

Historein

Vol 21, No 2 (2024)

Gendering the Mixed Economies of Welfare: Ruptures and Trajectories in Postwar Europe

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historein
a review of the past and other things

21.2 2024

Review of Dimitris Papanikolaou, Greek Weird Wave: A Cinema of Biopolitics

Valia Kravva

doi: [10.12681/historein.31591](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.31591)

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To cite this article:

Kravva, V. (2024). Review of Dimitris Papanikolaou, Greek Weird Wave: A Cinema of Biopolitics. *Historein*, 21(2). <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.31591>

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Kravva, Vasiliki. 2024. "Dimitris Papanikolaou, *Greek Weird Wave: A Cinema of Biopolitics*". *Historein* 21 (2).

<https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.31591>.

Dimitris Papanikolaou

Greek Weird Wave: A Cinema of Biopolitics

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021. 224 pp.

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Some books are just fascinating. Some books are purely academic. *Greek Weird Wave*, succeeds both since it is a concrete, reflective and solid analysis of a contemporary cultural phenomenon while being an interesting, up-to-date, intriguing narrative. Dimitris Papanikolaou, Associate Professor of Modern Greek at the University of Oxford and Fellow of St Cross College, manages to pose core questions about cultural and cinematic production in modern Greece while engaging the reader in a situation of constant personal reflection and self-denial. The Greek Weird Wave, a “new” post-2009, cinematic movement, is considered to be the cinematic response to Greek crisis. For the record, in May 2010 Greece agreed to the first memorandum with its creditors, and several more would follow.

This review will address at first the concepts of “cinema of biopolitics” and “biopolitical realism” and attempt to find correlations between these notions and the cinematic production of the Greek Weird Wave. The second issue to be addressed is the malfunctioning of the modern Greek family, a general dystopia that, according to the author, can explain other malfunctions in modern Greek reality and the collective imagination. Gender critics will also be discussed, namely queer assemblages and their functioning in this new cinematic paradigm. Some emblematic pictures, such as *Dogtooth* and *Strella*, will be used as allegories of biopolitical anxieties, trapped bodies, uneasy relationships and emotions but also queer assemblages and chronotopies.

The new cinematic paradigm depicts and delineates a very difficult decade for Greek people in general. It is a new cinematic genre that can be treated as chaotic, raw, cruel, emotionless, awkward, absurd and puzzling. For many, it creates feelings of dizziness, loss, frustration and wrongness; a sense of uncanny and unhomey belonging, a sense of stagnation, of melancholia and ruination, as Navaro-Yashin’s melancholic objects, melancholic narratives and haunting presences (and absences). Lovecraftian and Poe’s weirdness are much closer to what this new cinema is all about. Following Mazower, who described Thessaloniki as the “City of Ghosts”, the city of ghost Jewishness, we can argue about a cinema of ghosts, of ghosted lives, of a haunted present and a denied future. Exclusion, marginalisation, pauperisation, loneliness, internalisation of violence, disorientation are some of the feelings that Yorgos Lanthimos, Panos H. Koutras,

Konstantina Kotzamani, Athina Rachel Tsangari, Syllas Tzoumerkas and Yannis Economides, to mention some directors, explore in their films. *Dogtooth*, *Lobster*, *Strella* and many more are some of the best-known films directed by the abovementioned directors. Theodoros Angelopoulos is thought to be the director who created this modernist national poetics but we have to admit that he failed to address the complexity of the new economic and social reality in Greece. Maybe his death (2012) stopped him but we will never find out.

Undeniably, many things have been said and many more have been written about the Greek economic crisis that tortured Greece after 2009 and, up to a point, continues to threaten the Greek people in general (despite the current neoliberal voices pointing at the Greek success story). However, the Greek crisis was not a national monopoly; it was a global economic crisis that affected America and all European countries. Despite the fact that Greece became synonymous with financial crisis, very similar crises have affected world economies since 2008; we all remember the collapse of the American bank Lehman Brothers. Moreover, the Greek crisis was by far a multicomplex and multilayered dystopia. Thus, it is more correct to say that it was and still is, up to a point, an economic, social and political phenomenon that affected many cultural products and created several reactionary trends. The generalised situation of economic and political malfunctioning and the continuous austerity measures resulted in many reactions and “revolutionary” movements such as the massive demonstrations that led to the occupation of Athens’ Syntagma Square by the so-called indignados. These reactions had many similarities with other reactionary movements in other countries of southern Europe (such as Spain) and bear similarities to the Arab Spring and visions of collective resistance to submission.

Biopolitics and biopower are the main concepts mapped in the book, which is influenced by Michel Foucault’s theories of a dystopic modernity that produces and reproduces docile, obedient and passive bodies under surveillance, unable to escape from the inescapable modern net. Mainly *Discipline and Punish* (1975) is considered an emblematic work that reflects all this external exercise of power on minds, bodies and souls. The biopolitical agenda is also discussed in archaeology. For example, Dimitris Plantzos, in *The Recent Future: Classical Antiquity as a Biopolitical Tool* (2016), examines Greek antiquity (and the notion of continuity) as a biopolitical logos that exercises power on the present but also the future of Greece and Greek collective representations. Following the same route of analysis, *Greek Weird Wave* discusses the interesting ways in which this new cinematic genre attempts to explore and expose power modalities (either national, familiar or other) exercised on modern Greeks, resulting in controlled, restricted and frozen lives, where emotionality and free will find no place for expression. Scenarios such as fragmented families, isolated within four walls and engaged in an anti-social sociality and anti-human humanness, subjects trapped in a damaged social reality, yet claiming their

own ungendered, gendered space are some of the dystopic overhangs exposed in the films of the Greek Weird Wave.

Dogtooth and *Miss Violence* are two films that deal mainly with the malfunctioning of the Greek family. According to Papanikolaou, there is a sense of uneasiness within this institution that leads to violence and isolation, resulting in a vicious circle. The reasons are mainly the oppressive *patria potestas* and the toxicity of interfamilial relationships based on fear and obedience. Surveillance, purity and discipline are some of the core values of modern Greek families. And yet the ill Greek family somehow functions as an allegory for the ill nation and the ill sociality. The troubled family serves as a metaphor for the troubled modern society. At the same time gender performativities are called into question; gender certainties are also problematised, at least in the way we used to conceive them. As the author puts it, “it is not the films that are weird. It is the unending confrontation with the real” (224). Starting from the tragic killing of Zakie/Zak Kostopoulos in the centre of Athens, Papanikolaou discusses the very influential film *Strella/A Woman’s Way* to explore gender and queer assemblages but also the demand for public space and the acknowledgement of the sexual “other”.

Above all, this is a book with a purely political agenda: it is a reflective analysis of the current situation of precarity. In a post-Covid(?), post-pandemic era, post energy-zero life homo precarious faces an everyday situation of cultural, social, political and severe economic insecurity and uncertainty. The rhetoric of “development” and the optimism of the civilized world are seriously challenged by neoliberalism, the “Big Ill State”, the rise of neofascist movements but also the ghosts of despotisms and war. The Greek Weird Wave is not just a cinematic critique; it is mainly a brave and sober critique of modern social and personal dead-ends. It is a critical reaction to capitalist realism and the illusions of a pan-capital, developed, prosperous future.