

## Place, memory and tradition in contemporary Greek cinema just before the crisis

Christos Dermentzopoulos\*

A few years before the European and global crisis and just before the emergence of a «new» Greek cinema of the crisis, two films, a year apart from each other, set, in my view, the foundations for a sustained reflection on Greek reality.

The films are *The Guardian's Son* (2006), by Dimitris Koutsiabasakos, and *correction* (2007), by Thanos Anastopoulos. The films differ both thematically and aesthetically. The first one uses a classic narrative to refer to a return to the countryside while the second one wanders in the city, making extensive use of digital video. Both, however, set themselves apart from the run-of-the-mill film production of that period (sex comedies, romantic comedies of a televisual aesthetic, nationalist epics like *El Greco* (2008, Giannis Smaragdis).

Koutsiabasakos' film achieves something rare within contemporary Greek film production: it manages to open a dialogue with what we, generally and uncritically, refer to as 'tradition' and deal with issues pertaining to the past and its memory. Furthermore, what appears to dominate and basically keep the main role in the film is the mountaineering space. Anastopoulos' film, on the other hand, manages to speak about contemporary issues (racism, multiculturalism, prejudice, contemporary family forms) remaining within an urban terrain and developing a digital aesthetics quite novel in that period of Greek cinema. The film offers a substantial critique of contemporary Greek reality, including all the characteristics, which make up contemporary Greek identity.

Let us examine each one more closely.

### ❖ *correction*

The year 2006, the cinematic period ended with particular success in terms of revenue in contrast to the scarcity in the tickets of the so-called New Greek cinema, but also to the problematic relationship of the audience with contemporary Greek cinema. The phenomena of previous years had disappeared (like *Safe Sex* [1999, Thanasis Papathanasiou / Michalis Reppas], *A Touch of Spice* [2003, Tassos Boulmetis], *Sirens in the Aegean* [2005, Nikos Perakis]) but the production of that year generated tickets for most Greek films. It suffices to mention that from the 15 million tickets sold in average every year, 2 million tickets that year were sold for Greek films, a record number for the past few decades<sup>1</sup>. If we examine these

---

\* Christos Dermentzopoulos, Associate Professor of Anthropology of Art, Film and Cultural Studies, University of Ioannina - School of Fine Arts - Dept of Fine Arts and Sciences of Art.

<sup>1</sup> At the Greek box office the films *El Greco* (2007) and *I Just Got Separated* (2008) had more tickets than the American film *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2007).

productions we will discover that they are mostly television or theatrical comedies of the *ethographic* type with populist content and easy scripts (*I Just Got Separated* [2008, Vasilis Myriantopoulos], *First time Godfather* [2007, Olga Malea], *The Kiss of ...Zoe* [2007, Nikos Zapatinas) or historical films with nationalist character (*El Greco*, 2007, Giannis Smaragdis). Furthermore, it is clear that these productions aim at a Greek audience and are being consumed as easy digestible objects of a modern Greek petit-bourgeois aesthetic.

On the other end of the spectrum are a handful of movies which attempt to articulate a different discourse, do not flatter the audience, do not console the contemporary petit-bourgeois, but on the contrary, they urge the spectator to enter a crucial battle with himself, as Eco would say.<sup>2</sup> One of these films is *correction* (with a small *c*) of Thanos Anastopoulos; a film which was not financed by the Center of Greek Cinema - (I never really understood how this sort of funding works and what the criteria for eligibility are). The story borrows from a real-life event, the murder of an Albanian fan from a Greek one the night that the Greek national football team lost from the Albanian one. The film is a contemporary 'road movie' which follows an anti-hero in contemporary Athens. An Athens which does not bare any resemblance to what we know from television series or the majority of films produced in the last years. Very few films up to now have shown Athens as a metropolis in that way, at least until 2007. The director does not present, wisely in my opinion, the elements, which would form a logical explanation for the thoughts and the action of the protagonist. The puzzle of the story is formed gradually because, in reality, what matters, is not the presentation but the *flânerie* of the main anti-hero in the city and his attempts to construct his identity over again. When he comes out of jail, the protagonist wonders in places and situations, which are presented to viewers (who must be in their majority unaware of them): marginal people, homeless people, immigrants, neo-fascist organizations. In his itinerary, the protagonist will attempt to meet a woman and her child (the family of the victim) with the purpose of redeeming himself, asking for forgiveness, starting perhaps a new life.

