

BOOK REVIEW

Greek Weird Wave: A cinema of biopolitics

by

Dimitris Papanikolaou

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The discussion about the Weird Wave, the strange films that appeared after the post-2009 crisis, has already not only transformed the way we look at the past and the present of Greek film history, but also perhaps the way we perceive our surrealistic biopolitical present. I'm sure that I am not the only one who, during the lockdown, had the feeling that I was living inside a Lanthimos plot, where a benevolent paternal authority obliged me to abide by a series of absurdist, although highly "educational", rules such as sending an SMS with the number 5 to assist at a funeral, or the number 6 if a wanted to go out for daily exercise. A universal feeling of absurdism, a set of rules that dictate and describe every small detail of my social interactions and spatial movements together with the most acute sense of biopolitics is so palpable at this moment that it erases any doubt about the urgent cultural significance of the Weird Wave. Papanikolaou's excellent book is not only a precise account of the making of a new cinematic wave and a decisive contribution to the past and present of Greek film history, but also a witness to what he calls 'a biopolitical realism', a structure of feeling that can be traced in not only cinematic, and definitely not only Greek, forms of contemporary artistic or social expression.

The influential work of Dimitris Papanikolaou during the last decade about cultural practices in Greece, in the fields of literature, theatre, film and gender activism has already had a great impact on cultural criticism – for example the notion of 'archive trouble' or his study about the representations of family, kinship and desire during the crisis (2018). All these ideas are questioned, repositioned and put together in this ground-breaking book that presents a provocative cinema about being 'governed' that was born in a period of crisis and, at the same time, constitutes an ambitious example of what it means to write film history at the present moment, as public intervention and as

a political response to an 'intense biopolitical present'. The book enriches the impressive film studies section by Edinburgh University Press that remains committed to all forms of world cinema, film theory and aesthetics.

I start this presentation from the end of the book: not from one more account about the birth of the Weird Wave and its constitutional act of the award of *Dogtooth* (Lanthimos, 2009) at Cannes, but from the last film explored in the epilogue, *Winona* (Voulgaris, 2019); the distance of these two films is marked by a movement from the 'weird' to the 'eerie' and is linked to the ideas of Mark Fisher (2017) that haunt this book from the beginning to the end. Four girls, filmed with a 16mm camera that gives a home-movie texture to the image, spend an entire day at an empty beach; only by the end we understand that this joke-filled, funny and weird gathering was a mourning ritual for a lost sibling. Papanikolaou sees this film as a closure of a cycle, a self-referential comment about the cinema of the last decade during the years of the crisis, and its transformation into an exuberance of emotion and affect – a metonymical turn that appears stronger in the most recent films of the wave, such as Kekatos's *The Distance Between Us and the Sky* (2019). Film critics and scholars have many times repeated the conditions of the birth and labelling of the wave; today, however, more than ten years later, we remain rather indecisive about where this wave is going. If its branding constituted an ingenious and beneficent marketing strategy for a small-country film industry, the questions about how this wave relates to the society that surrounds it remained controversial – given the fact that most of these films were not popular with Greek audiences, and filmmakers were even attacked for making films as festival-oriented artefacts. Other accounts describe this wave as 'too intellectual, dissociated, even heartless' and 'unloving' (p. 24) – but Papanikolaou makes clear that he goes against such understandings of these films. This book provides us with a valuable theoretical toolkit so that we can answer these questions as he discusses this wave not as a closed and self-powered circuit but as the tip of the iceberg of a whole community of artists that during the crisis developed patterns of resistance, persistence and survival through the forms of 'archive trouble', assemblage, public citizenship and through intense shared experiences of collectiveness.

