

## BOOK REVIEW

# *The Queer Greek Weird Wave: Ethics, Politics and the Crisis of Meaning*

by Marios Psaras

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With *The Queer Greek Weird Wave*, Marios Psaras, independent film scholar and filmmaker, contributes to an exponentially rich body of monographs and collective works that concentrate on visual culture, particularly on the field of film text analysis. Psaras's text is part of the Palgrave Macmillan book series marketed under the title *Representing Cultural Change and Crisis*, which includes Davina Quinlivan's *Filming the Body: Trauma, Healing and Hopefulness* (2015); Gwendolyn Audrey Foster's *Disruptive Feminisms: Raced, Gendered, and Classed Bodies in Film* (2016); Kaitlynn Mendes and Kumarini Silva's *Feminist Erasures: Challenging Backlash Culture* (2015); and Eleftheria Arapoglou, Yiorgos Kalogeras and Jopi Nyman's *Racial and Ethnic Identities in the Media* (2016). The aforementioned projects are among many others that reveal a shift toward the study of cinema as both a product and an agent of change during times of economic precarity, social fragmentation, and instability.

Most importantly, however, Psaras's monograph is situated within a series of titles that examine national film productions through a queer critical lens. The last decades have witnessed an ever-proliferating number of academic studies that investigate the queer politics and potentialities of national cinemas. For instance, Nick Rees-Robert's *French Queer Cinema* (2008), Chris Perriam's *Spanish Queer Cinema* (2013), and Andrew Grossman's *Queer Asian Cinema: Shadows in the Shade* (2001) all address queer representation and desire and raise questions about understandings of gender, sexuality, and identity within national borders. Within the Greek context, contemporary filmmaking has been the object of scrutiny by a significant number of scholars, yet though the existing research on Greece's recent cinematic revitalization circulating in the form of

articles and book chapters cannot be underestimated, Psaras's book constitutes the first extensive work on the weird wave movement. Thus, it is a welcome and useful bibliographical addition.

The monograph is based on the author's Queen Mary University of London doctoral thesis, titled "Family, Nation and the Medium under Attack: Queer Time and Space in Contemporary Greek Cinema." However, the title of the monograph—*The Queer Greek Weird Wave: Ethnics, Politics and the Crisis of Meaning*—implies that this text contains material that was probably not present in the thesis. This book comprises eight sections: an introduction, six chapters that each examine a specific film, and a summary chapter that presents the author's final remarks and conclusions.

In his introduction, Psaras attempts to provide both a genealogy and a justification for what is called as the [Greek] crisis of meaning. Psaras takes us from the heterogeneous December movements of 2008 to the years of the Greek government's debt crisis to explore how the "extreme sense of confusion, frustration and disenchantment with politics" experienced by a traditionally highly politicized society coincided with an upsurge of creativity in filmmaking (2016: 3). Many journalists and thinkers have asked whether the strange, weird, and at times surreal films produced during this period constitute a product of the crisis and to what extent Greek filmmakers actually make use their work to make statements about their country's problems. Psaras acknowledges the potential of the crisis as an opportunity for artistic intervention but contends that the Greek weird wave is not necessarily a direct outgrowth of that crisis.

Psaras begins his analysis by unfolding the ideological production of the Modern Greek national identity and the establishment of the national narrative around the triptych of fatherland, religion, and family. After providing a useful historical contextualization, Psaras moves on to discuss national films, unearthing subversive moments and dissident ideologies in Greek cinema that emerged long before the advent of the weird wave movement. By the end of the chapter, he has established useful links between the past and the present and structured his references to previous scholarship on Greek weird cinema to provide a valid basis for departure from the author's analysis. Psaras's goal is to trace the ways in which contemporary trends in Greek cinema explore the effects of the financial crisis and its accompanied crisis of meaning "by virtue of a queer perspective through which the narratives of neoliberal capitalism, nationalism and patriarchy must be reviewed and re-examined by proffering a queer refusal of meaning" (2016: 27). This assertion, along with the author's implementation of the word "weird" as a metonymy of "queer" (sensibility), sets the tone of the book, and what follows is a number of case studies that aim to upset the cornerstones of the national imagery and the film medium itself.

