

“Bonjour, bourgeois” or undermining the realist convention in *The Greek Weird Wave*

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Abstract: *The Greek Weird Wave* is an ongoing cinema movement, some researchers state, which debuted with *Kynodontas* (directed by Yorgos Lanthimos, 2009), finalised – aesthetically speaking – once performance art was introduced in the film *Attenberg* (directed by Athina Rachel Tsangari, 2010). There are aesthetic links and links regarding conception between the above-mentioned directors, as the two films can be interpreted through the same critical device. Overcoming the aesthetic conditioning can be felt in the second internationally-produced film directed in 2015 by Yorgos Lanthimos, *The Lobster*, in which the first sequence, thought out as a prologue, is unique through the fact that the character in it does not reappear in the remainder of the film. Another director, who draws closer to a different perception of the real, is Babis Makridis through the films *Oiktos* (Pity) (2018) and *Ornithes* (*I pos na gineis pouli*) (Birds (or How to Be One)) (2020).

Keywords: Yorgos Lanthimos, Athina Rachel Tsangari

The collocation “The Greek Weird Wave” was imposed by influencers and subsequently taken over by journalist Steve Rose in the daily *The Guardian*. Although this trend managed to envelop a considerable number of films, two of them define the passage from a purely cinematic language to the integration of elements of performance art: *Kynodontas* (directed by Yorgos Lanthimos, 2009) and *Attenberg* (directed by Athina Rachel Tsangari, 2010). Subsequently, Yorgos Lanthimos directed internationally-produced films, among which *The Lobster* (2015) can be framed in the same cinema movement.

Greece is imagined internationally as “the quintessential archive of a perennial past”¹. In this sense *Kynodontas* and *Attenberg* can be defined as “archival disturbance”². Yorgos Lanthimos directed a film, which is autonomous in relation to

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¹ Dimitris Papanicolaou, “Archive Trouble”, in Penelope Papailias (ed.) *Beyond the «Greek Crisis»: Histories, Rhetorics, Politics*, Special Issue of *Cultural Anthropology*, in Marios Psaras, *The Queer Greek Weird Wave. Ethics, politics and the Crisis of Meaning*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 24

² Marios Psaras, *The Queer Greek Weird Wave. Ethics, politics and the Crisis of Meaning*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 24

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

the realist convention. In *Kynodontas*, the fact that the family offers their adult daughters and their son erroneous definitions of day-to-day words is a means through which the theme of the film *Kynodontas* is capitalised on, this being the lack of their offspring's independence. The Greek family is "radically reframed"³. I interpret that, through the invention of the erroneous definitions, the script-writers question a Greek nationalist attitude supported by the predominance of Greek etymology in the framework of Indo-European languages. "As Ben Tyrer observes, in *Dogtooth*'s parental regime the formation of the familial subject takes place through a meticulous linguistic project that depends on a double process: 'a reactive re-signification and a proactive dictation of signifieds'"⁴. The independence of the offspring is impossible in an environment of concentration, as the villa, in which they live, is presented. The "heroes of the 'Greek Weird Wave' appear self-conscious of the performative aspect of language and its functionality."⁵ In Efthymis Filippou and the director's script the sequences are consistently written in an absurd style. The younger daughter cuts the toes of a doll while screaming. The son talks in front of a hedge towards his absent brother and throws stones over the fence in the direction, in which he thinks he may have disappeared; the elder daughter throws slices of dry cake over the fence and believes that if a plane flying over the family's villa falls, she will take it. The character of the father states that a cat devoured their absent son; the family organises a commemoration of the son. The father announces that mother will give birth to two children and a dog. Incest takes place between the son and the elder daughter. The script-writers conceive a conceit in order to emphasise the theme; the family dog is tamed in six stages; the tamer explains to the father: "Dogs are like clay". The tamer underlines the fact that this dog belongs to the father and presents him with the possibility that this dog unhesitatingly does whatever is asked of it.

The characters of the two daughters learn medicine at home and check themselves as if they were doctors. The manner, in which, the character of the elder daughter is built, manifested in her acting, indicates the denouement as early as the first sequence. She shows a life-weary mine, being the one who would rebel. The technical performance of aesthetically imposing the absurd is realised including the contribution of the mother, as she records her loving voice reading the erroneous definitions of the words. In another sequence the parents listen on headphones to the piece "Casino Blues", performed by Jean Vallin; the sound level is higher in the next sequence, in which the daughters and the son look for their mother blindfolded.

