

GREEK CINEMA SINCE THE CRISIS

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Greece boasts one of the most celebrated national cinemas of recent years, evidenced by the festival success and critical acclaim garnered by films such as *Dogtooth*, *Strella*, *Attenberg* and *Miss Violence*. Some of these works have become instant cult favorites in cinephile circuits. What has been hard to ignore is that these aesthetically innovative films have been produced in a country devastated by neoliberal austerity policies since the 2008 financial crisis. Several explanations for this concomitance have been put forth by critics and scholars. Initially, journalists were able only to point out the weirdness of recent Greek films, failing to connect their unconventional style to the Greek economic and political crisis. As Steve Rose in *The Guardian* put it: “Is it just coincidence that the world's most messed-up country is making the world's most messed-up cinema?” (Rose 2011).

More recently, academic studies have started to forge links between the aesthetics of these films and their social context. Afroditi Nikolaidou highlights the performativity in recent Greek cinema, noting that the recurrence of “a mutilated, deformed, ailing, clumsy, over-gestural body” expresses “a kind of trauma and, especially, loss...loss of people, loss of control” that can be related to the social consequences of the crisis. (Nikolaidou 2014, 40) Rosalind Galt interprets the normalization of the perverse in *Dogtooth* as a queer refusal to produce meaning, a strategy designed to undermine models of social reproduction predetermined by neoliberal dogma (Galt 2013, 65) My own work has related recent Greek films to the democratic deficits created by technocratic governance and imposed neoliberal convergence, which have pushed human communication (language, sexuality) to the limits of signification. (Lykidis 2015) The social effects of the financial crisis are addressed in these films through a narrative emphasis on isolated or alienated characters, dysfunctional family relationships, desperate or anti-social behavior and breakdowns in communication. Aesthetically, these dynamics are conveyed through unexpressive acting, stilted dialogue, performative gestures, an absence of continuity editing, absurdist deviations from narrative logic, excessive referentiality and claustrophobic mise-en-scene.

In an important corrective to these periodizations of recent Greek cinema, Maria Chalkou focuses on a broader set of Greek industrial and societal developments that both prefigured the crisis and shaped cinematic responses to it: “the rapid growth and prosperity of the Greek commercial audio-visual industry, the long-standing financial poverty and institutional failure of the Greek film sector, changing forms of contemporary cinephilia, developments in communication and image recording practices arising from new technologies, generational conflict and societal crisis, as well as a growing discord in the Greek public domain between established forms of authority and new modes of articulating public discourse.” (Chalkou 2012, 245) In a similar vein, Lydia Papadimitriou urges us to expand our understanding of contemporary Greek cinema beyond the confines of purely textual analysis. She links the success of recent films to the increasing industrial influence and new production practices of Greek filmmakers, the role played by international film festivals and foreign funding and the

rapid proliferation of English-language academic studies of Greek national cinema. (Papadimitriou 2014) In the list that follows, I survey Greek films made since the crisis, as well as a few significant thematic and stylistic precursors to the current output.

XENIA (2014), dir. Panos Koutras – the journey of two brothers (one straight, one gay) in search of their Greek father is punctuated by beautiful reveries about their musical idol, Patty Bravo, who provides an idealized counterpoint to their alcoholic Albanian mother's failed musical career. The intersections between different forms of marginal identity (class, gender, sexual, ethnic) set the stage for a complex, nomadic reconsideration of Greek national identity.

STRELLA (2009), dir. Panos Koutras – a middle-aged ex-convict looking for his estranged son becomes romantically involved with a transgender sex worker. The film's queer oedipal narrative provides fresh perspectives on the psychosexual interplay between power and desire in the Greek patriarchal family.

THE ETERNAL RETURN OF ANTONIS PARASKEVAS (2013), dir. Elina Psykou – a middle-aged TV presenter in financial difficulties fakes his own abduction. As in other Greek crisis films, the emphasis is on a desperate, socially isolated and psychologically disturbed protagonist, whose perspective on social reality is distorted by a commercial media-driven mass culture incapable of explaining or resolving the problems of Greek society.

MISS VIOLENCE (2013), dir. Alexandros Avranas – a girl's suicide brings unwanted attention onto a secretive family whose members retain an unnerving air of normalcy in the aftermath of the tragedy. The deadpan acting used in many Greek crisis films is paired here with a more conventional, albeit clinically executed, narrative exegesis of the family's unusual behavior.

