

The Performative Aesthetics of the 'Greek New Wave'

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ABSTRACT

*This paper argues that there is an excessive performative element at work that is constitutive of the formation of the contemporary Greek 'festival films' as a wave (the so-called 'Greek New Wave'), even if each one seems extremely unique and different. Both performance and performativity become conceptual tools to scrutinize something more than the text, and at the same time they are the films' aesthetic penchant inscribed within the cinematic text as a thematic and formal structure. My attempt is to name and explain this, so far unnamed, unfamiliar aesthetics, which is located in and outside the text and functions as a trademark for these films. This performative specificity that bears similarities with contemporary post-dramatic theatre can be detected in the following interconnecting elements: a) the mechanisms of the films' participation in festivals and their promotional strategies, b) the recurrent thematic motifs and acting style used for characterization and plot construction, and c) different stylistic and narrational strategies with common functions. My account focuses on two films, namely *To Agori Troi to Fagito tou Pouliou/Boy Eating the Bird's Food (Lygizos, 2012)* and *I Eonia Epistrofi tou Antoni Paraskeva/The Eternal Return of Antonis Paraskevas (Psykou, 2013)*.*

KEYWORDS

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Greek New Wave

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A GREEK WAY, A GREEK WAVE

While media reference on the festival success and on the content and style of contemporary Greek Cinema expands, it is becoming increasingly crucial for Greek Film Studies to stand critically, theoretically and methodologically alert in order to explicate this new phenomenon and place the discussion within recent academic discourse. A reproduction of the discourse mostly provided by film critics in leading journals and newspapers like *Cahiers du Cinema* and *The Guardian* about the so called 'Greek Weird Wave' or the wider category – as I consider it – 'Greek New Wave', its 'weirdness' and their, sometimes easily assumed, shared characteristics is definitely a starting point only if questioned and certainly not taken for granted. Similarly, the other assertion that otherwise aesthetically different films¹ are categorised and branded together by those who are, as Thomas Elsaesser asserts, in the business of denominating 'new waves' and discovering a "new national cinema" (2005: 99), does not entail lack of a common aesthetics. Research on narrative and formal elements might actually justify, enrich or negate the traits mentioned in mainstream film criticism. The field is definitely complex since films, A-list festivals, and critics function as a feedback loop system that interweaves with the country's recent exposure in international news and form a generic status for the 'Greek New Wave'. Issues of transnational film festival networks, of recent trends in contemporary art-cinema narration, and those of production, distribution and exhibition modes within specific cultural contexts might prove fertile frameworks for producing historiographical and critical texts.

Dimitris Papanikolaou's (2010a; 2010b 2011) cultural analyses of films like *Strella/A Woman's Way* (Koutras, 2009), *Kynodontas/Dogtooth* (Lanthimos, 2009) and *Hora Proelefsis/Homeland* (Tzoumerkas, 2010) place the phenomenon within a broader current artistic trend in Greece that includes theatre and literature and suggests an interpretation that illustrates its "radical political position" (Papanikolaou 2011). Papanikolaou's account derives from a cultural criticism standpoint and therefore concerns more the formation of Modern Greek society and less of Greek cinema as a field of study. However, this task has been undertaken by Maria Chalkou (2012). Chalkou focuses more on this cinematic phenomenon as such and tries to explain the rise of a "new cinema of emancipation", as she calls it, through the presentation of a significant amount of

¹ Many directors deny the existence of a wave. In 2009 Yorgos Lanthimos said to Eftehia Katsarea: "There is not a single Greek new wave with common characteristics" (Katsarea 2009). However, after the continuing success of Greek films abroad, the term 'Greek Wave' or 'Greek Weird Wave' that was firstly coined by Rose (2011), was widely put in use. See also Chalkou (2012: 244). In this paper I use the term 'Greek New Wave' since the term 'weird' has many connotations and provides a characterization that needs further exploration and contextualization.

critically filtered data. In order to shed light on what terms like ‘Greek Weird Wave’ and ‘Greek New Wave’ might denote, she contextualizes the film production of the 2000s. According to her account, this new trend did not merely break through in 2009 (when *Strella* and *Dogtooth* participated in two major festivals), but was being cultivated throughout the 2000s, through the growth of the audio-visual industry in Greece, new forms of cinephilia, the emergence of new technologies, the relation with institutions as well as the social context and the change of public discourse since 2008. Chalkou comments less on text and more on context, but concludes by acknowledging the “challenging aesthetics and unconventional narratives” of this new generation of filmmakers (2012: 259).

With this paper, I aim at exposing and assessing this “challenging aesthetics”. I argue that there is an excessive performative element at work that is constitutive of the formation of these ‘festival films’ as a wave.² In this way, I suggest a theoretical and methodological framework and give an analysis that justifies their grouping together and at the same time reconsiders the way the festival network and the media contribute to this phenomenon. For this purpose, I will focus on two films which are aesthetically different to each other and have not yet been the subject of extended debate: Ektoras Lygizos’s *To Agori Troi to Fagito tou Pouliou/Boy Eating the Bird’s Food* (2012) and Elina Psykou’s *I Eonia Epistrofi tou Antoni Paraskeva/The Eternal Return of Antonis Paraskevas* (2013). The two films premiered at Karlovy Vary and Berlin Film Festivals, respectively.

Film critics and festival programmers who are already listing shared characteristics among Greek films and are even expressing concerns over standardization, discuss the inclusion of these two films within the ‘Greek New Wave’. Joachim Lepastier, in a comment on Psykou’s film in *Cahiers du Cinema*, writes of “une manière grecque”, “a Greek way”, which is characterized by a “reclusion in a post-modern décor”, “arrhythmic narration”, “warped humor”, “weirdness but perhaps too calculated” (2013: 66).³ Dimitris Eipides, Thessaloniki International Film Festival director and Toronto Film Festival Programmer, placed Lygizos’s film outside this wave: “Stark, rigorous and austere, the feature debut by first-time writer-director Ektoras Lygizos stands in

² Regarding the generic function of art-cinema that frequents the festival circuit see Thomas Elsaesser (2005) and Farahmad (2010). For instance, Elsaesser states that films of the international art cinema from different countries share a stylistic repertoire that has become a “norm that could be called the international festival film” (2005: 18).

