

**FILM REVIEW**

# *Wasted Youth*

by Argyris Papadimitropoulos and Yan Vogel  
(2011)

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*Wasted Youth* (2011), directed and written by Argyris Papadimitropoulos and Yan Vogel, is a poignant film drama on the devastating impacts of the economic and foremost of the social crisis in contemporary Greek society, unfolded in two parallel stories in Athens: the carefree, passionate hangouts of Harris (Harris Markou), a teenage skater, and the suffocating daily routine of Vassilis (Ieronimos Kaletsanos), a troubled middle-aged man, lost in his own personal worries.

The film has attracted international attention and received commendations from film critics in Greece and abroad, as it exemplifies an encouraging work of a new generation of Greek film directors. *Wasted Youth* has also been considered a genuine festival success, as it premiered at the 40th edition of the International Film Festival Rotterdam in 2011 as the opening film and as a candidate in the festival's Tiger Awards Competition, won an Orpheus-special jury award at the 5th Los Angeles Greek Film Festival in 2012 and was nominated for the award of "best film" at the Buenos Aires International Festival of Independent Cinema.

The plot of the film, although fictionalized, is inspired by a true incident, the murder of the 16-year-old teenager Alexis Grigoropoulos by a police officer in the centre of Athens in 2008. The film registers a cinematic account of a single summer day in the lives of the two characters, which is illustrated in a series of takes, seemingly unrelated to each other and allocated to mundane events. The first narrative is dominated by the depressed and frustrated character of Vassilis, the adult protagonist, a man with low self-esteem, who will later be revealed to the viewers to be working as a policeman. He is leading a dull and tedious life, with financial hardship due to his limited wage and his hesitance to start up a

second job, and also with serious personal concerns regarding his fragile relationship with his family and his colleagues at the police station.

The dominant figure in the second narrative is Harris, a 16-year-old skateboarder, who plunges into an insouciant and negligent lifestyle, typical of his young age. Harris recklessly wanders all around Athens on his skateboard, together with his teenage peers, always isolated to his iPod music, in an attempt to escape from a troublesome family environment and particularly from his controlling father. Harris is introduced to the audience at the moment of his morning wake up in a suburban villa, where he practices his skate in an empty swimming pool in the garden of Christina (Themis Bazaka). Christina is a friend of Harris's mother, who permanently provides a welcoming shelter for the boy, while his mother is seriously ill in the hospital. In contrast to Harris's controversial relationship with his father, who even implies a sexual bonding between his son and Christina, the woman seems to represent an alternative mother figure for the teenager – she is modern, wealthy and “young” in her manners, as he eagerly remarks. Although Harris's mother (Marrissa Triantafyllidou) is tender and supportive to Harris, both her absence and her physical impotence further complicate the boy's family problems.

Mimicking a foreign teenage group on the Internet, which produces a series of stickers referring to “Wasted German Youth”, Harris and his Ukranian friend Arthuros, who works at a copy shop, decide to make up their own Greek version of stickers that say “Wasted”, “Youth” and “Malaka” – a usual swear in the teenage slang, meaning “wanker” in Greek. The teens' plan to plaster the stickers in the city takes an unpredictable turn, when Harris insults Vassilis and his partner, who are on patrol, as he plasters a “Malaka” sticker on their police car. There follows a confrontation between the teenagers and the two policemen that concludes into a dramatic ending, as Vassilis's partner (played by filmmaker Syllas Tzoumerkas) surprisingly fires a deadly shot to Harris.

What is both provocative and suspenseful in the development of the film's plot is its own multifaceted narrative structure. The plot adopts the technique of parallel narrative in order to juxtapose two stories that run concurrently only to unexpectedly converge to a common string just a few seconds before the film's powerful ending. The two stories progress through seemingly disconnected episodes, which switch from a slow and at some points mesmerizing to a more vibrant and energetic narrative pace, which principally marks the youth scenes in contrast to the prolonged adult scenes. The contrast between youth and adulthood, combined with the continuous change of rhythm in the narrative flow, which concludes to an unexpected and dramatic ending, build tension and anxiety. There is also an apparent sense of tragic irony in the film's script, which serves as a narrative device to forecast Harris's dreadful end: subtle trails,

carefully spread throughout the story, could soon be used by the viewers as important signals of the film's dramatic climax. In one of the introductory scenes, for example, Christina advises the teenager "to take special care, because of the extreme heat", as "heat drives people crazy". In another scene, Harris's mother is unreasonably worried about Harris's skateboard, considering it a dangerous means of transportation in the city's heavy traffic. However, Harris's sudden death will be a result of the growing social tension in the Greek society rather than a matter of negligence on behalf of the teenager.

