

Weirdly/Queerly Ethical: Contemporary Greek Cinema and the Crisis of Meaning

Written by Marios Psaras

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MARIOS PSARAS, FEB 14 2018

In *Dogtooth*'s final scene the father drives his car to work as usual. The old Mercedes crosses Lanthimos's extreme long shot left to right and stops in the middle of the frame and in front of the big factory. The father gets out of the car and enters the building. The film then cuts to a closer shot of the Mercedes's boot and lingers on that frame for about half a minute. A disconcerting quietness pervades the film's final shot. It is a moment of suspense and suspension, the agonising silence of anticipation, during which the viewer's desire to see the boot opened grows. For *Dogtooth*'s final shot is haunted by the preceding sequence, in which the audience have witnessed the older daughter breaking her dogtooth with one of her brother's dumbbells and then hiding herself in the car-boot in an attempt to escape the oppressive contours of her totalitarian familial space. However, Lanthimos once more disappoints our expectations. The film cuts to black before the end credits appear. The film's denouement acquires a resonance that is both tragic and enigmatic. For, rather than offering a meaningful closure, Lanthimos's film dissolves in yet another meaningless foreclosure; indeed, in the foreclosure of meaning. As the Mercedes's boot remains firmly closed denying any access to the older daughter's fate, the film itself opens a gap, a void in the realm of meaning. One might wonder what this gesture is all about. I would call it an ethical one.

As Gilles Deleuze demonstrates in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, traditional 'narration always refers to a *system of judgment*' (2009: 133). As he explains, classical narrative cinema insists on an 'organic' narration, which claims to be true by preserving 'the legal connections in space and the chronological relations in time' (ibid.: 133), thus offering an indirect representation of time, as a consequence of action, dependent on movement and inferred from space (ibid.: 128). Through this structure, with what Janet Harbord calls 'the revelatory acts of narrative, bent on exposing error and reasserting a moral order,' normative cinema 'implicitly stages a higher moral authority, a transcendental legislation' (2007: 157-8). However, this 'notion of a greater or absolute truth' is collapsed in post-war cinema and cinema cultures of the margins, which privilege repetition or the accumulation of acts with 'no "greater" meaning', without performing 'a revelation or exposure of "truth" that suggests an appeal to justice' (ibid.: 158).

In my book *The Queer Greek Weird Wave: Ethics, Politics and the Crisis of Meaning* (2016), I identify a trend in contemporary independent Greek cinema, which not only defies the logical and chronological relations in cinematic time and space, but also repudiates the possibility of a revelation or exposure of truth through cinema, of cinema's very capacity of producing meaning, and of meaning itself. 'Is it just coincidence that the world's most messed-up country is making the world's most messed-up cinema?' wonders *The Guardian* journalist Steve Rose, asking whether 'the brilliantly strange films of Yorgos Lanthimos and Athina Rachel Tsangari [are] a product of Greece's economic turmoil' (2011). In this article, Rose makes the case for identifying a 'Greek Weird Wave', pointing to 'the growing number of independent, and inexplicably strange, new Greek films'. Though to suggest that the particular cinematic wave is a direct product of the country's severe financial crisis sounds at least naïve, it remains a fact that much as the collapse of the Greek economic-political establishment has brought about an unprecedented deterioration in the material quality of Greek people's daily life, so it has engendered an irrevocable destabilization of established national narratives that have long been central to the production of national identity and history, thus exposing them as fantasmatic ideological regimes, in many ways accountable for the present catastrophe.

Clearly, such a critique could not but permeate the country's cinematic production, which, after all, has invariably

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invested in or critically engaged with the nation's favourite narratives, especially those framed around the emblematic triptych 'Fatherland, Religion, Family'. Despite the undeniable controversy that haunts the triptych's historical deployment and appropriation by the dictatorial regimes of the country, this particular triad has in significant ways ideologically framed – if not constituted – the nation's modernity. It has underpinned Greece's self-representational lexicon and produced the institutions of family and the Orthodox Church as keystones of the modern Greek society. It has, indeed, established the Greek family not only as a metaphor for the nation, but as the actual space within which the national is ideologically constructed and empirically materialised.

Unsurprisingly, family is at the epicentre of the 'weird' films' critique; either as an oppressive ideological horizon that haunts the reality and fantasies of the (queer or not) characters or as the experiential space within which the gendered, sexual, and national self is produced. However, the familial, and by extension national, space are rendered here in rather excessive ways, which radically reframe and deconstruct it. The filmic mode is more performative and less representational, a mode which compromises verisimilitude, undermines realism and creates precisely this 'feeling of the uncanny', this 'inexplicable strangeness' (Poupou 2014) that has dubbed them 'weird'.