³ In another review, the *Economist* lists: “awkward dialogue”, “heightened background noise”, “sudden violence and emotional breakdown” and many others (see V.B. 2011). In a renowned blog, the reader will find that Greek cinema is characterized by the “loss of logical concatenation”, “convulsive sexuality”, “sparse and marred relationships”, “spastic physicality” (Celluloid Liberation Front 2012).

pointed contrast to the absurdism and deadpan humour of the ‘Greek New Wave’ of Yorgos Lanthimos and Athina Rachel Tsangari” (Eipides 2012). Nevertheless, the Hellenic Film Academy, which has twice held a conference with the title ‘Riding the Greek Wave’, honoured the same film with the award for Best Greek Feature Film in 2013.

Performative specificity can be observed in the following interconnecting elements: a) in the processes and practices of the films’ participation in festivals and the underlying promotional strategies, b) in the thematic motives and acting style used for characterization and plot construction, and c) in different stylistic and narrational strategies with common functions.

PERFORMATIVE AESTHETICS

Performance and performativity are polyhedral concepts that derive from the analysis of various phenomena and disciplines. The adjective ‘performative’ was initially used by the linguist John Langshaw Austin in the early 1950s. With the parallel development of Erving Goffman’s theory of *The Presentation of Everyday Life*, Victor Turner’s and Richard Schechner’s exploration of social dramas, cultural performances and theatre, and Judith Butler’s gender theory on performativity, the concept developed into an interdisciplinary field of study and a tool that facilitates the analysis of several social, cultural and artistic events or phenomena that create realities beyond the binary oppositions of subject/object, observer/observed, actor/spectator.⁴ In short, drawing from Austin’s notion, the performative is “something that in its enunciation *acts*” (emphasis on the text, Carlson 2008: 9). Moreover, the expansion of the field of performance studies and the utilization of the concepts is also connected with the ‘performative turn’ in the arts. As Erika Fischer-Lichte, asserts, the “performative turn in the early 1960s, [...] not only made each art more performative but also led to the creation of a new genre of art, so-called action and performance art” (2008: 18).

This “performative turn” left its mark on the cinema of the 1960s, its consequent historical and critical categorization and on a branch of film theory. To begin from the latter, such a turn becomes obvious with the theoretical approach of Vivian Sobchack (1992) and her “phenomenology of film experience”, according to which the cinema apparatus and spectatorship are interwoven in a physical relation towards the construction of meaning. Before that, one would detect the “performative turn” in the films themselves as Gilles Deleuze (2005[1985]: 182-215) did with his categorization of modernist cinema in “cinema of the body” and

⁴ For an overview of the field see Fischer-Lichte’s chapter ‘Explaining Concepts: Performativity and Performance’ (2008: 24-37), the introduction by Richard Schechner and Willa Appel (1997: 1-7) and the ‘Introduction: Performativity and Performance’ by Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1995: 1-18).

“cinema of the brain”. Subsequent terms such as the “New Extremism” (Horeck & Kendall 2013) or “cinemas of performance” (Del Rio 2008) also constitute a reworking of this wider category of the “cinema of the body”. Furthermore, another perspective from which the performative is approached is the study of film acting itself, especially the acknowledgement that performance becomes, in certain cases, a diegetic trigger and an organizational tool of narration. This perspective seems to be more text-based, though it does not neglect the fact that the gestural and bodily aspect of film affects the spectators. Steven Rawle, for example, examines the *Performance in the Cinema of Hal Hartley* in his homonymous text, and although he begins writing about the prominence of acting, he also acknowledges that the term ‘performance’ “suggests a whole continuum of possible activities, of which acting is just one subset of potential signs and outcomes” (2011: xii).

Another contribution to this discussion that raises the issue of performativity in a Greek film is an article by Angelos Koutsourakis (2012), who argues that Lanthimos’s *Dogtooth* belongs to the tradition of the “cinema of the body” and that it deals with the “politics of performativity” as Lars Von Trier’s *Dogville* (2003). Koutsourakis detects this aesthetics “on the performance of the actors as a formal and thematic element, demonstrating a preference for a paratactic style, which does not aim at unifying all the episodes, but opens the narrative to moments that go beyond dramaturgical consistency” (2012: 84-85). However, Koutsourakis does not just confine his essay to the analysis of style and narrative, but interprets this type of aesthetics as a political stance within a European film context, which concerns the affective relation of film to the audience and its respective participation. As he states: “[...] the reduction of the narrative to moments of performative excess, which permeates the works of European filmmakers, aims at maximizing ambiguity and assigning a more productive participation to the audience, a gesture which I understand to be political” (ibid.: 85).

Nevertheless, Lanthimos’s work (*Kinetta* [2005], *Dogtooth* and *Alpeis/Alps* [2011]) is a clear example of how thematics and style present materialized variations of concepts such as re-enactment, reconstruction and performance. But, do the rest of the films that have been attached to this ‘Greek New Wave’ label fit into this distinction? In order to tackle this question, I shall, on the one hand, adopt a macroscopic approach that addresses this cinematic phenomenon as an event, and on the other, at a microscopic level, I shall be referring to already existing accounts that center on theater aesthetics and its evolution after the “performative turn”.⁵ In this debate one should certainly include the actor, as

⁵ This theoretical convergence is a known methodological strategy. For instance, Bordwell (1985) very often refers to the art of music when he wants to explain

an element of performative aesthetics and, moreover, a conceptualization of “the film image as moving materiality/corporeality” (Del Rio 2008: 2). More importantly though, one should consider a “specific aestheticity” similar to the one Fischer-Lichte (2008[2004]: 36) observed in contemporary theatre, or rather in “post-dramatic theatre”, to use the words of Hans-Thies Lehmann (2002[1999]). The performative aesthetics of this essay’s title draws directly from Fischer-Lichte’s “aesthetics of the performative”. But what is this specificity and how can it contribute to a better understanding of the recent new wave?