Each subsequent chapter examines a filmic text through specific concepts and ideas derived from queer theory, film theory, ethical philosophy, and psychoanalysis. A potential risk of investing in a thinker's idea is that if he or she is refuted, then one's own theory and argument are vulnerable to a similar refutation. For instance, Lee Edelman's concept of the sinthomosexual (which is discussed in chapter two) has been criticized for reifying rather than challenging the symbolic order (Coffman 2013). Nevertheless, Psaras's presentation and handling of the various theoretical concepts are concise and thorough. In foregrounding the close textual analysis of the counter-ideological themes and weird (queer) forms of the films discussed, Psaras never loses sight of the films' production, presence in major festivals, and critical reception. Hence, Psaras employs a methodology that acknowledges the perspective of the body of critic and fan texts surrounding the films but at the same time provides his own perspective as film analyst and scholar, thus permitting the reader to acquire complete information about each case study.

Chapter two introduces the readers to Dennis Iliades's *Hardcore* (2004). Psaras gives an informative plot summary, takes a look at the film's reception and intertextuality with foreign films, and delves into *Hardcore*'s characters, themes, and intrinsic narrative elements. The author also advances his own reading of the film by drawing on post-Lacanian psychoanalysis, Lee Edelman's neologism of sinthomosexuality, and queer theorizations of time and space developed by Gordon Brent Ingram and Aaron Betsky. More specifically, Psaras argues that *Hardcore* constitutes a queer cinematic space in which the complex form and narrative fluctuate between desire and drive, thereby upsetting heteronormative notions of family and nation and disturbing conceptualizations of cinematic time and space.

In Chapter three, titled *Dogtooth: Of Narrativity*, Psaras explores the reception and critical acclaim accorded to Yorgos Lanthimos's film, *Kynodontas/Dogtooth* (2009). The author explores the gendered and heteropatriarchal family structures portrayed in the film. He then touches upon the theoretical and conceptual notions of family, kinship, and the nation (which were analyzed in depth in the introductory chapter) to argue that *Dogtooth*'s discursive mythic and meaningless family narratives challenge the Greek nation's official narrative and inevitably convert the concept of the nation itself into a myth.

The next chapter begins with a discussion of Michalis Cacoyannis's *Stella* (1955) and foreign New Queer films in an attempt to identify similarities and differences with Panos Koutras's *Strella/A Woman's Way* (2009) with regard to the way the films negotiate hegemonic ideology. Later, drawing on José Esteban Muñoz's book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), Psaras investigates the queer potential of the film's themes and form. Psaras imbues Koutras's film with Muñoz's concept of queer utopia, recasting *A Woman's Way*

as a forward-looking film that points toward surprising forms of community, family, intimacy, and desire. In this way, Psaras argues that the film queers family logistics and national symbols and reimagines the present in optimistic ways.

Chapter five (*Attenberg: Of (Dis)-Orientation*) examines Athina Tsangari's film (2010) through the prism of Sarah Ahmed's theory of the queer phenomenology of the body. Here, Psaras pays particular attention to form, themes, and key characters to explain how *Attenberg's* body (that is, both the body of the film and that of the main character) functions as a site of resistance that attacks the omnipresence and "naturalness" of canonical notions of family, gender, sexuality, and the nation.

Psaras's sixth chapter is devoted to Yorgos Lanthimos's film *Alpeis/Alps* (2011). By combining the notion of performativity and dispossession with Jacques Derrida's hauntology, Psaras demonstrates how *Alps*, through the figure of Monte Rosa, acts as a critique of the national and familial spaces that create and sustain dichotomies between bodies, which are defined as intelligible, grievable, apparitional, or disposable.