Although the film's directors are experienced in a mainstream style, as they have been both previously trained in commercial shooting for films and TV advertisements, in *Wasted Youth* they tend to adopt an "aesthetic of slow" (Flanagan 2008), reminiscent of contemporary European art cinema, principally in terms of storytelling and narrative progression. The focus on non-events, the frequent use of slow motion and the long silent takes, intertwined with the filmmakers' deliberate resistance to the quickening of editing, especially during the scenes that concern the adult characters, form a distinct style, typical not only of American and European independent filmmaking, but also of other Greek directors of the younger generations. The film's narrative and style, a hybrid genre of docu-fiction mainly shot with hand-held camera, a mix of professionals and amateur actors (the young skateboarders are all interpreted by amateur actors who belong to a skateboarding team in real life) and a small crew with a shoestring budget, attempt to take a closer look at everyday reality in Athens and to transmit its crisis vibes. The use of "episodic realism", a representational form dominant in the films of contemporary Greek filmmakers (Karalis 2012: 241-242) of a "new Greek wave" or a "weird wave of Greek cinema", as it has often been termed, places *Wasted Youth* amongst the films of this trend, while imbuing it with an unsettling authenticity, responding to a real crisis situation.

Indeed, there is an explicit intention on behalf of the filmmakers to be as close as they can to an everyday atmosphere. This is why they appear determined to improvise both in terms of narrative and *mise-en-scène*, in order to achieve a strong sense of reality and energy, equivalent to the real life conditions in contemporary Athens, which goes through difficult times. As Argyris Papadimitropoulos claims on the director's note, the film is willing to make a statement about an "emergency situation" in the city and consequently to portray Athens as a wounded metropolis, "exhausted, confused, [and] unable to make any progress, brimming with desperation and aggression" (Papamichos 2011). In that sense, *Wasted Youth* could be identified as "an urban road movie" (Lykourgou 2011), a contemporary city portrait of a dystopian capital, with the camera locking on to the fading pace of a "wasted city", reflected in the lives of its "wasted" heroes. For Argyris Papadimitropoulos, "the assassination of the 16-

year-old Alexandros Grigoropoulos was not just another incident in Athens, but something which was expected to happen” (Athens magazine 2011).

From this perspective, the film associates itself with the emerging cultural discourse of the “Athenian negative” (Karalis 2012: 248-249), which resonates in many contemporary Greek urban dramas, such as the films of Konstantinos Giannaris, Yorgos Lanthimos and Yannis Economides to name a few, that comment on a negative aspect of Athens, while thematizing the fluidity of family values, personal identities and social belonging in the modern city frame (ibid.: 249). These films also put emphasis on the social and cultural contradictions generated by the Greek crisis, which are primarily experienced in the cities. Their setting is usually a hostile urban environment, mainly Athens, which is inextricably linked to the characters’ incapacity to adjust themselves to the new urban realities caused by the protracted crisis. Arguably, a crisis-inspired film like *Wasted Youth* follows the trend of many of its contemporaries of the new art-house, such as *Spirotokouto/Matchbox* (2002) and *Macherovgaltis/Knifer* (2010) by Yannis Economides, *Tungsten* (2011) by Yorgos Georgopoulos and *To Agori Troi to Fagito tou Pouliou/Boy's Eating the Bird's Food* (2012) by Ektoras Lygizos, in that it registers the city as an important feature in the cinematic negotiation of the crisis. In fact, in *Wasted Youth* it is the staging of the urban experience itself that becomes an “urban imagery” of contemporary Athens that triggers narrative, and thus highlights how important the city is in portraying the controversies of crisis (Meissner 2012).