A feature of the Weird Wave films was the fact that even a single frame, cut from its context and narratives, could give the impression of being 'weird' due to framing, *mise-en-scène*, unexpected collisions between objects, animals and spaces, while remaining realistic in its own weird way: the image of the front page of the book shows a giraffe, in a space that could be a museum or an exhibition, while a man looks up at the head of the animal. It is a frame from Kotzamani's film *Washingtonia* (2014), which visually encapsulates the weird, as much as the blindfolded girl from *Dogtooth*. In his initial hypothesis, Papanikolaou made a bold move that prevented him from reaching a formalist dead-end: in the beginning of the discussion about the 'Weird Wave' many critics

and film theorists insisted that 'weird' was mostly a style of the *mise-en-scène*, identified by minimalism, geometrical frames, visual austerity and natural lighting – as these features could be found mostly in the films by Lanthimos, Tsangari and Makridis. This approach, however, failed to encompass films and filmmakers with different aesthetic choices, such as Koutras, Tzoumerkas or Economides, that constituted a not less important branch of the recent Greek production and participated as well in international film festivals. Papanikolaou decided not to take this label as a formal element but as a wider 'tone' that embraces the films of a generation sharing the same processes and the same concerns: as he says, what brings these films together is "a culture of late capitalism, biopolitics and crisis neoliberalism in which they participate and which they often thematize." (p. xii)

This choice is reflected in the structure of the book, which is divided into two parts: the first one is entitled 'Process' and presents the making of this wave as a cinema of biopolitics, while the second one, 'Keywords', focuses on the recurrent themes of these films: family, realism, allegory, archive and assemblage. The introduction lays out a detailed account of the emergence of this wave, the debates of the professional milieu, and at the same time, the discussion about its naming and the critical reception of it as closely related to the socio-economic crisis. In discussing the transformation of a local production into a 'paradigmatic moment', as Lanthimos's weird style became a '(post)-identificatory space for a new type of cinema' (p. 5), Papanikolaou painstakingly enters into dialogue with all the film theorists and critics that in the last decade dealt with this topic (Mademli: 2014; Psaras: 2016; Calotychos, Papadimitriou & Tzioumakis: 2016; and many others); he points out the challenges of adopting the label 'weird' – that could be sometimes perceived as a patronizing, orientalist or self-exoticizing label (Nikolaidou: 2020), but at the same time acknowledges the benefits and the uses of it, as it reflects 'the contemporaneity of the engagement' of this cinematic wave (p. 6). In the core of the introduction, we find one of the most important key notions of this book, which is the use of the allegory; drawing from the controversial essay about the cinema of the third world by Fredric Jameson, the author questions the reading of the weird films as 'national allegories' and the 'allegoric impulse', drawing instead attention to the porous boundaries between the allegory and the real – a question that Papanikolaou has already visited in his previous monograph (2018).

A second key notion in this book is the issue of biopolitics, introduced by Michel Foucault in the 1970s; Papanikolaou explains that in these films he could see 'a persistent engagement with a certain type of governing life, of politics over life', as the majority of these films belonged to a cultural production that registered the 'deep unease with the modern politics of surveillance, austerity management, control over life, state of exception and moral panic' (p. 15). The notion of biopolitics and also the heuristic concept of 'biopolitical realism' is explained, applied and revisited through all the chapters. A last key notion is the

one of metonymy that includes the spectatorial affect. An argument that is worked through the book is how these metonymic chains foreground principles of continuity for the spectator, especially through the uses of montage and framing. Finally, the introduction reveals the methodological tools that the author uses, which draw from cultural theory, film studies, political philosophy, but also from a participatory cultural observation that the author characterizes as auto-ethnographic (p. 17).