In 1999, a few years before Fischer-Lichte’s book, another prolific theatrical thinker, Hans-Thies Lehmann, explicated in detail the field of “post-dramatic theatre” delving into the specificity of theatre performances after the 1960s. He arrived at the articulation of a detailed “stylistic palette” that consists of, to name a few traits, simultaneity, monotony or chaotic accumulation of elements (135-138), the importance of music and sound as an autonomous structure of the theatre (143), avoidance of the dominance of logos (146) and corporeality, according to which, the body is made of gestures defying meaning (150-152). Similarly, in Fischer-Lichte’s account, “an aesthetics of the performative” encloses an excessive “mediality”, manifested in the reversal of roles, the creation of a community, physical contact, the “liveness” of the event; this aesthetics challenges established distinctions between producers, actors, characters and audience. It manifests itself as a different embodiment, one that moves away from identification and underlines the presence and importance of the body. Among its other traits, it gives prominence to the voice as a physical gesture over logos, while time is constructed with the use of time brackets more like repetitive parentheses, drawing away from a semioticity of the text (Fischer-Lichte 2008). In short, this specificity creates a sense of immediacy that procures the effect of presenting and not representing, gives the impression of ‘non-referentiality’, something that “do[es] not refer to pre-existing conditions, such as an inner essence” (ibid.: 27); that promotes ‘liveness’, presence, physicality and unpredictability, but also repetition as an act that “comprises a ‘re-enactment’ and a ‘re-experiencing’ based on a repertoire of meanings already socially instituted” (ibid.: 28).

Searching for this “specific aestheticity”, especially in cinema, one can borrow from a neo-formalist toolkit. Yet, this is not sufficient as an approach. Performative aesthetics emerges when one reconsiders text and context, from the fact that these films that constitute the ‘Greek New Wave’ participate in film festivals and they affectively address the spectators with their physicality or

“parametric narration”. In my account, ‘post-dramatic theatre’ is used as a continuing vessel and as a methodological lens for understanding cinema in Greece. Concomitantly, I imply a relationship of Greek cinema with contemporary Greek theatre.

even extremity, issues that a pure formalist analysis would not take into consideration. As Marvin Carlson in his introduction in Fischer-Lichte's book explains, formalists, like Shklovsky, give prominence to the "art object", while Fischer-Lichte (and other performance theorists) make "the shift from art object to event" (Carlson 2008: 7).

If one considers the conceptualization of a festival participation as performance and the cinematic performance of extreme actions (like acts of violence, non simulated sexual acts) that bring into being not just the Barthesian "reality effect" (Barthes 2002 [1968]), but a performative effect, then explicating this particular aesthetics requires other tools. Both performance and performativity become a conceptual tool to scrutinize something more than the text and, at the same time, they are the films' aesthetic penchant inscribed within the cinematic text as a thematic and formal structure.

FROM LIVE PERFORMANCE TO CINEMA AS PERFORMANCE

A reason why the performative is a concept to be explored in relation to these films is the fact that many of their creative contributors are equally active in the recent post-dramatic theatre in Greece. It is reasonable that many actors work both in theatre and cinema productions, and that the two arts often function as communicating vessels. But here I do not refer just to two professional fields that communicate and interchange personnel, but to the sharing of certain artistic mechanisms, to an aesthetic transplantation taking place through the bodies of the actors, and thus through their performances. This tradition pre-existed, but only flourished during the early 2000s, and is now an established practice of the diverse theatre performances produced in Athens: performance art, site-specific acts, devised theatre, theatre-dance and even documentary theatre. During the 1990s Michael Marmarinos, Theodoros Terzopoulos and others nursed a generation of spectators and young artists into the post-dramatic theatre art. The recent Greek 'festival film' and this specific theatrical realm cannot be thought of as non-interpermeable; aesthetic correlation is unavoidable when artists work on both spheres.

This kind of theatre includes the devised theatre of the Blitz Group (members of which act in contemporary films), Syllas Tzoumerkas's theatrical work that could also be classified as a devised theatre, Lanthimos's and Lygizos's theatrical re-appropriations and re-appraisal of modern and classical theatre, the audiovisual performances of Drog-A-Tek (musicians of the film *Homeland*). Yorgos Kakanakis co-wrote the script of *Kinetta*, had the leading part in *Istoria 52/Tale 52* (Alexiou, 2008), participated in *Wasted Youth* (Papadimitropoulos & Vogel, 2011), is a theatre director and artist, and co-founded the live cinema performance group of *The Erasers*; Alexandros Voulgaris and Yannis Veslemes are filmmakers and also

acknowledged performers of electronic and pop music shows, known by the name of *The Boy* and *Felizol* respectively; Angelos Frantzis has also directed films and live performances, and in 2012 showcased an installation presenting two twelve-minute films that were screened simultaneously along with a specific sound design, transporting the experience of Athens at the 13th International Architecture Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia.⁶

Solely the filmmakers' and actors' common background, though, is not enough to understand their films' branding as a wave. However, it does suggest that cinema is much more than the film itself, especially when one studies the formation of a wave. For example, Linda Badley (2010) has named the main part of her book on Lars von Trier 'Making the Waves: Cinema as Performance', where she explains the performative element in his films in terms of aestheticity and film practice. But she also further denotes the consequent formation of von Trier as an auteur and leading figure of 'Dogma 95', incorporating in her analysis the consideration of the filmmaker as a performer in festivals and media and public discourse and his auto-presentation as "a contradictory, eclectic, European and transnational figure within a global postmodern (as opposed to Danish) context" (2010: 3).

