]. (2005: 51)

Since the 1980s, the dominant approaches to authorship underscore the extra-textual signature of the auteur, and auteurism is understood more as a production and commercial strategy, as a way to organize the expectations of audiences rather than as a critical category of reception (Corrigan 1990: 44). Furthermore, recently there is a noticeable return to a combination of both extra-textual and textual approaches that reuse the old idea of the stylistic and thematic consistency (Martin 2005: 95; Orgeron 2007: 41). Tsangari's authorship is confirmed by her extra-textual presence as part of her personal signature as a producer and promoter of her own films. More extrovert than Lanthimos in her appearances, she gives long interviews about her work where she foregrounds signatures of selfhood: she explains every aspect of her film, she gives details about pre-production, auto-biographical elements, characters, sources, references, and she is eager to offer such elucidating explanations to the audience as Angelopoulos did, whenever he would decode the symbols of his films, offer interpretations to his allegories, or use autobiographical information to shed light on his motifs. Tsangari's work also presents a consistency in terms of themes: most of her films are coming-of-age stories, dealing with the topics of experience, knowledge and learning procedures. The main characters are young women, and the themes of sexual identity, girlhood, womanhood, and post-adolescence are recurrent in her work.

However, the construction of her authorship is not only a matter of extra-textual presence and the themes she deals with: as this study will discuss through close textual analysis, Tsangari's formal signature is built not by repetition but by eclecticism and experimentation with various formal materials and cinematic forms that come from different modernist traditions. In this context, I will focus

my attention on the issues of intertextuality and cinematic references, the generic hybridity that appears in all her films, the uses of distancing devices and the use of space as examples of her modernist approach. The purpose of this aesthetic analysis is to trace similarities between Tsangari's and other Greek filmmakers' work, a process that can help define the formal aspects of the 'weird' wave, its relation to the various forms of modernism, its affiliations and its genealogies.

GOING BACK TO 'PETRA GOING'

Tsangari's first feature film belongs to an era when it could ironically be said that 'the answer to all questions was post-modernism'. *The Slow Business of Going* – an ambitious film project, which started in 1995 and concluded in 2001 – was shot in more than ten countries over the duration of six years, and was based on the actors' improvisation and participation in the creative process. This project was in tune with the theoretical research of the 'post-modern condition' and the impact of the technological transformations on the production of knowledge, communication and information in post-industrial computerized societies (Lyotard [1979] 1984: 3-4) that reached its peak during the 1990s. In *The Slow Business of Going* a variation of topics that appear as the core of the discussion on postmodernism during this period can be traced: globalization, virtual reality, intermediated experience, the relation between the human body and technology, human senses as a database of experience and the concept of prosthetic memory, the nomadic and tourist gaze, non-spaces, limits and frontiers, the figure of the *flâneuse*, nostalgia, the pursuit of local identity in a global context, and the European Union after the fall of the Eastern block. In the official press release, it is described as "a tribute to the new millennium of technomadic visions".⁷ All these topics were treated in a fragmentary way and were illustrated in a variety of visual material that brings in mind what Jameson describes as the emergence of new kind of "flatness", "depthlessness" or "superficiality" and considers as the "supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms" (Jameson 1991 [2003]: 9).

However, the relation with post-modern aesthetics is not limited to thematics, characters and the creative process of the film. On the contrary, it is supported by all narrative and formal elements of the film, which could be described as a representative example of the post-classical narration⁸ established in global cinema in the 1990s and early 2000s. In the next part, I will trace features of the post-classical poetics in *The Slow Business of Going* in order to understand and

⁷ From the official website of Haos Films, available at <http://haosfilm.com/Default.aspx?tabid=119>. Accessed 26 June 2014.

⁸ I use the term post-classical narration as it was developed by Eleftheria Thanouli in her study on the post-classical paradigm of narration in international films in the last two decades (Thanouli 2009a).

classify the aesthetic vocabulary of the film, and will compare it with the two other examples.

The main character of this low budget science fiction film,⁹ Petra Going, is a migrant cyborg. Her name, as she explains, is an alternative way of saying 'Rolling Stone'. Petra is an agent of the Global Nomad Project, an international data agency that sends agents like her all over the world to collect and record images, senses and random instants. When the agents return to the headquarters, they deposit their memories into an archive, available for the clients. The motto of the agency is 'Nostalgia for Rent'.¹⁰ The film begins with Petra in a hotel room in Houston, feeling homesick for the first time in her life, without knowing why and for what, as she does not have a home or personal memories connected to a native land.