The first chapter, with the weird title 'There Are No Words to Describe Our National Pride', presents all the cinematic and political elements that were put together to form the momentum of the Weird Wave and focusses not only on Lanthimos's contribution, but also on other films such as *Matchbox* (Economides, 2003) and *Strella* (Koutras, 2008) that had already stirred the waters before the emergence of the wave. Through his choice to examine not only Lanthimos's films but also to include a wider range of shorts, documentaries, TV shows, web-videos or films made before the crisis, Papanikolaou makes clear that he doesn't see the Weird Wave as a successful cinematic sub-genre but as a process that characterizes cultural production in the current moment, and also as 'a key example of a larger political cultural landscape responding to an intense biopolitical present' (p. 45). And this is why, for example, he opens and closes his second chapter with two medium-length films, *Washingtonia* (2014) by Kotzamani and *Third Kind* (2018) by Zois that somehow are situated at the heart of the book. In this chapter, Papanikolaou unfolds the main idea of the book, the view of recent Greek filmmaking as a response to biopolitics and unpacks in a brilliant way all the points of contact of cinema with biopolitics, using a dense theoretical background given in the most direct and accessible way. He explains here his central idea of an 'intense biopolitical present', that he has witnessed unfolding in the last decade in Greece; and positions these films 'within this intense biopolitical present, in terms developed in interaction with it' (p.66). Moreover, the author explains that this Foucauldian notion was widely used during this period and brings the example of scholars outside film studies who put the notion of biopolitics in a central position in the Greek public sphere during the 2010s. These ideas lead us to the next chapter that gets its title from Lanthimos's own words, and is entitled 'A Cinema About Being Governed' that starts with an insightful analysis of *The Lobster* (2015) and goes on with an examination of an interview the filmmaker gave in ARTE (2012), showing the international expectations from the films of the Weird Wave as national allegories, and the unease of Greek filmmakers within this framing. The chapter closes with the presentation of the collective 'The Lost Highway of Greek Cinema' and its 'exercises in genealogy', while the author revisits the periods that preceded the appearance of the generation of the Weird Wave and repositions it in the history of Greek cinema.

If the first part gives us a more linear account of the birth of the New Wave, the second part is structured around the major keywords of this book: the

fourth chapter entitled 'Biopolitical Realism' revisits the notion of realism in previous periods of Greek cinema, and reconsiders the concept of 'Capitalist Realism' introduced by Mark Fisher, focusing on films such as *Attenberg* (2011) and *Pity* (Makridis, 2018). The central theme of the biopolitical family is in the centre of the fifth chapter, which explores *Miss Violence* (Avranas, 2014) and *Dogtooth* (2009) through the questions of discipline, economies of incest and sovereignty. The sixth chapter introduces the pivotal idea of 'archive trouble', as an artistic and cultural strategy that developed during the crisis as a reaction against the 'national allegories' and as 'a dominant political and cultural critique in Greece of the Crisis', an archival impulse that became related to a very urgent and direct need for political expression and found in the work of theatrical groups, in literature, music and dance performances and in many large art projects (p. 187-88). The last chapter, one of the strongest moments of this book, is centred around the issue of assemblage and discusses *Strella* as an example of a new queer poetics 'that became, at that crucial moment, a key to address pressing political issues' (p. 209). The chapter takes as a starting point the film *Mum I'm Back* (Katsimiris, 2017) as a comment on the mediatization of Zak Kostopoulos/Zackie Oh death, and the movement it provoked, as it brought together a spectacular synergy of queer, feminist, antifascist and anti-austerity activism (p. 199). Papanikolaou reintroduces Lauren Berlan's idea of 'Diva citizenship', the impulse to stage an exodus into the public sphere in which a person doesn't have privilege (p. 216) and recontextualises *Strella* as he retrieves instants from the archive of queer history, as moments of intersection between past, present and future 'which demand to be respected as genealogical exercises' (p. 223).

In a 'scene' of the book, the author is sitting in the dark in Astor Cinema, next to the filmmaker Elina Psykou and they are watching *Oi Voskoi tis symforas/ The Shepherds of Calamity* by Nikos Papatakis (1967), a film that gained publicity when Lanthimos said it was his favourite movie. During the screening, Elina explains to Dimitris that this particular gesture of a character in Papatakis's film, is repeated in another film that is considered as the start of the Weird Wave, *Matchbox*, where a woman makes exactly the same gesture. This is what Papanikolaou inventively does in this book; he brings together pieces of an informal Greek cinematic archive, collects unnoticed information, and weaves the threads that connect people, practices, technologies of survival, gestures and spaces, inside and outside the cinematic or artistic context; it is this auto-ethnographical participative approach that makes this book so valuable, and also so enjoyable to read. And at the same time, he links this wave to the most timely and useful contemporary theoretical background, presented with clarity and intelligence, and with the same admirable ease, as he was talking to us after a movie screening. And yes, it is a weird book, as funny, brilliant, provocative, personal and political, biting and moving, as the films of this wave are.

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