

BOOK REVIEW

Greek Cinema and Migration, 1991-2016

by Philip E. Phillis

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The end of the Cold War, the fall of socialism in Southeastern Europe, and the enlargement of the European Union marked the start of several sweeping changes for the European societies, changes that from 1990 onwards were often connected to the massive movement of populations all over Europe. One major shift that was experienced by Greek society at the time was its sudden transformation from sender to host of migrants, a fact that was facilitated by the geographical proximity of Greece to several former socialist countries, such as Albania. Moreover, starting from the early 2000s, Greece became a transit area for immigrants from Asia and Africa on their way to northern and central Europe (Angelopoulos, Kapetanaki, Kousaxidis 2018: 121). Thus Greece turned into an entry point and one of the main passageways for a massive flow of displaced people moving to the European community. However, in 2015, migration procedures resulted in a huge refugee and humanitarian crisis caused by the war in Syria and the political instability in Middle East. Greece became then one of the focal points of the humanitarian disaster in Europe because of the large migration flow that was reaching the Greek territory and simultaneously due to the major financial crisis that Greek society faced since 2010 (Papataxiarchis 2016: 3-7). During this time a large number of social scientists, members of humanitarian aid organizations and volunteers at camps, hot-spots and border areas all over the country, came to provide their solidarity and assistance.

Since 1989, this new phenomenon of mass influx of people towards Greece was extensively portrayed by mass media, analyzed by social scientists and experts, and captured by cinema as there are several contemporary Greek films aiming to reflect upon migration both in Southeastern Europe and Greece. Philip E. Phillis, in his monograph *Greek Cinema and Migration, 1991-2016*, talks

about a 'new world order in Greek cinema (p. 2) that, after the fall of socialism, describes and represents a world on the move. *To Meteoro Vima tou Pelargou/Suspended Step of the Stork* (Angelopoulos, 1991) is considered to be the starting point of this new wave of cinematic representation of the human mobility across territories while during the last thirty years, we can identify several directors who work in Greece, Greek directors who live abroad, or filmmakers on the move, who capture the process of territorial movement in Greece and the Balkans. Interestingly, migration and exile are sometimes part of their own experience.

At this point, Phillis's monograph covers a gap in the literature on contemporary Greek cinema as he successfully connects the social, historic and economic context of international migration and exile with Greek film. As he mentions, the aim of his monograph is to 'map and investigate migrant representation' in contemporary Greek cinema focusing on the years between 1991 and 2016. The book constitutes an important contribution to the history and the analysis of Greek film, succeeding to connect the successive changes and crises that took place in Greece during the last three decades with the Greek cinematic culture.

A central theme in the book is the encounter of a key player in the narrative of the movies under analysis with an Albanian migrant. The writer presents different ways in which this encounter can be captured and narrated by the filmmakers, while the migrant is usually of Albanian origin, due to the mass influx of migrants from Albania after 1989.¹ The writer makes use of his thorough knowledge of cinema in order to narrate personal experiences of people on the move and life across borders, as well as the concern of many migrants and refugees with the legalization of their everyday life activities. What is more, through cinema, Phillis succeeds in combining these personal aspects of human mobility in space with issues of representation and hegemony, state diplomacy and bureaucracy, government decisions, and dilemmas of humanitarianism.

Phillis's goal to examine the ways in which migration is captured and represented by the contemporary Greek cinema, together with the transformation of the Greek cinema itself from national to transnational, is reflected in all the nine chapters of the book. In the introduction of the monograph the author describes the conceptual tools he uses while in the first chapter, he talks about a diasporic cinema in Greece. More specifically, he describes a kind of cross-cultural and cross-border cinema, by using the work of Bujar Alimani and Robert Budina, who are both of Albanian origin. Their films as well as their reception together with the working lives of the authors draw

¹ In the 1990s the most numerous category of the labour immigrants in Greece was those from Albania who by 2010 reached 600,000 people (King and Vullnetari 2012: 207-220). However, there were large numbers of ethnic Greeks, Bulgarians, Romanians, and repatriates from the former USSR, who moved to Greece after the fall of socialism.

attention to the importance of transnational cooperation and film coproduction as a means of cultural exchange. At the same time, Alimani and Budina's works highlight issues of ethnicity, state sovereignty and the power that may emerge from any kind of exchange across the borders.

Chapter two focuses on the reception and the context of the films *Omiros / Hostage* (Giannaris, 2005) and *Eduart* (Antoniou, 2006) aiming to highlight their transnational dimensions. Interestingly, neither film was warmly welcomed by the Greek public, since, according to the writer, Greek society was not yet ready to reflect upon the marginalization of the Albanian migrants in Greece. At the same time, the fact that both movies were co-productions filmed in Greece and the Balkans, while the casting was mixed Albanian and Greek, makes us think of the possible hybridity of filmmaking. The two films point to the need to reflect once more upon the meaning of the nation and ethnicity, as well as to the procedure of filmmaking as a transnational entity, replete of border crossings and cultural exchanges.