The main narrative axis focuses on Petra's journeys all around the globe as a data collector for the Global Nomad Project. The film follows an episodic structure without chronological order: its major part is divided into five episodes in five different cities (Manhattan, Thessaloniki, Prague, Tokyo, Tangiers) shot in five different hotel rooms with five different male characters (followed by an episode with a female character, in Havana) (**Fig 1-2**). The episodes are introduced by a title with the city's name and a date. Each of the five episodes is the result of an improvisation workshop where the two actors invented the plot together. The filmmaker gave the actors only three conditions for what can happen during the one night in this hotel room: no sex, no violence and no discussion about Petra's other encounters. Thus, each of the episodes has a distinctive performative character and gives this impression of a separate cluster of action outside the main axis of the plot. Despite the improvisation process, the acting style can be described as detached, deadpan and anti-naturalistic. According to Tsangari, this style is influenced by Samuel Beckett's theatre. The director also claims that in Greece there is no strong tradition of method acting; on the contrary, the tradition of ancient drama performances leads to a trend of anti-naturalism and distancing in theatre acting, intensified by the popularity of Brecht's methods among Greek theatre companies (Bedel 2001).

⁹ See also the official website of Haos Films, available at <http://haosfilm.com/Default.aspx?tabid=63&language=en-US>. Accessed 26 June 2014.

¹⁰ The voice-over of the interrogation between the officer and Petra is illustrated with images from visas and stamps in Petra's passport. The audience learns that she is Greek-Mexican and she was born on a flight from Mexico to Athens. She does not have a permanent address, she travels and stays in different cities for a few days, and her only baggage is a rocking chair that sits on her back like a backpack, containing her few belongings.



Fig 1 View from a hotel room



Fig 2 An incident in a hotel room

Each episode in the film alludes to a cinematic genre or film tradition (film noir, crime film, melodrama, slapstick, surrealism), has a distinct visual texture and *mise-en-scène*, while its internal coherence is due to generic motivation, combining at the same time commercial genres and art-house references. Tsangari has a strong preference to this generic hybridity, defining her films in an imaginative and contradictory way: according to her, *The Slow Business of Going* is a “lo-fi sci-fi road movie”, *Attenberg* a “contemporary urban western”, *The Capsule* a “Greek gothic mystery” and her forthcoming film *Chevalier* a “buddy film without the buddies”.¹¹ In *The Slow Business of Going* this predilection for eclectic references through parody is more obvious, bringing the film closer to the post-classical poetics than to the field of the experimental avant-garde cinema.

¹¹ See the presentation of *The Capsule* and the description for *Chevalier* in the official site of Haos Film, available at <http://thecapsule.info/thefilm> and <http://www.haosfilm.com/en/news/> respectively. Accessed 26 June 2014.

The journeys in the film are followed by three long sequences, showing the heroine returning to the headquarters of the company, where she deposits her data. These parts bear the aesthetics of a science fiction film, while they are interchanged with montage sequences of various cities and landscapes, alluding to kino-eye and the city symphonies of the 1920s, in particular to Dziga Vertov and Walter Ruttmann. This relatively consistent narrative axis is interchanged with many short sequences of Petra's self-presentation in voice-over, where the character talks about herself, her job, her travels, her name.¹² This sequence breaks the loop and the repetitive form of the text so far, attributing a sense of closure since it is understood that the heroine is questioning her life and is ready for another quest, suggesting the end of this journey and consequently of the film. In one of the last scenes Petra's voice-over concerns her grandmother and the rituals of the Easter celebrations in Greece, and it is combined with images of typical family scenes from amateur videos:¹³ as the personal memories, nostalgia and the concept of homeland become stronger, it is suggested that Petra can no longer work as a global traveler.

This structure can be described as a complex of interlaced thematic blocs¹⁴ that gives the film an intentional impression of a 'work in progress': however, the film concludes in a relative narrative closure since it does not have an entirely open ending, and the audience witnesses a progression and transformation of the main character. Finally, the extended use of auto-reflexive devices does not reduce the transparency of characters' motivation, as it happens in art-film: according to Bordwell, a major feature of art-film is the obscurity of the character's thoughts, ideas, goals and aims (Bordwell 1985: 206-213). The level of communicativeness in this film is high and the narration gives an excess of information about the main character's motivation. Petra's self-presentation

¹² Another thematic block is the discussions between Petra and her friend Mikah, a colleague who quitted this job and returned to a normal life, with whom Petra shares her thoughts about memory and nostalgia. After that, follows an atypical sequence of Petra traveling in a lake boat with three unknown women. This sequence, which brings us closer to the end, giving a sense of fulfillment and closure, is differentiated from the other episodes, as it is filmed in exteriors and not in a hotel room, although a kind of isolation and a contrast between open and closed space is succeeded by the spatial form of a small boat travelling in the lake.

¹³ The same concept of using amateur personal videos can be also found in *Imerologia Amnisias/Anesia Diaries* (2012) by Stella Theodorakis.

¹⁴ In the middle of the film an unusual non-diegetic sequence breaks and it functions as an interruption: it is the description of the Petra Going ideal imaginative vehicle, and is entitled 'Europe: 1957-2001'. This sequence adds nothing to the plot and it is used as an interlude interconnected with the concerns of the films about globalization and local identity, highlighting at the same time Petra's character through this personalized product. This interruption could be compared to the dancing interludes in *Attenberg*.

through voice-overs, official reports or confessions to her friend Mikah, overemphasizes the construction of the character. Thus, despite the complex structure and loose goal-oriented progression, the viewers can still detect a character-centered causality that finally leads to a sense of closure, a basic feature of post-classical causality (Thanouli 2009a: 36-37). This sense of closure is different from the finality of the classic Hollywood film, and also different from the open endings of the art-film paradigm.