³ Dimitris Papanicolaou, *op. cit.*

⁴ Ben Tyrer (2012), "This Tongue Is Not My Own: *Dogtooth*, Phobia and the Paternal Metaphor", posted in *academia.edu*, <https://kcl.academia.edu/BenTyrer>, in Marios Psaras, *The Queer Greek Weird Wave*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 87

⁵ framescinemajournal.com/article/from-the-crisis-of-cinema-to-the-cinema-of-crisis-a-weird-label-for-contemporary-greek-cinema/

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

Actresses Angeliki Papoulia, Mary Tsoni and actor Hristos Passalis in the roles of the daughters and the son, respectively, play childlike, non-realistically through bodily conduct, pronunciation, tone of voice, this being the main directorial innovation. On the occasion of the anniversary of their parents' marriage, the actresses in the roles of the daughters perform a paradoxical choreography, combining classical steps with civil movements. The elder daughter does stretching movements, pop dance movements, her parents interpreting them as dangerous. The elder daughter breaks her right canine with a dumbbell.

The fact that the son counts his transfer pictures stuck to the back of the bed before dinner proves the transformation of his and his sisters' lives in a retarded-development game. The actor Christos Stergioglu, performing the role of the father, integrates a mechanised manner in the relations to all characters. The only sequence, in which he expresses a feeling of love, is when his elder daughter cuts his toe nails: he sings a love song from his youth. The next sequence is made up of unpopulated exterior shots filmed on location (the factory where he works). The respective sound track is drawn under the shots. In a sequence, which follows up on a quarrel between the younger daughter and her brother, the parents discuss and the father mouths words without speaking. This technique, used in this context, can be framed as performance art.

Athina Rachel Tsangari directed *Attenberg* and guided the actresses in the main roles in the direction of integrating performance art. "Tsangari says she works with 'biology and not psychology. [...] I'm not at all into method acting and all those ways of preparing actors. It's very, very physical.'"⁶ David Attenborough agreed that the director name the film thus, wishing her good luck. Ariane Labed and Evangelia Randou, the actresses in the main roles – Marina and Bella – constantly use the method of improvisation of imitating animals. They play arm in arm in a series of sequences; in the first one the content of the lines contrasts with the tone of their voices and the rhythm of their gait. Their relationship is close. The character of Bella executes a single choreographic gesture during their civil movement, personifying the inanimate topic of conversation. The costume designers Thanos Papastergiou and Vassilia Rozana layed simple dresses at the actresses' disposal for this series of sequences. In the second such sequence the choreographic contribution increases.

In the relationship between the main female character, Marina, and her father – Spyros – there takes place a conversation about the term of tabu. Marina seems to disregard the concept. In another sequence between Spyros and Marina, he tells her to keep some of his architect's tools. In this film the director expresses the loneliness of the main female characters.

Yorgos Lanthimos directed *The Lobster*, his second internationally-produced film. The direction insists on the main character's omniscient perspective (the Short-Sighted Woman, performed by Rachel Weisz) through the voice-off technique,

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/aug/27/attenberg-dogtooth-greece-cinema>

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

although the character only appears in the second half of the film. The script-writers Yorgos Lanthimos and Efthymis Filippou wrote the first sequence as a prologue (directed as a master shot): a character, who, unusually, appears once only in the film, works as a symbol of cruelty. This is manifested in the texture of the film through the fact that single people have to find a partner under the threat of being transformed into animals. The script-writers underline the rigidity of the atmosphere at the “castle” (the building, in which the persons looking for partners are accommodated) through details such as the absence of half-sizes for shoes, the inexistence “since about last summer” of the option of being registered as a bisexual. In the same sense, “Smoking is not allowed. That way you’ll be able to run for longer during the hunt without getting tired and your breath won’t smell when you kiss.”⁷ The room, in which the main character is accommodated, bears the number 101.

The director and script-writer uses elements of performance art with the goal of bantering the electronic music scene, the culture of individual dancing, respectively. The matches between the characters looking for partners are conceived mechanically: a secondary female character has frequent nose bleeds; the man courting her provokes similar bleeding onto himself in order to convince her of their match. Like in *Kynodontas*, the script-writers develop a concept from the aesthetic category of the absurd, writing each sequence in this logic. “The fact that you will turn into an animal, if you fail to fall in love with someone during your stay here, is not something that should upset you or get you down. Just think: as an animal you’ll have a second chance to find a companion. But even then you must be careful. You need to choose a companion that is a similar type of animal to you. A wolf and a penguin can never live together, nor could a camel and a hippopotamus. That would be absurd. Think about it!”⁸

The acting style is adapted to the concept, tending towards non-realism. Nevertheless, the actor playing the main character David, Colin Farrell, is guided to combine the opposite characteristics of realism and non-realism. The script-writers wrote a consistently absurd final sequence, in which the acting style developed in the film by Colin Farrell appears in this manner.