The role of the festivals in the formation of waves, as well as of the international visibility of a director or a national production, is connected with the idea of the festival as performance and ritual.⁷ This conceptualization goes as back as André Bazin's 1955 article 'The Festival Viewed as A Religious Order' (2009 [1955]: 13-19). Taking cue from his experience as a journalist at Cannes Film Festival, Bazin elucidates the phenomenon analyzing and explaining its rules, rituals, inevitable hierarchies, its "moral obligations and the regularity of its activities" (Bazin 2009 [1955]: 16). Later on, the anthropologist and journalist Daniel Dayan described his experience at the Sundance Film Festival with a similar statement. Film festivals are operating like sacred events, like rituals or rites of passage, for each type of participants (cinema-goers, journalists, industry professionals, filmmakers). Daniel Dayan (1997) clearly states that film festivals are "a live performance", "a voluntary act of separation from everyday life" for audiences and a "baptism of fire" for filmmakers. From Dayan's analysis, one may infer the

⁶ See these websites: <http://paranoiseradio.blogspot.gr/2011/05/extended.html>, <http://veslemesvsfelizol.com/>, <http://flix.gr/en/53rd-thessaloniki-iff-higuita-by-the-boy.html>, <http://www.efsyn.gr/?p=131306>, <https://www.behance.net/kakanakis>, <http://flix.gr/en/got-to-be-real-angelos-frantzis-in-search-of-the-t.html>. All accessed 18 October 2013.

⁷ For bibliography on film festival theory, see <http://www.filmfestivalresearch.org/index.php/ffrn-bibliography/1-film-festivals-the-long-view/1-1-film-festival-studies/1-1-a-film-festival-theory/> Accessed 18 October 2013.

different status, the distinction that participants acquire from their involvement in the process. Thomas Elsaesser elucidates the issue as following:

The exclusivity of [the festival] aligns them closer to rituals where the initiated are amongst themselves, and barriers cordon off the crowd: at the core, there is a performative act (if only of being seen – walking up the red carpet in Cannes, for instance) or the act of handing out the awards. Some film festivals include fans and encourage the presence of the public, others are for professionals only, and almost all of them follow elaborate and often arcane accreditation rules. (2005: 94)

Moreover, Marijke de Valck's extensive research on film festivals expanded this field of study. De Valck also connects Latour's Actor Network Theory notion of "obligatory points of passage" with Arnold Van Gennep's "rites of passage" according to which certain ritualistic events transform the status of the participants to the event and "contribute to the cultural positioning of films and filmmakers in the film world" (de Valck 2007: 37).

Participation in festivals functions in the way a performance act does, insofar as screenings are just one part of the whole process where often the director becomes a performer and the audience contributes to the whole experience. Furthermore, extensive networking that consists of transnational meetings, workshops, competitions and fora where film directors, script-writers and producers are given the chance to work on all aspects of film creation, from idea development to funding, on one hand, brings forth other types of creators/actors or 'auteurs', like producers, decision makers, script instructors, consultants, agents etc; on the other hand, it makes new directors and waves within a transnational environment. Therefore, the Greek film that begins its career in such a network, adopts the quality of theatrical or cultural performance that bears all the aforementioned characteristics, i.e. liveness and physicality, reversal of roles, change of status. Under this prism, the exhibition of these films in important international festivals changed their status as artistic and cultural products and also the status of their directors. In the case of Lanthimos, Athina Rachel Tsangari and Alexandros Avranas, their transformed status was also reinforced by political appreciation (for example, the minister of culture used their names in a speech about the recent film law, the President of Greece congratulated some of them).⁸ As far as Lygizos, Psykou and their films are concerned, the passage to visibility and media attention started in the 'works in progress' festival sections. Lygizos's film was presented in the respective section of the Rotterdam International Film Festival. Likewise, Psykou's film gained a

⁸ <http://entertainment.in.gr/html/ent/393/ent.97393.asp> and <http://gr.euronews.com/2013/09/09/alexandros-avranas-miss-violence-vraveio-venetia-venice-film-festival/>. Accessed 5 November 2013.

completely different status when the project received the ‘work in progress’ award at the Karlovy Vary Film Festival. According to the Festival website⁹ a film may compete for the ‘work in progress’ section with a trailer, a twenty minute rough-cut footage and a press-kit. Then the film enters the festival circuit before its completion, more like an event than a film.¹⁰

In this consideration of cinema as performance I would also add the promotional strategy of these films. Lygizos’s film promotion strategy consisted not only of a facebook page and a twitter account that let fans and viewers interact, ask, comment, ‘like’ and follow the film’s journey, but also of a peculiar strategy on instagram: instead of posting pictures from the set, pictures of canaries were posted, foregrounding the ‘bound motif’ of the character. Additionally, Lygizos, being an actor himself, participated in a photoshoot resembling a fashion exhibition that completed an extensive article and interview on his work for the VIMADONA magazine.¹¹

A more interesting example of cinema adopting performative elements through promotion is the communicative strategy of *The Eternal Return of Antonis Paraskevas* that contests the boundaries between filmic text and context and establishes the performative aspect that films acquire: after the screening of the film at the Berlin Film Festival, the director shot short videos with existing media personas, intellectuals and TV stars – like Yorgos Veltsos, Christoforos Papakaliatis, Lena Divani, Anna Goula (a persona played in real life by the artist Hara Kolaiti) – who talk about the main character Antonis Paraskevas as if he were a real person.¹² This material belongs to the fabula of the film and it is supposed to have happened before and during Paraskevas’s alleged disappearance (Nikolaidou, 2014). This way, the filmic event attains liveness, materiality, corporeality and generic uncertainty; it therefore begs the question: is this an art project, a transmedia event, or rather a ‘weird’ promotional strategy?

⁹ <http://www.kviff.com/en/for-film-industry/works-in-progress/>

¹⁰ The director answered thus to one of my questions about the contribution of the Karlovy Vary Film Festival in the success of her film: “I had the first feedback, I made contacts that helped the film attain a premiere (sales agent, festival people). I also got the first award that helped me finish the film since it was an award for post-production expenses.” (E-mail interview held on the 11th of October 2013).