BOY EATING THE BIRD'S FOOD (2012), dir. Ektoras Lygizos – an out-of-work young singer who lives in extreme poverty becomes increasingly desperate and socially isolated. Hand-held camerawork and claustrophobic framing provide an intimate and unsettling portrait of the psychological effects of poverty and marginalization.

THE DAUGHTER (2012), dir. Thanos Anastopoulos – her father's bankruptcy and subsequent disappearance leads a teenage girl to kidnap the eight-year old son of the family she blames for her own family's troubles. As in other Greek crisis films, violent, anti-social behavior is used to express the desperation of a society destroyed by austerity and undemocratic governance.

HOSTAGE (2005), dir. Constantine Giannaris – based on a real-life incident, the story follows a young Albanian man who hijacks a Greek public bus (anticipating the abduction narratives in Greek post-crisis films). The film's singular title echoes the narrative's focus on the victimization of the hijacker at the hands of a xenophobic society rather than that of his hostages, whose lives he impacts in unexpected ways.

WASTED YOUTH (2011), Argyris Papadimitropoulos and Jan Vogel – inspired by the 2008 police killing of a 15-year old student, the narrative follows the intersecting lives of a young skateboarder and a policeman undergoing a midlife crisis. Like in two earlier Greek films – *The Years of the Big Heat* (Frieda Liapa, 1991) and *Quiet Days in August* (Pantelis Voulgaris, 1991), sweltering summer heat provides the backdrop for a plot about intergenerational miscommunication and social alienation.

UNFAIR WORLD (2011), dir. Filippos Tsitos – a compassionate police officer, seeking to prove the innocence of one of his suspects, commits a murder which is witnessed by a cleaning lady. Like in *Wasted Youth*, a narrative about a disgruntled police officer explores the moral quandaries of a Greek state apparatus responsible for the brutal suppression of anti-austerity protesters and the mistreatment of immigrants.

PLATO'S ACADEMY (2009), dir. Filippos Tsitos – a store owner and his friends spend their days commenting disapprovingly on the influx of immigrants into their neighborhood, until one day they discover that the store owner's mother is Albanian. The film's ironic title signals the dialogue-heavy narrative's satirical critique of Greek nativism and feelings of cultural superiority, reminiscent of earlier Greek films such as *Balkanisateur* (Sotiris Goritsas, 1997).

ALPS (2011), dir. Giorgos Lanthimos – a story about a group that provides human replacements to families that have lost a loved one as a way to help them cope with their grief. The disenfranchisements of the neoliberal era are conveyed through disorienting framing and editing and a narrative emphasis on de-individuation and mimicry.

ATTENBERG (2010), dir. Athina Rachel Tsangari – a naïve young woman copes with her father's illness through a romantic entanglement with a visiting engineer and interactions with her only female friend. The narrative, which focuses on the protagonist's awkward social and sexual encounters, is interrupted by performative interludes that provide a release from the ideological constraints of language.

KNIFER (2010), dir. Yannis Economides – following the death of his father, a young man goes to live with his uncle who hires him to protect his purebred dogs. The film's neo-noir style emphasizes the isolation and entrapment of the characters, continuing Economides' longstanding preoccupation with the simmering discontent and violent antagonisms of Greek domestic relationships.

MATCHBOX (2002), dir. Yannis Economides – the story follows the escalating arguments that break out between members of a family living together in a cramped apartment. The paroxysms and resentments of Greek family dynamics (which are also explored in many post-crisis films) are conveyed through claustrophobic framing and the relentlessness of the characters' hyper-abusive, profanity-laced dialogue.

DOGTOOTH (2009), dir. Giorgos Lanthimos – a dystopian narrative about young adult children imprisoned in their home by the family’s authoritarian patriarch. The children’s social isolation and distorted perception of reality creates a poignant allegory of the limitations placed on knowledge and agency in peripheral societies.

KINETTA (2005), dir. Giorgos Lanthimos – a policeman, a hotel maid and a photographer spend their free time re-enacting local murders. An early example of Lanthimos’ anti-dramatic style, which would later influence post-crisis depictions of social alienation and political disempowerment.

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