The film *correction* came out during a particularly difficult period for Greek society. The Macedonian issue was and still is in the agenda, a topic of a constantly accelerating nationalistic exaltation –even if the intensity seems to soften in comparison to previous years. The film is important mainly for two reasons. One corresponds to the historical moment which is linked to its theme and ideological presuppositions and the other reason is mainly cinematic; a question about the expressive means and the overall aesthetic construction of the film. With regards to the first aspect, I would suggest that it is a political film in every sense

---

<sup>2</sup> (Eco 1988, 26)

of the term. Even when it portrays an internal search for identity and a 'definition' of people who stand in the margins of society, in reality, the film projects a possibility which transcends existing perspectives and suggests new possible equilibriums by reinventing the idea of 'family' in its contemporary frame.

It was not a coincidence that more films of this mindframe came up in the years that followed. A body of work that dissolves the classic triptych 'country-religion-family', something attempted also by other contemporary artists, without, however, the trap of verbosity and easy politicising. Correction attempts to 'correct' the idea of despising the everyday social issues of Greek reality, when the totality of the cinematic production as well as the tickets sold, concern populist comedies or epic-lyrical nationalistic 'cries' of previous glories.

The second reason refers to the aesthetic of the film. The use of video manages to escape the usual unfortunate paths of various 'gesture' and formalist experiments projecting a perspective that may be convenient for the Greek cinema production. In a manner which administers vitality and energy, high quality video and new technologies, prove to be crucial allies for the expressive means of the film. The camera enters the microcosm of the heroes with a rare capacity for a Greek film. The documentary and the narrative intermingle harmoniously, paving new avenues for the filmic representations of the Greek urban space. The film has very few dialogues and it uses a model where the action of the traditional narrative model cedes its place to a model of more substantial experience. Dead time, absence of logical action, internal search, many subjective frames, consist of a filming that manages to serve its theme. And all these, without excluding the emotional element which has been attacked in the various models of the deconstruction cinema. The emotion which the film transfers does not consist of the easy and melodramatic emotion of viewers but an essential element where the viewer is called to understand personalities that move in the outskirts of the official frame and they seek their own position in the process of it recreation.

If the work of art is defined by its essential adherence to the utopia and by the projection of the present to the sum of the possibilities of culture, then the film manages this aim. The discourse constructs a critique of contemporary Greek reality with all the elements that form the identity of the last few years. The social racism and the urban violence, the phenomenon Archbishop Christodoulos and its connotations, the meager efforts to integrate immigrants in the Greek educational system –in some of the sequences of the film are included the litanies and the preaching of the late Archbishop, the nationalistic excitements of

Greeks who yell: “you will never become Greek, you Albanian”),<sup>3</sup> the inspirational attempt of the educators in ‘Grava’ for an open multicultural education which, of course, had not succeeded. All these are presented in a coherent and substantiated discourse, which is included in an organic way in the story.

The film makes one understand how the dividing lines work. All these are presented without any type of rhetoric or populist political method, without predisposing the viewer. In reality, who can manage to approach without fear Omonia Square or the surrounding streets nowadays, who can walk in Koumoundourou Square or Klathmonos Square without questioning the image of the city? We are ignorant of our city and its contemporary network and we are content with the mediated reality transmitted in a vulgar way by T.V. and the reality shows or the Minister of Public Order. In our era, as the film suggests, the ‘other’ is the immigrant, the homeless, the disgraced neighbor whom everyone rejects. We might not have in our country yet, the “gated communities” that exist in other countries, but most of us are unaware or do not wish to know the image of Greece of today where trust is completely absent from everyday transactions and xenophobia and isolation have taken over the vital space of people. The film proposes the possibility of another coexistence, different, perhaps, not yet accepted, but already visible. Through the simple personal story of searching for redemption and forgiveness, the viewer may perceive the possibilities that each work of art must project in the reality in which it is produced.

#### ❖ *The Guardian’s son*

Koutsibasakos’ film, as already mentioned, manages to negotiate the subject of tradition. It is no coincidence that a large part of established cinema critics had reservations about the film. The old school of criticism is connected to the cinema of the 1970s and 1980s and follows with hesitation the interesting attempts of contemporary Greek cinematographers who aim to approach the past in a different way. Has any one considered how many films we have seen that deal with the Greek civil war or the military dictatorship in the last thirty years? It seems that no one feels the need to revisit the past or renegotiate issues of memory.

I will not talk about the aesthetic perfection of the film and its expensive means; it is certain that the creator is very capable in that respect. I will not talk about the level of the production, which is roughly the same as that of the majority of the Greek films of the last few years. Lastly, I will not talk either about the script and the narration of the film, which is very good (for a first feature film). What impressed most was the dialogue that a young and very promising creator opens with the past. He continues in the same line with the

---

<sup>3</sup> (see Γκολφινόπουλος 2007)

documentary production *The Grocer* (2013). He deals with the past not in a nostalgic or folklore manner but with the terms of history or at least with the terms of a *reflective nostalgia* as Svetlana Boym would say.<sup>4</sup> This is what distinguishes his film from other attempts of young creators who focus mainly in the present. In the naturalistic present, Koutsiabasakos juxtaposes the historicity of the situations.