Director of photography Thimios Bakatakis recorded shots, in which the edges of the shot do not always observe the full framing of the human body (Sequence 7. Int. Castle. Day). Moreover, there are sides of the shot, which do not follow the action. There are “empty spaces”, unoccupied through action, which reveal the director’s

⁷https://www.netflix.com/watch/80058480?trackId=255824129&tctx=0%2C0%2CNAPA%40%40%7C3a24a3e9-6a7f-4547-8a32-65167af74d4e-137490379_titles%2F1%2F%2FHomarul%2F0%2F0%2CNAPA%40%40%7C3a24a3e9-6a7f-4547-8a32-65167af74d4e-137490379_titles%2F1%2F%2FHomarul%2F0%2F0%2Cunknown%2C%2C3a24a3e9-6a7f-4547-8a32-65167af74d4e-137490379%7C1%2C

⁸ Idem

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

rebellion against realism, also manifested in the photography. Moments of decision are filmed in slow motion. In the 16th sequence, of the ball, the soundtrack takes on a concept of modern classical music, thus playing a more important role than the main character's theme. In the 18th sequence, that of the first hunt, the slow motion is illustrated musically through a Greek romantic song, in which the voice is preceded and accompanied by writing for piano.

An actor used by directors Yorgos Lanthimos in *Alpeis* (2011) and by Babis Makridis in *Ornithes (I pos na gineis pouli)* (Birds (or How to Be One)) (2020) is Aris Sevetalis. In *Alpeis* the actor, in the role of a stretcher bearer, interprets friendship, impressionability, professionalism and playfulness, although the directed role is written as one pertaining to a brutal character without scruple. The only feeling interpreted in the sense of the script is suspiciousness. In *Ornithes (I pos na gineis pouli)* (Birds (or How to Be One)) Aris Sevetalis plays a role with sincerity (the role of one of the two men, who leave their hometown looking for a better place to live), at the same time subjecting himself to the interview convention of a documentary (the director interviews both actors and non-actors).

In 2018 the film directed by Babis Makridis, *Oiktos* (Pity) was distributed. In the use of the musical illustration in the first sequence and in a series of two subsequent sequences, in which the main character relates a film and cries, the film seems to be influenced by composers employed in films directed by Michael Haneke. The script-writers Efthymis Fillippou and Babis Makridis wrote a script illustrating a lawyer descending into madness: in the first act the lawyer rearranges a picture in his office, so that it does not hang at a right angle. In the following sequence the main character quotes his prosecutor's deposition to his wife in a coma, while their son plays a game on his phone with a high volume. There is relatively little "weirdness" in this film, as the main character proves to be so through pronunciation, gait, postures, glances. The most unusual sequence occurs before the end of the final act, when the lawyer plays in his office a death-metal track found at the scene of the crime, which he is prosecuting. He asks his secretary to scream, as if she were being stabbed. The first plot point is set in the moment, in which his wife comes to from the coma; the sequence is illustrated musically with the movement "Lacrimosa" from Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's Requiem in E minor. The nurse, to whom the patient had been attributed, is glad, all awash in emotion.

The theme of pity is extended through the leitmotif of crying. The main character feels pity from a neighbour, from an employee in a dry-cleaning laundry. Out of the locations chosen for filming, it is in a greenhouse that the lawyer envies for the first time the pity shown to others. The moment is covered in three shots, the latter two being an extreme close-up and a close-up of the main character.

There is neither a consensus regarding the number of films included in *The Greek Weird Wave*, nor whether the term "weird" is appropriate in order to describe

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

a national cinema movement. Nevertheless, the film *Kynodontas* contributed to an unparalleled stylistic innovation, continued by *Attenberg* especially through the performance art included in the filmic discourse. *The Lobster* carries on the approach of the absurd in *Kynodontas*, one, however, damped through classical elements such as musical illustration and voice-off. Through the films *Oiktos* (Pity) and *Ornithes (I pos na gineis pouli)* (Birds (or How to Be One)) director Babis Makridis contributes with an attitude questioning narrativity and the meaning of reality.

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