One of the most striking morphological aspects of the film is the combination of various sources of audiovisual material, which gives the impression of a rich visual construction, resulting from the particular creative process of the project. Different technical supports were used during the six years of filmmaking, such as 35mm and 16mm film, super 8 and mini DV. This material was combined with photographs, sketches, postcards, manuscripts, television and computer screens, tourist videos, family amateur footage and animated images. All these elements are presented in fast pace montage sequences, with titles, split screens and other effects, leading to a rich visual variety of textures, a bricolage of grainy analogue, digital or handcrafted material, illustrating (in a way reminiscent to Chris Marker) the idea that image is the material of memory, or that there is no memory without image. This combination of materials with multiple audiovisual references intensifies the degree of auto-reflexivity about the cinematic medium. According to Thanouli, one of the major elements of the post-classical cinematic image is hypermediality, with the use of intermedia, layering and intensified continuity (2009a: 175). The system of cinematic space in post-classical narration is based on spatial clusters, split screens, multiple exposures and special effects, while the system of post-classical time is mediated, complex, using flashbacks, flashforwards, slow motion, fast forward and loops, with emphasis on simultaneity and non-seriality (ibid.: 178-179). All these features are used in an extensive way in *The Slow Business of Going*.

The elaborated narrative geography of the film plays a major part in the construction of the plot and it is further expanded by the fact that parts of the project were shot in Houston, New York, Havana, Moscow, Tokyo, Thessaloniki, Mexico City and many other urban locations all over the world. This urban imagery consists of images of everyday life, insisting on transportation means, trams, subways and the traffic in the streets, postcards from monumental spaces, landmarks and transitional *non-lieux*, airports, hotel rooms, stations. However, the five main episodes are mostly shot in interior spaces of hotel rooms, creating a contrast between enclosed spaces and the openness and dispersion of the plot all over the globe. All these features conclude in the formation of a virtual space based on image, memory, data and experience, a space of 'surfaces', avoiding a more representational and descriptive spatial iconography.

In terms of intertextuality and cinematic references then, Tsangari is influenced by Wim Wenders, who in the 1970s and 1980s developed these themes of global wandering, transitory urban non-places, and the relationship between space, memory and image. References to Chris Marker's work – who also developed the theme of memory and image through technology, virtual reality and intermedia, combining it with the genre of science fiction – can be also found. Moreover, similarities with *The Book of Life* by Hal Hartley, a 1998 film that marks its filmmaker's turn towards the post-classical narratives can be detected (Berrettini 2011: 57-68). In the level of acting the director mentions the influence of John Cassavetes, Robert Altman and Jean Luc Godard.

ATTENBERG: A RETURN TO MODERNIST VOCABULARY

Tsangari's following film, *Attenberg*, was released almost a decade later. A comparative approach between *Attenberg* and *The Slow Business of Going* shows a shift in the stylistic vocabulary of the director: despite the fact that, at first glance, the films seem very different, a closer examination can show that the two films are linked in terms of opposition and antithesis. In contrast to the wide range of topics in the first film that deal with the post-modern theoretical discussion, in *Attenberg* there are only two major themes: sex and death. The complex structure, intermediality and extra-cinematic openness of *The Slow Business of Going* are replaced by a geometrical introspective austerity and an ascetic procedure applied to all morphological and narrative devices in *Attenberg*. *Attenberg*'s structure is based on minimalism, repetition, seriality and homogeneity as a result of a systematic reduction of stylistic features. Despite their differences, a thematic, structural and aesthetic core in these two films can still be detected, and a line of evolution through the experimentation with different modernist features can be drawn.

A starting point to describe *Attenberg*'s structure is Bordwell's concept of "parametric narration". In his book *Narration in Fiction Film* (1985) Bordwell proposes "parametric narration" as one of the systems of art-film narration. He claims that this system is used by a few "idiosyncratic", "isolated" directors (Dreyer, Ozu, Bresson, Tati) and in exceptional ("fugitive") films (ibid.: 274). Many researchers¹⁵ claim that this concept remains vague, less convincing and less consistent than the description of the other narrative systems, such as the system of classical narration or art-film narration.¹⁶ Despite its problems and contradictions, the idea of "parametric narration" is reevaluated by

¹⁵ Such as Betz (2010: 33-39), Kovács (2007: 34-38), Thanouli (2009b: 5-6).