¹¹ <http://www.tovima.gr/vimadonna/talks/article/?aid=510614> Accessed 23 October 2013

¹² Information from an e-mail interview with me held on the 11th of October 2013.

THE THEMATICS OF PERFORMANCE AND THE CHARACTER AS PERFORMER

Performance is part of the thematics of these films in a very literal way. Thematics, in the formalists' and neo-formalists' toolkit, is not something outside of form. Tomaschevsky in his seminal essay 'Thematics' states that "a theme has a certain unity and is composed of small thematic elements arranged in definite order" (1965 [1925]: 66). He calls the smallest thematic element, a motif. Motifs are used for plot construction and characterization. In the case of the 'festival films' I am referring to, this would mean, first of all, that the thematics of performance are composed of either bodily acts as motifs that construct character, or social, cultural and aesthetic acts that build the narrative.

Indeed, the spectator is exposed to the characters on screen being performative in their diegetic environments. Moreover, the plot consists of performative acts, like those in *Dogtooth* and *Alps*, where the performance is comprised of games and re-enactments. Respectively, the performative is apparent, albeit in less dynamic ways, in the recurrent motifs of public ceremonies, social dramas and rituals in *Homeland*, *diorthosi/correction* (Anastopoulos, 2007) and *Macherovgaltis/Knifer* (Economides, 2010).¹³

In *The Boy Eating the Bird's Food*, performativity consists of several 'bound motifs' used for characterization. First of all, characterization starts even before one watches the film. The *boy* in Lygizos's film is the main character, and he performs an act: he eats the bird's food. Moreover, he has a beautiful voice. These two characteristics are established in the title and in one version of the poster, respectively. Presently, during the first scene in the boy's kitchen, he feeds his canary (reaffirming the title), and he lightly touches his stomach. In the next shot he places a hot water bottle on his stomach, then rubs it with alcohol and finally falls onto his bed. The boy has a physical problem. Lygizos establishes the motif of a diseased body, which is being explored throughout the film. In the next scene, the boy performs 'Erbarne Dich', the Bach aria, stating thus his profession. In the same scene he faints as a result of his hunger. Consequently, Lygizos defines the

¹³ For instance, *Homeland* is swarming with scenes placed within marches, parades, manifestations or public events that appear as an unmotivated break from the act of narration. What does it mean to place the characters within such environments, like a theatre performance in *Knifer*, a religious march (epitafios) in *correction*? The exceptional and sometimes liminal status of these situations that contest established identities and mundane reality are adding some of their qualities to the heroes as, for example, the incestuous kiss during the Saint Dimitrios parade in *Homeland*, or the only colored scene in an otherwise black and white film, at the theatre just before the character becomes a *Knifer*.

character under variations of two sub-themes consisting of somatic effects: the ailing body and the performing body.

These two sub-themes develop throughout the film with different somatic manifestations: in the next scenes, the boy eats whenever he finds food, loses his hair, tries to have sex, is in pain, has to rehearse how to react in hypothetical work situations, talks to himself while performing both sides of hypothetical dialogues, becoming both the confessor and the one who confesses.¹⁴ The consistency and repetitiveness of these motifs make up the actual film.

Antonis Paraskevas in Psykou's film is literally a performer. He is a celebrity that started out as a news broadcaster, stood out as a media persona in glamorous TV shows, presented big broadcasted ceremonies and now is at the twilight of his career. Again, the character is heralded in the title. But the exploration of the thematics of performance proceeds in a totally different way than in Lygizos's film. The latter consists of variations of its two sub-themes and their motifs, while Psykou's film consists of a climactic progression of its motifs.

The plot shows the demise of Antonis Paraskevas from a TV star to a shabby, hungry, mutilated, almost dehumanized vagrant. The plot adheres to the literal performance acts that Antonis Paraskevas undertakes in a deserted hotel, like singing or cooking in front of his camera, and to certain small acts that, at the beginning of the film at least, maintain his usual clear-cut physical appearance so that its deterioration is clear later on. The deterioration of Paraskevas's body, his physical metamorphosis *is* the actual narrative.

Antonis Paraskevas is constructed from the beginning as a silent character that enters a deserted hotel. He talks for the first time after he turns on a video camera that he has brought with him to the hotel, and starts to anchor a kind of a diary. His voice is heard for the first time because he interacts with a camera. He repeats this kind of performance act in front of his camera several times; he even wakes up in the middle of the night to record himself while reading the hotel's promotional brochure. He also watches his old TV shows. It is important for him to be in front of the camera and to be looked at and heard. This is a basic sub-theme, which comprises the motif of presenting an act in front of the camera. He also arranges food and his personal belongings displaying a strong urge for control and order. This is the second series of motifs which marks the literal construct of his identity through bodily acts and gestures that underline the way he takes care of himself. For instance, controlling his appearance is crucial: he

¹⁴ This hypothetical dialogue is similar to the self role-playing *Rosetta* (1999) performs in the renowned Dardenne's film. One can definitely establish a connection between the two films.

needs to wear specific outfits and he has brought his hair dyeing kit with him at the hotel. The camera focuses and returns on these various acts (searching for and wearing the appropriate shirt) or props (the close up of the hair dyeing kit) turning them into motifs, since these small thematic elements altogether and in progression build one of the main sub-themes of the narrative: Paraskevas's body transformation. These motifs become important for the character and for the dramatic twist in the middle-point of the narrative. The moment he starts losing his mind, the camera becomes increasingly mobile, and Antonis Paraskevas performs movements that are contrary to his prior ones: he shaves his hair, puts on the clothes of a scarecrow, eats garbage and he mutilates himself. All these motifs that construct the two sub-themes of performance acts and body transformation are not only 'bound' (to the character) but also 'dynamic' in the sense explained by Tomashevsky, they are motifs that "are central to the story" and that "keep it moving" (1965 [1925]: 70).