Contrary to most critics and scholars' reservations, I am fascinated by the analytical potential of embracing the epithet 'weird'. I argue for a re-appropriation of the qualifier that draws on its semantic relation to another formerly derogatory, now re-appropriated term, namely the 'queer'. In other words, I am proposing a rather bold maneuver from the 'weird' to the 'queer' as a useful metonymic gesture that illuminates the underlying rhetoric of the contemporary trend as precisely an acerbic queer critique in response to the ongoing national crisis. The re-appropriation of the term 'weird' as a metonymy for 'queer' is not, however, so much invested in the films' representation of non-normative desire and sexual practices – although, such images frequently permeate their frames – but in the radical 'queer sensibility' that, arguably, imbues their non-representational, performative, 'weird' aesthetics and their treatment of the familiar familial and national space and narratives.

On this I draw on Rosalind Galt's conception of the 'default cinema', which refers to a strand of contemporary global art cinema that responds to recent histories of economic crisis by means of a radical 'queer' critique that infuses both its form and content (2013). Galt's conception is theoretically anchored to Lee Edelman's critique of heteronormative and homonormative conceptualizations of time and space, encapsulated in the axiomatic 'queer refusal of meaning', as well as to Teresa de Lauretis's delineation of queer textuality as one 'that not only works against narrativity, the generic pressure of all narrative toward closure and fulfillment of meaning, but also pointedly disrupts the referentiality of language and the referentiality of images' (2011: 244). Through a (queer) defiance of narrativity and identity, as well as through a repudiation of normative conceptualizations and representations of time and space as meaningful and productive, 'default cinema', [1] Galt argues, materializes the 'queer refusal to signify', as a formal and thematic repudiation of the intertwined meanings and narratives of neoliberal capitalism, patriarchy and heteronormativity. After all, as Edelman proposes, 'The narrative that raises meaninglessness as a possibility [...] necessarily bestows a particular meaning on such meaninglessness itself' (2004:120).

Undermining the referentiality of language and images, and exposing the futility as well as the oppressiveness underlying the discourses that seek to infuse time and space with meaning, films, such as Lanthimos's *Dogtooth* (2009) and *Alps* (2011), Tsangaris's *Attenberg* (2010), Panos Koutras's *Strella* (2009), and Ektoras Lygizos's *Boy Eating the Bird's Food* (2012), project a queer defiance of narrativity and identity. Their vision-less, meaning-less, 'weird' form and narratives are heavily laden with an all-encompassing trenchant critique, both deconstructive and repudiating, of familiar national(ist) narratives, as these have been enmeshed with capitalism, channeled through the actual and symbolic space of the hetero-patriarchal family, and reproduced and disseminated by a series of state-supported and supporting discourses (the educational system, the Church, the mass media, cinema itself).

However, as Sara Ahmed would say, these are films that do not strive to 'overcome the disorientation of the queer moment but rather inhabit the intensity of its moment' (2006:107). With meaning and its technologies in a state of crisis as the backdrop, the 'weird' films resolve into a queer fascination with the body or a fascination with bodies acting queerly. The films constitute a repository of bodies that refuse the patriarchal order as much as they resist the neoliberal structures of productivity and 'responsibilization': [2] from the inert and de-sexualized bodies of *Dogtooth* and *Attenberg*, through the disintegrating, convulsively-acting body of the *Boy*, to the transgressive bodies

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of *Hardcore's* *sinthomosexuals* and *Strella's* incestuous lovers, and, last but not least, the spectral bodies of *Alps*. In all these cases, the body acting weirdly or queerly is simultaneously a suffering body, a body that is excluded or disposed of, marginalized, devalued, left to die. But the image refuses sensationalism and sentimentalism. The films' performative, non-representational mode defies realism, forestalling the canonical operations of characterization and blocking the long-established pleasures of identification and narrative immersion. Sex, violence, and suffering are offered raw, de-glamorised, weird. Self-reflexivity and ambiguity dominates both the diegetic and non-diegetic. Diegesis itself is compromised. The 'weird poetics' thus attacks not only the problematic ethics of heteropatriarchal capitalism, but also the ethics of realism and the premises of cinematic illusionism (all those valued cinematic pleasures unearthed by psychoanalysis, as well as the promised safe distance and the preserved subject-object position between viewer and spectacle). Enforcing critical reflection rather than identification, content and form conspire to expose our own implication in the re-production and re-presentation of human suffering, of real and imagined violence; for, as Michele Aaron points out following Emmanuel Levinas, spectatorship 'depends upon our intersubjective alignment with the prospective suffering of the other' (2007: 112).