¹⁶ Bordwell avoids calling the three non-classical modes of narration modernist despite the fact that almost all his examples come from early or late European modernist cinema, with the exception of Ozu and Mizoguchi. About this subject see Kovács (2007: 57-58).

contemporary theorists, such as Mark Betz, who observes a return to this parametric modernist example, expressed by contemporary auteurs established in the international art-house festival circuit. Betz explains that “parametric narration and cinematic modernism has been extended in the past two decades in such a way as to become not only widespread and perceivable, but also more recognizable, watchable, and marketable than Bordwell considered in 1985” (Betz 2010: 39). According to Betz, the concept of “parametric narration” can be used to describe not only films by European contemporary auteurs, such as Pedro Costa, Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, Philippe Garrel, Michael Haneke, Ulrich Seidl, Aleksandr Sokurov and Béla Tarr, but also a wide range of international directors who are classified in film festivals under the category of ‘world cinema’.¹⁷ An idea for further analysis is that this return to the modernist vocabulary and dialogue with the “parametric narration” can also be traced back to several filmmakers of the Greek ‘weird’ wave.¹⁸ The best example of this tendency can be found in *Attenberg*, where the morphological traits of repetition, austerity and seriality are evident, and where specific structural parameters, which become more apparent without being linked or justified by the plot and sometimes working autonomously from it, can be detected.

In *Attenberg*, 23-year-old Marina (Ariane Labed) lives in a small industrial town with her father Spyros (Vangelis Mourikis), who was one of the architects of this town and who is dying of cancer. Marina has to accompany him through this dying process, assuring him that his wish to be cremated and not buried will be executed. Marina is not very social. She has only one friend, Bella (Eleftheria Rantou), and has never had a sexual encounter. With the arrival of a young engineer in the city, Marina decides to experiment with sex. At the end of the film, she accomplishes both tasks – her father’s death wish and her sexual pursuit – entering adulthood.

The film follows a linear chronological order, where every scene leads to the next, and all scenes together ultimately lead to the protagonist’s defined aims. This strict goal-oriented process and the tight causality between the scenes do not stray from classical narration. The fact that the plot is bare of other elements (for example, absence of sub-plots and secondary characters) makes the story

¹⁷ One example of this idea is the fact that festival-winning contemporary auteurs, such as Michael Haneke, the Dardenne brothers, Aki Kaurismäki, from the 1990s until today, acknowledge the work of Robert Bresson as a major influence, leading to a reevaluation and a rediscovery of his work and creating in the last decade a real legacy of these ‘fugitive’ Bressonian aesthetics.

¹⁸ Almost all directors of the Greek ‘weird’ wave, including Athina Tsangari, Yorgos Lanthimos, Philippos Tsitos, Ektoras Lygizos, and Babis Makridis mention Bresson as a major reference of their poetics and inscribe their work in this Bressonian tradition (however this does not mean that they can be also characterized as parametric).

look more like a tale, where the main character has to accomplish specific tasks for narrative closure to be achieved. Furthermore, every sequence is based on a confrontation, exchange or compromise between two characters, usually framed in a two-shot where the persons look at each other. A repetition of different blocks of action that form the serial structure of the film can be traced here; the same block structure can also be traced in *The Slow Business of Going*, despite the more complex and loose-oriented plot.

The best examples of this serial structure based in repetitive blocks are the dance sequences; the linear narrative is interrupted – but not totally deconstructed – by seven similar extra-diegetic scenes showing the two girls performing a weird kind of dance. According to Kovács, this straightforward narrative, following the rules of classical continuity, interrupted by extra-diegetic scenes is characteristic of the modernist pattern of serial composition (2007: 139). These performative parts are repeated several times across the film, consisting of the same *mise-en-scène* elements every time: they share space, costumes, acting and camera movement, intensifying its seriality. It could be argued that this feature that is highlighted by repetition resists further interpretation, which can be described, according to Bordwell, as a parametric character. Tsangari describes these extra-diegetic scenes as ‘dance interludes’ and says that she was inspired by the chorus in ancient drama and by Monty Pythons’ famous sketch of *The Ministry of Silly Walks* (1970). The influence of Jean Luc Godard and the famous dance scene in *Bande à Part/Band of Outsiders* (1964) and the reworking of this motif by Hal Hartley who created a similar dance scene in *Simple Men* (1992) can be seen here (**Fig 3**).





Fig 3 Instances of the repeated performative parts

Many similar examples of repetition of specific devices can be found in *Attenberg*, without a clear narrative justification, a link to the plot or a symbolic or reflexive use.¹⁹ The camera movement is an obvious example. In *The Slow Business of Going*, most of the film's shots included intense and elaborate motion. In *Attenberg* this device is used in a strict way as the camera remains static most of the time and there are very few instances of camera movement. A group of similar shots that include camera movement is limited to parallel tracking shots of vehicles in motion: Marina and Bella on their scooters, Marina alone or with her father on her scooter, Marina in her car, alone or with the engineer, the father in his boat with the two girls and various similar instances. Despite these shots' narrative justification as transitional scenes, the multiple repetition of the same movement and space organisation with the same framing create a visual motif and give the impression of seriality, which is reinforced by the function of diegetic music (for instance, Marina listening to 'Suicide' in her car) that creates slight differences between these almost identical frames. A similar case of camera movement is the tracking shots used in the dance interludes, also repeated seven times with the same space organization, giving the impression of a visual motif, or a 'graphic match' (Bordwell 1985: 280) across the film. The limited use of motion makes the parameter of camera movement more evident to the spectator and accentuates the sense of repetition and seriality.