Like in Lygizos's film, character development starts from the title itself, and is carried throughout the film in silence, almost without any dialogue, but only with actions, gestures and postures. Therefore, characterization relies more on the body itself and less on a dramatic depth. In Lygizos's film the story is about a boy literally eating the bird's food, while in Psykou's film, even the protagonist's past is a performance to be watched. In this sense, there is no before or after for the characters in the plot. There is no trauma in the past. The trauma is taking place in the present.

ACTING STYLE AND THE ACTOR AS PERFORMER: GESTURES AND POSTURES

A few critics and scholars have already mentioned the importance of the actor in recent Greek films (Chalkou 2012: 256; Kerkinos 2013: 2). Furthermore, in their interviews, directors like Lanthimos, Tsangari, Tzoumerkas and Lygizos to name a few, explicitly talk about acting style and the methods they employ with their actors¹⁵ – not to mention that many of them actually perform themselves in theatre and film.

¹⁵ Lanthimos explains his dislike towards naturalism in acting in <http://flix.gr/en/yorgos-lanthimos-takes-us-on-a-tour-of-the-quotap.html>. Accessed 23 January 2013. Tangari makes an extensive reference to acting style in 'Suicide Girl: Athina Rachel Tsangari' at <http://cinema-scope.com/cinema-scope-magazine/interviews-suicide-girl-athina-rachel-tsangari-attenberg/>. Accessed 23 October 2013. Tzoumerkas and his co-writer and protagonist Youla Boudali explain also the way they worked in building the character through acting in an interview available at <http://www.patris.gr/articles/189678?PHPSESSID=k62u1lrhsh44nbi99o2ettq886#.U67IfZRdV B>. Accessed 23 October 2013. Lygizos explains how important the actor's

Literature on film acting, although scant when compared to other aspects of film studies, acknowledges that acting is a cinematic element co-created with the aestheticity of the medium, namely its technological essence and its other formal elements, such as editing, sound design and cinematography. One way or another, the actor's performance in cinema is more than acting, since the medium itself influences what, and how, the spectator perceives as acting. As Cynthia Baron, Diane Carson and Frank P. Tomasulo note, "film acting is best understood as a form of *mediated performance* that lies at the intersection of art, technology and culture" (Baron & al 2004: 1). Film acting can be analyzed, as Higson asserts, through the categories of voice, facial expression, gesture and posture or corporeal materiality, however, these categories are shaped by the cinematic devices (2004: 147).

My argument, though, is not acknowledging that acting in cinema is 'a mediated performance'. Rather, I argue that there is a specific type of acting that is instead grounded in techniques and tools deriving from a post-dramatic theatrical tradition, a foregrounding of gestures and postures, a reflexive corporeality, a wide range of actor's skills that transcend the medium and genre specificity (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 47). As Lehmann writes, the performer "moves mainly between 'not-acting' and 'simple acting'" (2002: 135). Or as Fischer-Lichte again describes, two out of four strategies employed in this performative turn are about "emphasizing and exhibiting the individual performer(-body)" and "highlighting the performer(-body)'s fragile, vulnerability, and shortcomings" (ibid.: 82). A reflexive body presence and a generic uncertainty are prominent in this type of acting style and function as a trademark for this corpus of films.

To be more precise, in Lygizos's film, Yannis Papadopoulos's (the boy) acting style is based on a continuous physicality. His performance is driven away from logos, away from words and text and sometimes appears unmotivated, giving the impression of improvisation at the exact moment of filming. Moreover, Lygizos denudes Papadopoulos's acting from both plot-driven actions and from any kind of context: the hand-held camera stays close to his face and other body parts and follows his gestures and movements with long takes while the shallow depth of field decontextualizes his body.

Yannis Papadopoulos (the boy) is this specific boy with this specific body and, at the same time, he could be any boy living under these circumstances; he is a body with these specific gestures: a body opening the drawer like *that*, with *this* specific finger inclination, breathing heavily and screaming with *this* particular voice when he is hungry. At the same time, his performance lacks a strong bond

gestures and postures are in <http://www.mag24.gr/interview/synenteyksi-ektoras-lygizos-polybrabeymenos-skinothetis>. Accessed 23 October 2013.

with 'compositional motivation'; it becomes an improvisation or a part of a performance act. For example, there is no reason for the character to step on the kitchen sink and place a paper bill on top of his head, nor to do these choreographed-like movements on the balcony seen in the clip below.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2b_S9HaaqJw

If one wants to place Lygizos's film within its European counterparts, similar devices used in Dardenne's cinematic universe are noticed. Regardless of the similarities, there are some differences between the *boy* and Dardenne's *Rosetta* as, for instance, the latter has a name in contrast to the *boy*. *The boy* is following the tradition of Dardenne Brothers' films but with more intense physicality and abstraction. By not assigning the subject with a name, the character/actor becomes both an abstract scheme and body specific.

What Lygizos and Papadopoulos achieve with the gestures and movements of the camera and the body respectively, Psykou and Christos Stergioglou (Paraskevas) do so with the persistence and repetitiveness of specific frames and postures. For this reason, no matter how different Psykou's and Lygizos's films are, one can classify the acting style of their films within a wider non-naturalistic and post-dramatic category of acting. The frequent reference¹⁶ to Robert Bresson in the debate around Greek cinema seems to be justified since this acting style seems to move "from the exterior to the interior" (Bresson 1977: 2).

Stergioglou's acting in fact consists of two types of gestural and postural devices. The first one revolves around the construction of the character in his past images as a TV persona in various shows (broadcasts, beauty contests, big TV shows, the Millennium celebration, Eurovision competitions and many more). In these scenes from Paraskevas's TV past, Stergioglou uses hyperbolic manners and gestures using the codes of Greek television where minimality is by no means an option. This type of acting is set against the acting during the rest of the film, expressing thus a self-referential statement about acting on TV and acting on Film.