At the same time, the 'weird' films expose and critique the vices of both under-representation (namely, the narrative erasure of specific forms of suffering, of specific injured bodies) and over-representation (the political pressure to name, identify, police the Other if they are to get recognized as proper human, whose life would be valued and protected). Showcasing a subversive deconstruction of the spatial context and temporal structure of the normative discourses of the body, these films point toward more ethical ways in which the medium might capture, edit, exhibit, reframe and re-imagine the body. Images, spaces and bodies appear and withdraw without temporal coherence or narrative significance. The cinematic gaze, often disembodied and fragmentary, is impregnated with ambivalence and indeterminacy rather than a reflection of subjective meaning and experience. In this way, the weird poetics materializes the Levinasian axiom of our responsibility to preserve the Other's irreducible alterity, in spite of or precisely responding to the French philosopher's reservations about representation, especially visual representation, as a form of *altericide*.

Whether decentered or center-staged, the characters are often denied agency, as their actions are rendered excessive, unjustified and unresolved, while the deadpan acting style refuses access to the experience of time and space as meaningful and productive. Wasteful time is rather foregrounded, not necessarily because the films are devoid of action, but, because action is deliberately separated from productivity, rendered excessive, thus echoing contemporary theorizations of queer time as unproductive and queerness itself as 'wasted time, wasted lives, wasted productivity' (Schoonover, 2012: 73). Time, indeed, emerges as a key issue at stake in these films. The films attest to no simple conceptions of temporality. At a superficial level, time, of course, appears as linear and chronological, but it is also effectively repetitive, comprising an alternation between dissociated fragments of quotidian time, characterized by boredom and unproductive expenditure, disjointed moments of fantasy or performative intervals, and acts of temporal rupture, marked by violence, incest, death, dispossession; all accumulating without 'greater' meaning. Futurity is contested and, ultimately, negated. For, on the one hand, such spatiotemporality results in what Harbord understands as a 'fetishization of action, a repetitious re-enactment of the quotidian' (2007: 156); a spatiotemporality, which, nonetheless, acquires particular resonance insofar as it unearths performativity as precisely constitutive of identity, space, and time. On the other hand, the repetition of the seemingly trivial and insignificant is constantly undermined and haunted by the possibility of rupture. This fascinating conflation of the temporal conditions of repetition and contingency, ultimately, exposes performativity's structural reliance on the absence of essence, its dependence on the emptiness of the Signifier, and meaning itself as a matter of contingency, an act of imagination, subjected to a ceaseless reframing, a perennial deferral of closure(s).

In an age of recession and regression, of reactionary populism and fundamentalism, of growing nationalist and fascist sentiments and attacks; in such a glooming and menacing global political landscape where truth is contested and meaning is manipulated, the contemporary trend in Greek cinema that is discussed in my monograph construes and articulates this 'crisis of meaning', this moment of meaninglessness as an eminently queer one. However, the void of vision inherent in this meaninglessness should not be understood as an annihilation of political discourse. This void of vision does not, indeed, forestall the confrontation as political; it only suspends its meaning as one of fixed and fixated identitarian claims. It is, perhaps, the vision of the void, as a call for a perennial deferral of a clearly demarcated vision, a call for a perennial contestation and opposition against the reproduction of the oppressive

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regimes that have interchangeably regulated the allocation of rights according to their own terms of recognizability: patriarchy, heteronormativity, nationalism, fascism, capitalism, neoliberalism, neo-colonialism, fundamentalism, and so on. Indeed, the 'weird poetics' emerges as, ultimately, queer precisely in the way it essentially constitutes a paradigm shift of how the medium can serve as an unexpected platform for putting forward both an ethics and a politics of difference.

Notes

[1] Galt's 'default cinema' is primarily placed within the context of cinematic cultures of the economically ailing global South, while she uses as an exemplary case of this category a filmic example from Argentinean cinema, namely *Suddenly/Tan de repente* (Diego Lerman, 2002), which she finds defiant not only in textual but also in contextual terms, as the film is not 'fully legible', as she notices, within the 'neoliberal circulatory regime' of mainstream distribution and the major film festival circuit (2013: 70).

[2] As Butler and Athanasiou explain, 'responsibilization' names the condition of social therapeutics put forward by neoliberal governmentality, which is 'premised upon a morality of self-government, possessive individualism, and entrepreneurial guilt' (2013: 103).

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Marios Psaras (PhD in Film Studies, 2015) is an independent film scholar and filmmaker, author of *The Queer Greek Weird Wave: Ethics, Politics and the Crisis of Meaning* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). He has taught film theory at King's College London and Queen Mary University of London and has published on contemporary Greek and French queer cinema. His current research interests focus on the intersections between queer theory and ethical philosophy in global cinema and new media. Psaras is the Artistic Director of the Cyprus Short Film Day in London, member of the pre-selection jury of the national section of the International Short Film Festival of Cyprus and a member of the editorial board of the online journal *Filmicon: Journal of Greek Film Studies*. He has also worked as a Greek teacher, radio and TV host, and theatre director. His latest documentary *Thin Green Line* investigates sexual relationships across the buffer zone in his birthplace, Cyprus.