¹⁹ However, not all camera movements are submitted to this endless and meaningless repetition: an exceptional case of camera movement is used in a few instants of high emotional intensity. These scenes are shot with a hand-held camera recording Marina's body, in close distance. The framing here is completely different from the rest of the film, which is based on symmetrically centered medium and long shots. These non-symmetrical and blur moving close ups are used only in three moments: when Marina meets the engineer, when she plays tennis with Bella and when her father discusses his death openly. These three moving shots are related to the narration and function as illustrations of Marina's emotional movement. These scenes are reminiscent of Lanthimos's style as similar scene organization can be traced in *Kinetta* and *Alps*, so it can be seen as an inter-textual reference to Tsangari's co-worker.

The austerity in camera movement intensifies the effect of the static shots used in the rest of the film. Tsangari imitates Chantal Akerman's style, according to which most shots are totally immobile. This immobility is accentuated by the frontal position of the camera, usually in front of a plain shallow background. This is what David Bordwell describes as a "planimetric" use of space (2005: 167-168), established by Michelangelo Antonioni, Jean-Luc Godard, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Theo Angelopoulos and especially Chantal Akerman, and followed more recently by Michael Haneke. According to Bordwell, this style imitates the shallowness produced by long lenses used in the 1960s and 1970s and aims at creating a distanced, dedramatised anti-naturalistic, abstract space (in contrast to what is referred to in art history as 'recessive' space, where figures and architectural spaces present a diagonal shoot from foreground to background, usually filmed in deep focus and creating an overdramatized space).

This kind of abstract dedramatised space is not without meaning in modernist cinema, as very often it is used in order to foreground a political, ideological or feminist agenda (Akerman, Angelopoulos, Antonioni, Fassbinder, Godard). This "planimetric" use of space is also a common element in the cycle of the American Smart film, creating the impression of the so-called "blank style" that many critics consider as a characteristic of the Smart film and it is usually combined with deadpan acting and an ironic sense of humor and cynicism (Sconce 2002: 358-359). Another recurrent formal element referring to Akerman is the frontal position of the camera towards the actors, with an alternation from a 180 to a 90 degree angle that creates 'angular' space and geometric filmmaking.²⁰ Usually, in these pairs of images, the first frame is based on a frontal organization and creates a planimetric space, while the second frame is based on architectural diagonal lines, creating a mildly recessive space, which, according to Bordwell, also dedramatises space, like in the films by Antonioni, in contrast to the aggressive recessiveness of the deep focus image (2005: 167). In angular scenes in *Attenberg* the two actors face each other (Marina and Bella, Marina and her father, Marina and the engineer), illustrating the confrontation and compromises that constitute the structure of the film in spatial terms (**Fig 4**).

²⁰ References to Akerman are not limited to style and *mise-en-scène*: *Attenberg* is inspired by the short film *J'ai Faim, J'ai Froid/I'm Hungry, I'm Cold* (1984) where two eighteen-year-old girls leave Brussels and go to Paris in order to have sex for the first time, which they achieve. In the meantime, they wander in the streets of Paris, give weird singing performances in public and experiment kissing each other.



Fig 4 Instances of planimetric space

Another basic feature of *Attenberg's* aesthetics is the effect of distancing and defamiliarisation achieved primarily through the combination of the thematics of alienation with an anti-naturalistic, detached, deadpan acting style. This acting style can be also found in many examples of the 'weird' cycle as one of the most important features of this corpus (Nikolaidou 2014), but at the same time, links *Attenberg* with *The Slow Business of Going*, where this basic element can also be traced. The strategy of the actor's improvisation in *Attenberg* is used in a similar way as in *The Slow Business of Going* in order to give this result. For example, during the dance interludes, the two actresses imitate various animals, as they see them in David Attenborough's documentaries. Tsangari states that the imitation of animals played an important role in the development of the acting style for the two protagonists: each actress imitated an animal, intensifying the effect of distancing in acting.²¹ This effect is underscored by the fact that the

²¹ Interview by Elias Fragoulis in *Cinemad*, 17/12/2010.

protagonist, Labeled, is not a Greek native speaker.²² According to Tsangari, the film reflected the feeling of being a stranger in her own country, something that she also felt when she returned to Greece after thirteen years of working in the United States. She claims that the core of the film was anchored in this strategy of distancing so as to create the feeling of “alien”, “strange” or “uncanny”, and that her intention was to speak about “common familiar things but keeping a distance from herself and from the spectator”.²³ This combination of a familiar subject seen from a distance creates the feeling of the uncanny’, a mixture of anxiety, fear or inexplicable ‘strangeness’ related to un-familiar or ex-familiar situations that now became strange. In *Attenberg* the distancing process is elaborated through the film, making it the most obvious example of the ‘weird’ poetics.