¹⁶ This connection has been used for Lygizos's film and has been promoted by the director himself. See: <http://flix.gr/en/ektoras-lygizos-bares-all-about-his-first-feature.html> where Lygizos says "I was mostly inspired by Bresson"; also the comment in <http://festivalists.com/post/41715095819/boyeatingthebirdsfood> that "[the film] echoes the brilliantly elliptical cinema of Bresson in this bracing, dispassionately lucid study of an outsider, driven to the extremes of isolation and desperation"; and the Hollywood Reporter Review in <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/boy-eating-birds-food-karlovy-festival-346508> (all accessed 23 October 2013). However, I believe that Lygizos's has very few similarities with Bresson's cinema.

The second type of performance consists of two devices: specific repetitive postures and the intense use of bodily sounds. In the diegetic present of Antonis Paraskevas in the hotel, Stergioglou's acting style consists of everyday simple repetitive postures in the form of his slightly inclined shoulders, blank facial expression, calculated and automatic movements, all of them placed often in the centre of the frame, as seen in **Fig 1-6**. Even when, mid-way of the film, Paraskevas seems to be losing his mind, his postures remain the same. His deadpan facial expression does not change even when he mutilates himself. His reaction is almost apathetic and voiceless.



Fig 1: Antonis Paraskevas's posture while cooking



Fig 2: Antonis Paraskevas's posture while eating



Fig 3: Antonis Paraskevas's cooks again



Fig 4: Antonis Paraskevas speaks in front of his camera



Fig 5: Antonis Paraskevas sings

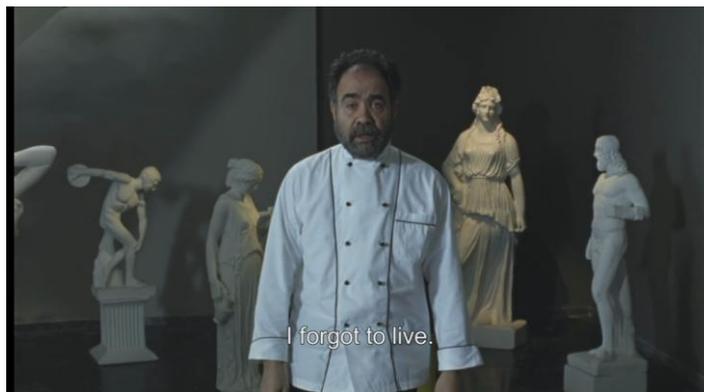


Fig 6: Antonis Paraskevas sings again

This inexpressive acting is however enriched by a creative treatment of sound: by the pass from the silence of stasis to the abrupt sound of kinesis, by bodily noises, such as heavy breathing, and by vocal gestures, such as muffled crying or screaming. For instance, when Paraskevas leaves the hotel, he crosses the highway. Although this crossing takes place in a very long shot with cars passing by in high speed in the foreground, the viewer hears Paraskevas's heavy breathing (although he is in the background) instead of the traffic, the volume of which is considerably lower.

Although cinematic techniques are different in the two films, the accumulation of or focus on gestural acts becomes the centre of their narrative and style. At the same time, both acting styles signify each particular body and the mechanisms of every body. This is also one reason why these films function not only on a literal level, but also an allegorical one.

Apart from the foregrounding of a phenomenology of the body, another element of this type of performing can be found in the generic uncertainty that actors embody in both films. To be specific, actors are asked to perform and unfold in the same film a wide palette of skills coming from different cinematic and artistic genres like musical, comedy, melodrama and performance art. The actor is a body that is required to dance and sing (in Psykou's film), exercise or explore his physical ability, jumping and climbing or even exposing himself in front of the camera in scenes of extreme intimacy, like that of masturbation (in Lygizos's film), blurring the boundaries between different cinematic and artistic genres, but also contesting the boundaries between artistic and social ethics. The new aesthetics of this post-dramatic tradition mentioned by Lehmann and Fischer-Lichte includes this kind of performative skills and it is far from being a new phenomenon in the Greek theatrical scene. As Tsihli notes, the devised theatre, a theatre mode that has emerged in Greece during the past ten years, promotes a different type of actor; in reality it promotes a performer who "expresses himself through pantomime and dance, physical ability and improvising possibilities", exploring his/her abilities while borrowing techniques from *variété* and the circus (2008: 89).

PERFORMED STYLE VS 'PREFORMED STYLE'

The interconnectedness of the performative elements of film could not but include the relation of film style to narration. Therefore, I am referring to a specific kind of narration that foregrounds the aesthetic qualities of performative acts, that gives a performative effect.

The Boy Eating the Bird's Food is openly and more easily classified as an improvised film that generates this effect. A constant camera flow tracks the protagonist's body movements, similar to a Dardenne camera style, only much more extreme, since Lygizos is going even closer to bodily details, sometimes lingers with his shots for over a minute, and throws space out of frame. His stylistic devices, which are minimal and austere, enhance the performative effect, giving the impression of 'unpredictability'. The pro-filmic reality becomes an event open to improvisation and transformation. One can never be sure as to what the actor's next movement will be and to which direction it will lead the camera, rendering framing and *mise-en-scène* unpredictable. It is the physicality of the camera, its movements and gestures that put forth a performance along

with the actor's performance. Actor and camera perform alongside the narrative, as if the narrative did not exist prior to the shooting. The main effect of this narrational act is to persuade the audience that the cinematic text does not represent something previously written, but is a presentation of what is happening *now*. In short, this type of narration comprises also a rhetoric of unpredictability.

On the other hand, Elina Psykou's narration unfolds in a totally different film style. Improvisation, unpredictability (or even a rhetoric of it) do not belong to Psykou's cinematic universe.¹⁷ Her major formal strategy is the organization of the frame either on the horizontal axis – namely creating planimetric frames that connote the theatrical stage and also news broadcasts – or on the vertical axis – paying attention to architectural space. Consequently, framing is symmetrical. But symmetry is accompanied by repetitiveness, either of separate shots, as for instance, the close ups of Paraskevas's blank face or of the night table and the props on it, or sets of shots like the one of Paraskevas waking up, which is repeated with slight variations at least three times.