In the seventh chapter of his book, Psaras draws on the theme of biopolitics and applies Judith Butler and Athina Athanasiou's concept of dispossession as well as Emmanuel Levinas's notion of responsibility to Ektoras Lygizos's film *To agori troei to fagito toy pouliou/Boy Eating the Bird's Food* (2012). Psaras differentiates Lygizos's work from films that create and confirm totalizing conditions of victimization and subordination and argues that *Boy Eating the Bird's Food* calls into question the understanding of "victim" and brings to the fore ethical and queer ways to envision such terms, films, and cinema.

At this point, one must ask why the author selected the above-mentioned films at the expense of others. According to Psaras, the films selected, though not necessarily falling under the label of the Weird Wave, have the potential to "reframe Greece's familial and national space, time and [even]... the medium's dominant affective mechanisms" (p. 28). This answer is not satisfactory, however, especially if we consider the plethora of films produced during and in the aftermath of the Greek debt crisis that also could have served as exceptional case studies. These films include *Tungsten* (Giorgos Georgopoulos, 2011), *I Afroditi stin avli/Venus in the Garden* (Telemachos Alexiou, 2011), *Luton* (Michalis Konstantatos, 2013), *Norvigia/Norway* (Yiannis Veslemes, 2014), and certainly *Miss Violence* (Alexandros Avranas, 2013). Despite the rather unclear rationale behind the selection of the films, *Hardcore*, *Dogtooth*, *A Woman's Way*, *Attenberg*, *Alps*, and *Boy Eating the Bird's Food* provide fertile ground for exploration of the author's arguments.

The conclusion serves to pull the films and the different theoretical strands together. Despite the films' distinct elements and the multitude of theoretical angles adopted in the book, the final chapter achieves a unified account and reveals how meaning—seen as open, empty, fluid, and even meaningless—constitutes the link among all cinematic works. In spite of their diverse themes, forms, characters, and narrative devices, the six films examined in this book are promising in their directive to promote and imbue a queer critique within national politics and the film medium. These films provide an aesthetically rich, pluralist, queer, and ethical answer to the Greek crisis. At the same time, given their openness, script oddities and weird performances, the aforementioned films, along with others of their kind, leave the door open for future projects in the field of contemporary Greek cinema. For example, future research may extend this study by examining how masculinities and femininities are performed at particular moments and scenes from Greek Weird Wave films and why. Furthermore, discussions on class and an exploration of the notion of 'hegemonic masculinity' would provide great insights into the role of class identity and its intersection with family structure, gender hegemony/inequality and the Greek nation.

Despite recommendations for future research, *The Queer Greek Weird Wave* is an important intervention and a crucial point of reference for undergraduate students, young researchers and scholars interested in the area of film theory, psychoanalysis, queer theory and reception studies. It is also a timely book because it arrives at a phase when the interest in the Weird Wave movement is strong but dissonant. For instance, in 2015, Yorgos Lanthimos produced *The Lobster*, which was nominated for several awards and won the Jury Prize (among others) at the 2015 Cannes Film Festival. However, Lanthimos's new big-budget film, *The Killing of the Sacred Deer* (2017) appears to move in a different direction. It still contains queer themes but is less Greek. Lanthimos is considered by various critics to be the father of the Greek Weird Wave, and his engagement with foreign productions and different themes has given rise to a number of voices that are quick to observe signs of deflation in the contemporary film trend and even whisper about the end of the Greek Weird Wave as we have come to know it despite the significant number of weird films being produced in Greece at the moment (Adiohos 2015; Grigoriou 2015; Lekkas 2017). Overall, *The Queer Greek Weird Wave* provides good food for thought about the transformations of contemporary Greek cinema over the course of the years and at the same time offers a critical lens for assessing the limits and possibilities of the cinema as well as of the current cultural moment with respect to where we stand and what kind of future awaits us in Greece, both in cinematic and social terms.

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