However, what gives *Attenberg* an idiosyncratic tone is the combination of distance and familiarity, rationality and emotion. Music plays an important part in this combination. In the last sequence of the film, Marina scatters her father’s ashes to the sea in Bella’s presence. The last scene of the film is an immobile long shot of a mine landscape used as a parking lot. This empty industrial space is highlighted by the intense red color of the ground and functions at the same time as a reference to Antonioni’s *Red Desert* (1964). The organisation of the final shot clearly refers to the modalities of the modernist cinema;²⁴ however, when the characters leave the scenery, this cold and static image is immersed in the overwhelming pop song by Francoise Hardy *C’est Le Temps de L’Amour/It is the time of love* (1964). The song obtains a narrative function as it marks Marina’s transition into adulthood, attributing a sense of closure and completion to the film instead of an open ending. This function of a popular song in the final credits as counterpoint music, after a violent, awkward or open ending, is commonly used in the ‘weird’ cycle. Syllas Tzoumerkas ends his disturbing film *Hora Proelefsis/Homeland* (2010) ironically with *Felicita* (1982) by Al Bano and Romina Powers, creating at the same time a high emotional impact, which is further enhanced through the music’s visual combination with family photographs of the 1970s and 1980s.

²² Ariane Labeled is not the only example. Michele Valley in *Dogtooth* also has a foreign accent which is not diegetically justified. In Filippos Tsitos *Academia Platonos/Plato’s Academy* (2009), the character of Marenglen, played by Anastasis Kozdine, speaks Greek with a foreign accent. Here, the accent is justified by the plot, but at the same time reinforces the slow rhythm of the pronunciation between all characters. In Tsitos’s films, the speech rhythm is reminiscent of the films of Aki Kaurismäki, another director who frequently uses actors who do not speak in their native language, and have a strong foreign accent.

²³ Interview of the director in the special features in the DVD by Artificial Eye.

²⁴ See also the review in *Sight & Sound* by Romney (2011).

Discussing Haneke's early works, Catherine Wheatley makes a distinction between two types of cinematic reflexivity in modernist film: "aggressive" reflexivity – expressed by the films of Godard with the use of violent, interruptive devices with the aim to discomfort the spectator – and "benign" reflexivity – expressed by Akerman's films, based on simplification, repetition, seriality and distancing (2009: 53-55). According to Wheatley, the combination of aggressive and benign modernism is one of the manipulation strategies used by Haneke, which, at the same time, mobilizes emotion and demands the spectator's position or judgment. *Attenberg* features the same combination of aggressive and benign modernism that finally gives the impression of a 'laboratory'²⁵ product based on clinical observation, but, at the same time, produces high emotional impact.

A link between *The Slow Business of Going* and *Attenberg* is the centrality of the authorial position. In *Attenberg* there is a modernist central authorial presence, which remains in a narrative position at the background as the 'mastermind', giving its own personal vision. Tsangari often claims in her interviews that she felt as if she was looking at her characters through a magnifying glass in a laboratory.²⁶ At the same time, the centrality of the main character is highlighted: Marina is present in almost every scene, with the exception of transitory landscape shots. This structure emphasizes the subjectivity of the narration, from Marina's and Tsangari's point of view, and the construction of this personal universe. The character of the dying father, as the architect of this city, constitutes a more concrete authorial figure, used also in a symbolic way as a reference to the 'death of the auteur' – as seen in many modernist films – and at the same time, the end of modernism. In contrast to this central modernist authorial presence, in *The Slow Business of Going*, a typical post-modernist dissolution of the author (Tsangari/Petra Going), that becomes part of the narration, could be traced at first view and can be found scattered all over this bricolage work in progress. However, it is clear that the author (Tsangari/Petra Going) becomes the organising principle of this work, which finally achieves to foreground the author's 'all embracing' central position, reminiscent of Godard's transitory period from modernism to post-modernism. As Kovács notes, in Godard's last modernist period, the more collage became important in his work, the more he placed himself in an unifying central position (2007: 384). To conclude, despite the differences between *Attenberg* and *The Slow Business of Going*, authorial presence is still strong and central in both films.

²⁵ Athina Tsangari in the interviews already cited (footnotes 22 and 23) says that she felt like a scientist observing insects through the magnifying lens, underscoring the distancing process. At the same time, she mentioned the way Richard Attenborough observes his subject, with a scientific interest mixed with tenderness.

²⁶ For example see the interview of the director in the special features in the DVD by *Artificial Eye*.