More specifically, Psykou uses a very limited set of stylistic devices. Her style is as ascetic and austere as Lygizos's, as part of the 'parametric' cinema, which is represented by auteurs such as Bresson, and the more contemporary Ulrich Seidl and Michael Haneke (especially the latter's first feature film, *The Seventh Continent*, 1989). Contrary to the effect of improvisational performance created by Lygizos, Psykou's overall strategy demands precise organisation and control of *mise-en-scène*. As Bordwell writes about 'parametric narration', this kind of strategy presupposes the absolute "stylization of the profilmic event" (1985: 292). Concomitantly, in his analysis of Bresson, Bordwell explains that "a limitation of devices constitutes a powerful intrinsic norm which 'processes' each *syuzhet* event according to a recognizable 'preformed' style" (ibid.: 285). Accordingly, Elina Psykou's style seems to be a 'preformed' one.

However, repetitiveness, symmetry and centrality (this 'preformed' style) are enriched by elements of surprise. This mechanism is exposed from the beginning. In the first scene, right after the credits, in a wide shot that is symmetrically divided in two by the transverse position of the car in the frame, the driver gets out of the car, moves along the side and opens the trunk to reveal Antonis Paraskevas (**Fig 7**).

¹⁷ Indeed, as Psykou also asserts, there was no improvisation, but a lot of discussion with the actor in order to decide exactly who the character is. Personal e-mail conversation held on the 11th of October 2013.



Fig 7: Antonis Paraskevas is in the trunk

Surprise also works on a formal level. The static, repetitive and symmetrical long and medium shots are replaced, at about the 35th minute, with a more mobile camera and framing, complementing what is not expressed by the blank, deadpan acting style of Stergioglou, namely his gradual collapse. Repetitiveness, symmetry and stasis are established in order at specific instances to catch the viewer by surprise. In short, Elina Psykou establishes a 'preformed' style in order to be ruptured by surprise, by a narrative or formal performative act.

CONCLUSION

Despite their differences, Lygizos's and Psykou's films (as well as other recent Greek 'festival films') stem from the same notion of a more bodily-centered and presentational narration, rather than a representational and logocentric one: bodily-centered because of the importance of gestures and the thematics of the body; more presentational in the sense that the narration has a rhetoric strategy that creates the effect that the film relies very loosely or at all on previous texts like scripts, but is an act performed for/with the camera; and less logocentric in terms that dialogue is minimal or even less cause-effect driven.

This common tendency shows that there is a more profound link between these films. The fact that they are grouped together is not merely a concurrence of Greece's crisis, nor a simple media construction. The 'Greek New Wave', like other waves, is formatted as a label or has acquired its visibility and its name through the attention of festivals, media coverage and authorial discourse. However, this is not a label devoid of specific aesthetic connotations. This does not mean that conformity prevails, but rather that there is a specific narrational and aesthetic stance. What I tried to show here is that the common background and framework in theatre and performance, as well as the infusion of

performance as it has been manifested in post-dramatic theatre within the field of cinema, have become a very substantial and adhesive characteristic of these films.

In this sense, this performative aesthetic should be further contextualized within the recent economic and cultural environment in terms of its formation and specific form. One should not only ask when and how this 'Greek New Wave' is becoming a category, but also why this category seems to have these particular characteristics instead of others.

These recurrent thematics and aesthetics (since they are becoming a driving force) of a mutilated, deformed, ailing, clumsy, over-gestural body, as it is depicted in many of these films, may lead one to associate this cinema with a kind of trauma and, especially, loss: loss of people, loss of control, loss of parts of the body, like a finger or hair, even loss of status. But one should take into consideration the fact that these films are produced simultaneously with what occurs in the socio-economic sphere. This performative turn is to a certain degree a reaction not to a traumatic past (as is the case, for example, in post-World War II European cinema, or in the 1970s New Greek Cinema) but to a loss that is becoming trauma while in the process of cinematic creation. It could be said that this aestheticity bears the mark of the shock, of destabilization, of discomfort of/for the present.¹⁸

Finally, this performative aesthetics raises some other issues that can also be inferred from De Valck's remarks on the conceptualization of film festivals as a "force field of contradictions". De Valck further states that "the old notions of 'auteur' and 'nation' seem insufficient in construing the transformations" (2007: 29). In my turn, I suggest a similar matter for further analysis, which I believe is also inscribed in the overall aesthetics of this 'Greek New Wave'. Since these films, on one hand, communicate with, or belong to a larger tradition that foregrounds cinema's gestural qualities and, on the other hand, participate in the performative acts of transnational processes like festivals, one should reconsider if and how the filmmaker is the 'auteur' and what the 'national' becomes inside

¹⁸ Dimitris Papanikolaou when analyzing the phenomenon uses the words 'anxiety' and 'disturbance'; he makes a very interesting argument when he explicates the use of archive (2011). Using his discourse, Elina Psykou's work, for instance, is also an effort to create a new kind of archive based on true and fictional events as troublesome in the sense that it asks for rearrangement, reframing and replotting. He has developed a similar argument in a speech entitled 'The anxiety of allegory: re-reading *Dogtooth*' [in Greek] and given on the 13th of January, as part of the Greek Film Studies Seminar that took place at Panteion University during 2013-2014, and was organized by Maria Paradeisi, Myrto Kalofolia and myself. I believe that this kind of discourse by Papanikolaou, although it answers different sets of questions, can also explain the specific non-representational and more performative aestheticity.

and outside the cinematic text, when working in transnational environments and approaching international markets. In conclusion, I suggest that the 'performative' seems to be a starting point for articulating the inexpressible and at the same time a point of access for audiences, which in both cases works on a 'supranational' level.

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