In *Wasted Youth* the filmmakers do not refer so much to the financial burdens of the crisis, but they attempt to principally explore its interpersonal, psychological and cultural effects, reflecting on a dismantled and alienated society and a city in turmoil that is on the verge to explode. Special mention should be made to the way in which the “Athenian negative” is thematically and ideologically structured in the film through a comparative scheme of two elements in crisis: a crisis in contemporary youth (signifying a more profound crisis of intergenerational problems that is clearly displayed by the stereotypical image of idle teenagers) as well as a city in crisis.

One of the film’s prime targets is the portrayal of contemporary youth, as it is positioned in the context of the dysfunctional family, which creates an oppressive and repulsive environment for its members, especially for the youngsters. This is a frequent thematic choice among contemporary Greek filmmakers, who share a common interest in representing the socially dominant themes of youth cultures and family conflicts in their modern urban dramas – a tendency which embarks on Konstantinos Giannaris’s *Apo tin Akri tis Polis/At the Edge of the City* in 1998 and develops itself in to more recent Greek films like *Kynodontas/Dogtooth* (2009) by Yorgos Lanthimos, *Strella/A Woman's Way*

(2009) by Panos Koutras or *Attenberg* (2010) by Athena Rachel Tsangari. In this sense, *Wasted Youth* draws upon a recognizable iconography of Greek films that emphasize on the representation of the adolescent rites of passage. The film suggests a social reading of the “wasted” actions of its young protagonists, reminiscent of the social exclusion of destabilized youth as frequently mirrored not only in Greek films, but also in American independent films on a similar aspect of youth, such as the emblematic *Kids* (1995) by Larry Clark or the suggestive *Elephant* (2003) by Gus Van Sant. With the same empathy as Giannaris towards the young characters and their feelings and with the same vibrant, stark and unpolished narrative style as Clark and Van Sant, Papadimitropoulos and Vogel deal with contemporary youth, composing a powerful story of family wrongness at a critical moment in Greek society.

Youth, as viewed in the film, is disoriented, frivolous and slacker, unwilling to take any serious responsibilities in life, always being in contradiction to the adult world, to which it always seems indifferent and incomprehensible. This is a common view in the representational politics of contemporary media culture, which is adopted by the film and it considers youth as separate and in opposition to adult society (Giroux 1996). This is clearly exemplified throughout the film, initially in a breakfast scene, where Vassilis bursts into an inexplicably offensive behaviour towards his 14-year-old daughter, as she disdains his presence by being constantly connected to her iPod. In a similar fashion, later in the film, Harris’s father is inexcusably hostile and violent towards his son, as he complains about Harris’s negligence of getting a job and of not paying regular visits to his mother in the hospital.

At stake here are the intergenerational conflicts, which, as the film suggests, simmer in a state of prolonged tension and are mirrored not only in a contradiction between youth and adult life, but also in a juxtaposition of various stories of “wasted youth” – whether young or older. In this view, the framed photograph of Vassilis at a younger age, on which the camera focuses with a close-up in the opening sequence of the film, functions as a reminder that this frustrated adult has once been a carefree teenager, resembling to Harris. Similarly, Vassilis’s mother, a silent and isolated old woman, totally dependent on his son’s family, leads moments of genuine excitement and joy only when she resorts to memories of her adolescence by watching on DVD the school performances of her teenage granddaughter.

Tension and frustration are the dominant feelings of the film, which create a claustrophobic atmosphere, where adulthood is experienced negatively as a dysfunctional period of fears and conflicts, frustration and anger, wasted opportunities and low self-esteem that torment the heroes’ lives. In the case of Vassilis, this is evident as early as the first scenes of the film, where, after a tiring

night shift, he attempts to have perfunctory sex with his wife (Maria Skoula). Later on, in a family scene, Vassilis will find himself isolated once again, trapped in his daughter's indifference and contempt. Vassilis is constantly portrayed stressful and annoyed, unable to cope with his problems. The only exception to the rule of an anxious adulthood is Christina, who is cheerful and confident, lively and passionate, yet separated from other adults, as if belonging to another world.