Chapter three presents the film *Kleistoi dromoi / Roadblocks* (Ioannou, 2000). According to Phillis (p. 90), the film 'embodies shifting cinematic tendencies in Greece and Europe, of migration cinema as a vehicle of liminality and hybridity'. *Roadblocks* is an attempt to conceptualize the meaning of Fortress Europe through the journey of an Iraqi Kurdish man to Europe and Greece. It is the story of a man to whom neither asylum is granted nor legal travel or residence documents are given in Greece. Thus, he wanders around Athens at nights and lives in a central square of the city. For the needs of the film, the actors are real refugees from Iraq, while the spoken language is a Kurdish dialect. The director aims to present the life of exilic subjects on the move, while they regularly face the law and the police in the context of the inhospitable city in which they live.

Chapter four focuses on *Hostage* (Giannaris, 2005), a film that addresses migration and criminality from the point of view of those on the move. Giannaris highlights the fact that institutional exercise of violence may lead displaced people to criminality, and thus reflects upon the dominant discourse, taking place in Greek society at the time, that connected Albanian migrants to crime. Phillis, referring to Gazmend Kaplani (2011) and his description of the 'border syndrome' as an 'obscure illness' related with the border crossing experience of those on the move, uses the film as a vehicle for an analysis of the borders as a traumatic experience in life, or as a syndrome from which migrants may suffer for a long time.

In Chapter five, Phillis investigates the origins of Albanophobia and focuses on cultural representation so as to approach the stereotypes and fears about the 'illegal' Albanian migrants. The analysis focuses on the films *Mirupafshim / See you* (Voupouras and Korras, 1997) and *Eduart* (Antoniou, 2006). Through the two films, the writer describes the atmosphere of mistrust towards the Albanian migrants in Greece, as a result of the fact that during the

1990s they were lacking legal travel or residence documents, which, in turn, inevitably influenced their work, residence, everyday life and position in Greek society.²

Chapter six deals with the 'other' as a mirror of the native/Greek identity. Different movies are used as a fertile ground for the representation of the foreigner, through indigenous aspects on migration. Phillis (2020: 145) suggests that Greek filmmakers face difficulties in representing "Greekness" thus using the image of the 'other' as a mirror, revealing at the same time a crisis of representation. The question, therefore, that arises here is whether these native representations of migration may be hegemonic, since otherness is being produced through the indigenous lens on identity.

Chapter seven addresses issues of citizenship and the repatriation of members of the Greek minority in Southern Albania moving to Greece, as well as aspects of belonging and the integration of ethnic Greek diasporas and political exiles from the former Soviet Union. The films analyzed in this chapter refer to the concepts of foreignness and familiarity and they all raise the question 'what constitutes "our own" people' (p. 173), while narrating hybrid perceptions of the nation, citizenship and belonging.

The eighth chapter focuses on the presentation of those on the move, since they are often captured in films as belonging to an anonymous mass of people. More specifically, Phillis critically approaches this stereotypical perception of migrants and refugees as a homogenous group of people, as 'non-citizens from a peripheral no man's land' (p. 197), who seem to be marginal subjects placed in the background of the movie scenes, rather than being actors and creators of everyday life.

Finally, chapter nine discusses the representation of migrants and refugees in Greece after 2010. This last category includes documentary films focusing on a period during which Greece has faced a deep financial crisis. Simultaneously, the rise of an extreme right-wing party, which succeeded to enter in the Greek parliament, and a new refugee crisis seemed to be on the verge of becoming the new reality for the Greek society. Here, Phillis (p. 224-225) questions the meaning of 'truthfulness' and 'factual representation' of documentaries, and, once more, argues about the hegemonic representations that construct lived experience as part of an everyday life discourse.

Philip-Edward Phillis's monograph is an important asset for the academic literature on Greek cinema, the history of cinema in Southeastern Europe and the connection of sociopolitical life and its procedures of mobility in space with film culture. Phillis's analytical thought emphasizes not only cinema itself, but also

² Nowadays the stereotype of the 'Albanian criminal' has faded out, however, it can be said that it was reinforced for many years by the Greek migration law. For many Albanian immigrants, the settlement and integration process lasted at least until 1998 when the Greek Government granted many undocumented immigrants residence and work permits.

questions of identity and citizenship, issues of power, ethnicity and hybridity, as well as the processes of perpetual transformation of the European societies. The author's descriptions critically narrate the ways in which contemporary Greek film production represents migration, racism and crisis, as well as the transformation of the Balkans after 1989. His work is a great journey through historical and cultural processes captured by films. Thus, the book may constitute an important guide not only for scholars and students who focus on Greek cinema, film co-productions in Southeastern Europe, migration and exile, but also for social scientists, who work on migration issues and aim to use cinema as part of their field analysis. As a matter of fact, Phillis's analysis can open new prospects for research by social scientists that could further link Phillis's work to the voices of those on the move. In relation to the history of cinema, it may be interesting to incorporate Phillis's findings into a research that would connect film production, co-production and migration, this time within the wider context of Southeastern Europe and the Balkans.

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