All references to modernism seem to converge in the element of space, both in form and content: modernist architecture and urbanism of the 1960s are juxtaposed with a contemporary aspect of modernism as a ruin, through a use of cinematic space established by modernist auteurs. Filmic space, the anonymous industrial town of *Attenberg*, coincides with the real space where the film was shot; *Aspra Spitia* is an industrial colony, built in the 1960s by the architect Constantinos Doxiadis to serve the French aluminum industry of Pechiney. This distinct town had no mayor as all activities were managed by the company, and the population came from all over Greece and had no right to remain in the town after retirement. The town had no cemetery and no educational institution after high school: it is an experimental town without roots, without past and without future. These particularities served as an inspiration for the imaginary town of *Attenberg*. It is depicted as a closed utopian enclave without interference from the outside world, emphasizing the feeling of isolation and enclosure, a common feature in many films of the 'weird' cycle. The director creates a space where nothing accidental or random intervenes, she does not let the reality of everyday life enter the film, and in this way, it operates as a laboratory where everything functions as an experiment. The influence of Antonioni's aesthetics is obvious in the representation of the cityscape through geometrical framing of empty spaces, reflective surfaces, a predilection for industrial sites and the use of the landscape as an expression of the characters' psychology.

This town is described as an unaccomplished, failed modernist utopia and Spyros who designed and built it feels like a 'toxic remnant of modernism'. On the other side, Marina admits that she likes the uniformity of the town and her father answers that she does so because she is an optimist bourgeois modernist. This short dialogue happens on the top of a tall building overlooking the town. The setting makes it clear that modernism lies as a background theme of the film, and emphasises the reading of it as an allegory for the failed effort to modernise Greece that led to the contemporary state of economical and social crisis (Azoury 2011; Bradshaw 2011; Cox 2011; Romney 2011: 41-42; Kaufman 2012). The same scene functions as a model for Tsangari's recent project, her participation in the tribute for the 70 years of the Venice Festival under the title *Future Reloaded*, a short 90-second film, called *24 Frames Per Century*. This short film returns to a monumental and conscious modernism as it has references to *Le Mépris/Contempt* (1963) by Godard, to Angelopoulos, Antonioni and Beckett, showing the dialogue between an Italian and an American film projector, a pessimist and an optimist respectively, who are waiting for someone to change the reel and keep the screening going on eternally.

THE ORIGINS OF THE AVANT-GARDE: *THE CAPSULE*

The dialogue with modernist vocabulary and specifically with the first generation surrealist avant-garde tradition continues in Tsangari's recent project *The Capsule*. Presented in many major festivals in 2012, this medium-length film was the result of the collaboration between Tsangari and the artist Aleksandra Waliszewska, and is classified as an experimental film.²⁷ *The Capsule* transcends the limits of cinema since it is conceived as a hybrid construction between fashion, installation, performance, dance video art and animation film. It was commissioned and financed by Dakis Joannou and the Foundation for Contemporary Art (DESTE), and before its participation in Locarno, Toronto and Sundance, it was presented as an installation in the shop window of a fashion store in New York, where passers-by could watch it through a kaleidoscopic device (Lepastier 2012: 87). In terms of production, exhibition and aesthetics, *The Capsule* seems to belong to the surrealist avant-garde film tradition of the 1920s and 1930s, with references to the films of Jean Cocteau, Luis Buñuel and Man Ray (**Fig 5**). At the same time, Tsangari follows the example of many modernist filmmakers who translated their works into installations conceived for exhibition in galleries while continuing making films for traditional theatrical releases (Kim 2010: 126) such as Akerman, Victor Erice, Peter Greenaway, Godard, Marker and Apichatpong Weerasethakul.



²⁷ According to Kovács, the term experimental cinema is used to designate “noncommercial films whose main concern is not to tell a story or to represent a piece of ‘real life’ but to concentrate on and exploit the possibilities of the formal aspects of the cinematic medium” (2007: 27). He makes the distinction between the uses of the term ‘experimental cinema’ in French terminology, with references to Jean Mitry, and the use of the term ‘avant-garde’ in American historiography, used as a general term for alternative, non-narrative film practice. A third label, ‘underground’ is used to refer to the American avant-garde of the 1960s. However all three terms have similar meanings in designating a particular film practice. Kovács also notes that an experimental/avant-garde/underground cinema may or may not include a political component, the political provocation is not necessary in this practice (ibid.: 27-32).



Fig 5 Instances of surrealist avant-garde influence

The loose narrative, which takes the form of a loop, is about six young women following lessons of discipline in a mansion on a rocky Cycladic island. They are invited by the main character, played by Ariane Labeled, a vampire who plays the role of the educator: she is the 'origin' and the young girls are the replicants²⁸ with a limited lifespan. The themes of the film include a ritual passage to womanhood, exploration of sexuality, education and experience, isolation in a closed space in a mixture of comic, absurd and grotesque elements. Features from gothic horror film and vampire films are included, and generic hybridity is evident, as in *The Slow Business of Going* and *Attenberg*. The primary language used in film is French, which can be seen as a reference to the French avant-garde and also functions as a distancing device. Despite the fact that, at first view, this project seems also very different in terms of style from the two previous examples, similarities, motifs and patterns that complete this retrograde evolution towards the origins of cinematic modernism can still be traced.