The film comments on the idea of "waste" and "loss" at different levels. On the one hand, there is the apparent and typical confrontation among two generations, adolescence and adult life. On the other hand, there is another "crisis in a crisis" situation (Grasseli 2011), as Athens in *Wasted Youth* is experienced as a troubled and indifferent city in a desperate state of "waste", which is well documented in the aimless lifestyle of its inhabitants. As the film's title suggests, *Wasted Youth* is primarily a film about wasted elements, which could refer not only to personal accounts, but also to city stories. The film shows a distressed and at the same time simmering face of Athens, where the Athenian youth bustles with a steaming yet unused energy.

Athens in *Wasted Youth* becomes the battlefield of stark social dramas, framing the characters' agonies and controversies towards a changing world. The slow pace of the narrative in the introductory scene of the film is temporarily disrupted by a vibrant sequence of a crane, jerky shot of Athens, which is accompanied by an explosive rock song (Brand New Bass Guitar by Jamie T), responding both to the music preferences of youth culture, as well as to the social and existential overtones of a troubled city in the verge of a crisis situation. The chaotic, blurred and fragmented image of the city centre, as viewed in this sequence, establishes the dramatic backdrop, where the "Wasted youth" of the film's title is expected to emerge. As the story progresses, the film's view towards the cityscape grows more implicit and circuitous than promised in the opening scenes.

Although the film begins with a subjective look towards Athens, expressed by the young protagonists' ease to move practically everywhere using their skates, at the film's climax, nobody really has any clue on what is happening in the city, neither the characters nor the viewers. *Wasted Youth* ends up with a disoriented and fragmented account of an inhospitable urban atmosphere, created in the chaotic, trembling hand-held takes and with the camera, which puts viewers and characters aside, in the role of an astonished and numbed audience, which witnesses Harris's tragic death in the middle of the street. What *Wasted Youth* suggests through this skilful switch of point of view and the limited vision of the city that the characters possess is how silently and at the same time ambiguously the crisis is experienced by the city and its people. The audience might not feel at ease with such a delicate and at the same time controversial issue, which

possibly concerns everybody, but which nonetheless becomes particularly uncomfortable in the way it is reflected on the screen. The film's vigorous and straightforward style, together with its denial of mainstream narrative, make it difficult – even at some points unpleasant – to the Greek viewers, who are acquainted to more conventional forms of storytelling.

The filmmakers' choice to resolve the plot by using a secondary character, such as Harris' partner, and not one of the leading roles – in itself an unconventional narrative path – promotes an interesting point of view of the narrative, that of the spectator. The film undervalues the significance of the adult protagonist as it places the leading character in the viewers' position, since his role in the plot suddenly changes during the final sequence: Vassilis turns from being an actor to being an observer, shocked and confused, in the same way the audience probably is. This choice is also reinforced by the film's own generic codes of the docu-drama, which adhere to the verisimilitude of the plot and to a rough representation of reality.

The greatest virtue in *Wasted Youth* lies particularly in its claim that the Greek crisis is above all an existential crisis, a fatal loss of self-motivation and self-confidence, an immense void in the middle of the street noise, where interpersonal relations have become a field of wasted energy. The sudden and unjustified open ending, with one of the peripheral characters accidentally playing a leading role, strengthens the film's ambiguity as both an aesthetic and an ideological choice. Harris's sudden death because of a seemingly unexpected incident, with no possible explanation behind the characters and their actions, together with the effective screen presence of both amateur and professional actors, brings to light a strong metaphor for the Greek city in crisis and the “wasted” people that inhabit it.

In all, *Wasted Youth* could be viewed as a strong cinematic illustration of the contemporary crisis that articulates a wistful message about interpersonal crisis, intergenerational conflicts and family problems in modern-day Greece. Although the film is critical against the common theme of the Greek crisis, it explores more subtle, esoteric and persistent aspects of the issue, which shape and affect the audience's sense of an ambivalent social reality. Furthermore, it plainly reflects both the qualities and the complexities of the films of the “new Greek wave”, since *Wasted Youth* not only investigates the thematic, aesthetic, and ideological concerns expressed in these films, but it also highlights the current situation in European film production, where, regardless of the films' merit, independent filmmaking is practically undervalued by institutional agents and frequently developed as an emergency act (Blondeau 2012). Still, this controversial cinema of the European “new waves”, where *Wasted Youth* belongs, is the center of the most essential and revolutionary cultural forces against the crisis.

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