Not So Weird: The Landscape of New Greek Cinema

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Not so weird: The landscape of new Greek cinema

SPOTLIGHT by Geli Mademli

It’s no overstatement that Greek cinema has been the main export cultural product of the country in the years of recession. The international acclaim of Yorgos Lanthimos’ DOGTOOH (2009), a quirky tale about a secluded family with their own social rules living in a spacious mansion in Athens suburbia, not only coincided with the outbreak of the Greek debt crisis in global media, but it rather served as a vehicle for discussing a troubled society in transition and diagnosing the symptoms behind its gradual decline.

Since 2010, Greek films such as Athina Rachel Tsangari’s ATTENBERG, Philppos Tsitos’ UNFAIR WORLD, Ektoras Lygizos’ BOY EATING THE BIRD’S FOOD, Alexandros Avranas’ MISS VIOLENCE or Elina Psykou’s THE ETERNAL RETURN OF ANTONIS PARASKEVAS became festival sensations, boosting a local industry that previously struggled with introversion and pessimism, even in more prosperous times.

This sudden increase in the mobility and popularity of Greek films around international audiences was famously proclaimed as a “weird wave” by The Guardian in 2011. This term is still widely used as a cultural trademark: a rubric that alludes to the paradoxes of film production in this part of the world, presenting unconventional characters (often with minimalist performances and absurd dialogues), and a generalized feeling of awkwardness towards the state of affairs in a country that is called to handle the maintenance of ancient and contemporary ruins alike.

This “weird” shift in the perception of Greek films abroad seems already obsolete for the local industry, who try on one hand to balance between this new trend and the global legacy of Theo Angelopoulos; and who, on the other hand, try to discover new ways to explore topics of social relevance (immigration, xenophobia, unemployment, or the “wasted youth,” as Argyris Papadimitropoulos’ film of the same title suggests) through social realism or genre filmmaking.

Filmmakers like Tsangari, Lanthimos, Babis Makridis, Syllas Tzoumerkas, and Psykou are well known at the top film festivals, as
Festivals are of course crucial to the ecosystem of arthouse films in Europe, but in Greece, some filmmakers hadn’t taken full advantage of festival launches.

Konstantinos Kontovrakis, the co-founder (alongside Giorgos Karnavas) of Heretic Productions is one of the first creative producers of this new wave. With his background in festival programming, Kontovrakis realized there was a gap in the market and introduced the first Greek company that expands from production to sales and distribution (Heretic Outreach), and consulting (Heretic Asterisk). “I made my first steps as a producer at a breaking point for Greek production, when all official funding schemas were frozen, including the funds raised by the state-owned Hellenic Broadcast Corporation (ERT), which was temporarily shut down (during a live broadcast!),” he recalls.

“When we realized we had nothing to wait for, we opted for a guerrilla approach: we made films next to nothing, self-funded among a circle of friends, with a certain kind of freedom that resonated in the final product...This permitted a whole new generation of filmmakers to take action and gain confidence in their own powers, but of course there is a downside to this. Suddenly there was a misunderstanding among the regular stakeholders that money shouldn’t be an issue, as Greek filmmakers seemed to manage perfectly without it. This false assumption in its turn motivated Greek producers to work even harder to establish collaborations beyond borders.”

Young producer Konstantinos Vasilaros of Studio Bauhaus, who recently won the CineLink Industry Days Award at Sarajevo for Holy Emy by Araceli Lemos, confirms that guerrilla spirit moves things along in Greece in a way that he didn’t experience when he lived in the UK. “Greek professionals empathize with each other, so eventually solidarity prevails over competitiveness.”

Director Yorgos Zois doesn’t always agree. “I recently visited Argentina and was amazed by the film industry’s methods. In this thriving place, people constantly make films and exchange roles, they always lend a hand and work as assistants to other people’s projects. In Greece, the circles of creative industries remain polarized, there are sects that help certain peers but combat others, groups that undermine people’s search for funding and take different sides in the course of time.”

As for the effect of the festival frenzy for new Greek films, Zois already notices an important change in the last few years. He says, “Younger filmmakers often approach me asking if I know any good festival programmers. They are looking for producers with an entrepreneurial flair and not with a creative insight.”

Elina Psykou, who won the Best International Narrative Feature award at Tribeca 2017 for SON OF SOFIA, also has mixed feelings for the landscape of contemporary Greek production: “When I made my first film, I didn’t take into account the festival circuit during the development, pre-production or shooting of the film, I started thinking about it more intensely in the post-production stage. However, in my second feature, I realized I was fully aware of this procedure from the very beginning. Festival biases can be very disorienting for a filmmaker...Placing labels and looking for patterns in films from specific regions is a tool for festival programmers to facilitate their work, but this
practice can impede ours, in the sense that we are often subconsciously compelled to frame our films according to a reflection, a false image created by others."

Even if the label of "weird" has proven to be a construction, for some just an invasive tool for rough and hasty grouping in festival settings, the waves that it generated in the formerly still waters of Greek film production are invaluable. If anything, this 'weird wave' label provides film professionals the opportunity to reflect on their work, and motivate them to find ways to divert the dominant narrative about art in the times of crisis. Eventually, the post-weird is all about remaining critical.

Geli Mademli works for Thessaloniki International Film Festival and Syros International Film Festival as a programme assistant and main editor of the festivals' publications. She is a doctoral candidate at the Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis at the University of Amsterdam, working in the areas of film heritage and media archaeology. She is also a freelance journalist, specializing in film and media, and a member of the editorial board of the Journal of Greek Film Studies FilmIcon.

Aleksandr Sokurov: Directing for the Human Soul

by Nick Holdsworth

Many of Russian filmmaker Aleksandr Sokurov's past films have been about power, its abuses and the world of the human soul. Those themes are also explored in his next film, which he describes as an "original script with a completely new approach set during the period of 1940-45"

He is not willing to be drawn on details yet, but the film will feature Stalin, Churchill, Hitler and Mussolini as main characters. Partners on the co-production include his "Italian friends" Avventurosa, Cinecitta Luce and RAI.

The project begs the question of why Sokurov, a noted critic of Russian president Vladimir Putin (he even used a Kremlin meeting in 2015 with Putin to obliquely criticize Russia's backing of Ukrainian separatists), does not appear interested in more contemporary figures of power. His response is typically direct: "I am not interested in modern political practice in Russia," he says. "It is monotonous, lacks novelty and is even formulaic. There's been nothing new in Russia's political cuisine for many years. Everything that is served up now had already been done before. Even the names of the dishes are the same as half a century ago."

Well said by a director who is known for taking no prisoners. To watch a Sokurov film is to know that the next 90 minutes or so will offer little in the way of escape from the world.

Sokurov, a frequent contender in competition at Cannes and Berlin, and the recipient of this year’s Lifetime Achievement Award at the EFAs, immerses his viewers in the worlds he creates - and in doing so elicits experiences that can be unexpected.

The darkness and subterfuge of power seen in TAURUS (his film about Lenin), MOLOCH (Hitler), THE SUN (Emperor Hirohito), or FAUST - his series on the fallibility of men who succumb to the temptations of power - makes for challenging viewing. His last film, 2015’s FRANCOFONIA, was a creative documentary set in the Louvre in Paris, concentrated on its wartime fate and the role it played in the Nazi's cultural plundering of Europe, set within a meditation on the timelessness of art.