As in *Attenberg*, a basic structural feature of the *mise-en-scène* is the confrontation scenes between two people; in *The Capsule* there is a multiplication of the same scheme, as compositions of confrontations between six or seven persons occur. In one of the first sequences, six girls are aggressively opposed to each other, imitating wild animals. In terms of style, the scene is a more elaborate reworking of *Attenberg's* first sequence which shows the two girls kissing, and then imitating aggressive animals. Similar confrontation scenes, linked by the topic of teaching and antagonism, can be found in both films. Performativity in *The Capsule* is more intense than in *Attenberg* and in *The Slow Business of Going* as it is not submitted to realist conventions and it is primarily based on dance and improvisation. Another major stylistic element of *The*

²⁸ The idea of replicants can be also found in *Alps*: the films of the 'weird' cycle share many common motifs and themes.

Capsule is the reflexive devices that are used across the film, especially slow motion, referring to emblematic avant-garde filmmakers (for example Jean Vigo and Germaine Dulac). Animation scenes, created by Waliszewska, intermingle with photographed image, and, as a result, mythical or real animals (dragons, spiders, cats) are seen in composition with the girls' faces. Animation is also used in order to show the inner self of the characters: the face and the body of the girls are torn, and the interior is presented in animation scenes. Animation and distortion of motion can also be found in *The Slow Business of Going*.

Taking spatial construction as a key feature, a passage from the *virtual* space of *The Slow Business of Going* is detected, with all references to post-modernism (a fictive geography as a pastiche of real and imaginary locations, mediated space, space as a surface, and the construction of space through experience) and to the *architectural* space of *Attenberg* (a concrete space referring to empirical reality through the use of specific buildings in a confined location, as well as the figure of the architect and references to the utopian architectural modernism of the 1960s). From the real, architectural space of *Attenberg* there is a passage to an *imaginary* space, a dreamlike, unreal space referring to surrealist literature, using chronotopes, such as the gothic castle and the island. However these spaces, referring to different periods and modernist traditions, are linked through the forms of enclosure and the relation of the heroines to their environment.

The choice of an isolated mansion in Hydra can be seen as a reference to Nikos Nikolaidis's first short experimental film *Lacrimae Rerum* (1962); the scenography of the interior and the emphasis on the expressionistic use of lighting establish a link between these two films. The recurrent motif of insularity or isolation in a restricted space, city, island or house is one of the main features of the generation of the New Greek Cinema in the 1970s, especially in the films of Nikos Nikolaidis's *Evridiki BA 2037/Euridice BA 2037* (1975) and Nikos Panayotopoulos's *I Tembelides tis Eforis Kiladas/The Idlers of the Fertile Valley* (1978). Restricted space and confined characters, in combination with an allegorical perspective, become a tradition that is reevaluated in the films of the 'weird' wave. The inter-textual functions of this film are not limited to cinematic references in the text but also to extra-textual relationships: *The Capsule* was presented at the 53rd Thessaloniki Film Festival in 2012 and at the Greek Film Archive in 2013 in a common screening with *Higuita* (2012) by The Boy (Alexandros Voulgaris), an experimental science fiction allegorical medium-length film also taking place on an isolated island, a combination of utopia and a place of exile.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, despite the shift of different vocabularies from post-classicism to an austere and minimal modernism, and from there to a surrealist avant-garde hybridity, Tsangari's aesthetic trajectory can be seen as a constant dialogue with forms of modernism, as an evolution of the same thematic and stylistic core, or even as a *return* to modernism, but a kind of modernism strongly affected by the experience of post-modernism. Tsangari constructs her image as an author not by repetition, but by experimentation with various morphological materials, patterns and traditions of modernism. She follows systematically contemporary cinematic trends used in the film festival circuit, combining and transforming them into something new, in the same way Angelopoulos did in the 1970s with the renovations of the use of the long take. What is important is that this kind of passage from post-classical narration to modernism and to avant-garde can also be traced in the work of other directors, such as Alexandros Voulgaris, Angelos Frantzis and Stella Theodorakis. For example Alexandros Voulgaris's first film *Kles?/Crying?* (2003) played with the rules of post-modernism, mixing reflexive devices, authorial presence, multiple plots and references to pop culture in a mainstream attempt to reach a young audience. His second film *Roz/Pink* (2006) is one of the first examples of the 'weird' aesthetics, establishing a personal art-house narration referring to the typical modernist wandering heroes, while his third film *Higuita* clearly belongs to the avant-garde tradition due to its form and narrative.

A close aesthetic analysis of Tsangari's films, as one of the most emblematic auteurs of the Greek 'weird' wave, helps to define the basic morphological features of this trend as many of the points under examination appear in many examples of the 'weird' cycle. This trend is not defined only by the choice of topics related to the social and economic crisis or the mode of production, but it is also a matter of stylistic and narrative choices by a generation of filmmakers who are in dialogue with the global art-house scene and the modernist genealogies, and participate dynamically in the contemporary film festival circuit.

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