The film portrays the journey of a young man, a journalist of the type of ‘candid-camera’ for a regional station, who soon moves to a larger station in Athens, in his mother’s birthplace. He follows another young man, the son of the guardian of the village, searching for a gun, which was taken from him during one of these pranks; the gun must be returned to his father, the policeman. The young hero will discover a world which involves him and his own past and which his mother had concealed from him. He will find his grandmother’s house and will meet the last few inhabitants of the village. This trip, a type of initiation, will make the young hero mature and bring him closer to self-realization and to the understanding of an environment which he ignored. He will thus try together with the guardian’s son and other young men to prevent the demolition of the house of Fotis (a reference to the bandit Yangoulas of the 20<sup>th</sup> century). He will make a ‘foreign’ case his own and will ‘direct’ his best performance and discover his limits. The story schematically presented herein gives the opportunity to the director to talk about certain issues which do not seem to concern the totality of our artistic production. The young men who find themselves suddenly in an isolated village of Pindos, each one for his own reasons, must confront a past, which they have not known either because it was concealed from them or because the conditions of their existence have negated its historicity. Their connection, however, with a wild place, a deserted village in the mountains, will release powers that nobody thought they had and it will also release a place and a space which claims to transfer new meaning to the present. In that way, the story of the film and the film itself is transformed into a place of memory, which claims the present through the definition of the past. Suddenly, the group or young men obtains a past and gains the memory which did not have up until that time; a past which they can control and which will guide their future behavior. The birthplace, the material and the mental space with its defining memories that consist of the collective and social identity of the community is thus a past. It will survive though as a memory and quite possibly it will define the future life of the heroes.

As the French historian Pierre Nora suggests “memory is the life carried by the groups which live today and in that way it is in constant evolution, it is open to the dialectics of

---

<sup>4</sup> (Boym 2001)

remembering and forgetting without using the continuous transformations, vulnerable to all the uses and the treatments, open to receptive situations of hypnosis and to sudden awakenings. The story is always the problematic and unfinished reconstruction of what no longer exists. Memory is a phenomenon always fresh, a bond that we live in the present. The story is a representation of the past. ...Memory is from its nature multiple, collective and individualistic. History on the other hand, belongs to everyone and to none and addresses the universal. Memory makes roots in the real, the space, the gesture, the image, the object”.<sup>5</sup>

Without nostalgic notes, with a particularly strong and genuinely emotional ending, Koutsiabasakos seems to communicate the present with the forgotten past, make it talk with a new environment producing in a dialogic way new meaning. In this past all the elements which formed the everyday reality of our urban life have a reason to exist: the environment of popular disobedience and the tradition of revolt, the passage to urban folk-like culture with the popular press (pulp fiction) with social bandits and revolutionaries of the period as heroes, the antithesis between mountain and plane (the grandfather of the villager mentions characteristically that Fotis (the famous Greek social bandit Giangoulas) was killed because he had went up against cities. “You cannot go up against cities on your own”). In this film, the topography obtains an active role which underlines the fields of possible conflicts and lets, at the same time, contemporary spectators of the city receive all these elements which will lead them if they so wish to the rediscovery of a multiple past, their past.

In a historical conjuncture when the «death of the past» is incessantly promoted and which is dominated by a fragmented and ahistorical constant present, Koutsiabasakos’ film suggests that any move forward to the future will have to negotiate the past and tradition in a historical rather than a folkloric or nostalgic manner. Anastopoulos’ film, on the other hand, resituates Greek identity in a new framework, opening up new conceptual horizons. Both films become *places of memory*, demanding the reconceptualisations of the present through the parameters of the past. In this manner, the cultural memory - collective and personal - of modern Greek reality gets rooted in actuality, in space, in the visual image, in the objects.

### **Bibliography**

Boym, Svetlana: *The Future of Nostalgia*. Basic Books 2001.

Γκολφινόπουλος, Γιάννης: *Έλληνας ποτέ... Άλβανοί και ελληνικός τύπος τη νύχτα της 4<sup>ης</sup> Σεπτεμβρίου 2004*. Ισνάφι 2007.

Eco, Umberto: *Ο υπεράνθρωπος των μαζών*. Γνώση 1988.

Nora, Pierre : “Entre mémoire et histoire. La problématique des lieux”. In: Pierre Nora (Ed.), *Les lieux de mémoire, I, La République*. Paris: Gallimard 1997: 23-43.

---

<sup>5</sup> (Nora 1997, 24-25).