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Greek Weird Wave

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Otherness and Identity in the Greek Weird Wave

While Greece was once upon an ancient time the dominant culture in the western world, it has suffered from political instability, financial and identity crisis, especially in recent years. Since the identity of the self only comes into concern in the context of interaction of others, the identity of Greece originates from the changing European context. The crisis of identity and ideologies of Greece are reflected in its weird wave contemporary cinema in the changing of context of the characters. In the films *Xenia* (Panos H. Koutras, 2014), *The Lobster* (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2016) and *Thread* (The Boy, 2016), all address the characters' identities in crisis from the dual perspective of the other and the self, which question the way in which otherness is used to identify the self.

In the path to becoming the modernized version of Greece, the country has been experiencing difficulties adapting to the changes happening in the rest of the world. Greece is recognized as the "other Europe" alongside other countries such as Spain and Portugal, struggling to keep up with the civil advancements in the stronger countries of the new Europe. In Sandra Ponzanesi's article *The Non-Places of Migrant Cinema in Europe*, she explains that parts of the new Europe post colonialism have not yet dealt with the legacy of slavery, therefore there is the issue of "national colonial unconscious" which many Greek weird wave filmmakers deal with in their works. Races such as Albanian which the brothers from *Xenia* are associated with and submissive characters such as the mute girl in *Thread* and the maid in *The Lobster* do not get

justified for their inferiorities in the films. Ponzanesi also states that “self-explanatory identity has come under pressure in recent decades as a result of increased postcolonial awareness, the revival of religious practices in the public sphere and the crisis of the secular state, and the rise of new forms of racism.” In turn, people who enter and get casted out of the society, mostly immigrants and queers, find their place in the non-place, the heterotopia: a real space in which all the otherness belong; a place to escape from authority and repression.

While otherness in the historical context is often associated with things and people from the outside of the self, the three Greek films all take on the perspective of the other back in the timeline when the otherness is created. In *Xenia*, Danny and Oddy are pulled between the memories of their recently demised Albanian mother and the possibility of finding his Greek father, as he reaches the critical stage of needing financial and legal support. In *The Lobster*, David’s transition between the two contradicting societies confuses him of whether a person should live alone or with a partner. In *Thread*, Niki’s primal instincts of motherhood and pain come into conflict with her identity as a political activist leader. The three films deal with different issues that Ponzanesi mentions: immigration in *Xenia*, public religious practice in *Thread*, and the secular monitoring of social behaviors in *The Lobster*. Interestingly, all three films reject the notion of coming of age and linearity in their plots. In *Xenia* the brothers go back to Athens to live the teenage way that they have been living. In *The Lobster* it is not clear whether one society is an improvement of the other. *Thread* blurs the distinctions between the mother and the son by casting the same actress to play both which increases the association between the two generations, as well as having disconnected plotline. For example, in one scene, Lefteris cuts his tongue out, but in the scene towards the end when he is in a bus with a person who seems to be his mother, he speaks normally. The scene in the bus seems apocalyptic, the

mirror is counting down for self-destruction. The disjoint in the detail of Lefteris's tongue suggest that perhaps the end is not the end. The end of film does not give us the highly visual blasting of the world that the audience typically expect from the mainstream cinema of American Hollywood.

The choice of not conforming to temporality is the attempt of reversing the chosen, to reconsider the other choice. The transitioning characters experience the stage of double occupancy, the dividing of allegiance where they do not truly belong anywhere. In *Xenia*, the brothers go after their dreams of finding their biological father and becoming citizens, but they fantasize about the memories of queerness and otherness through their mothers and Danny's pet bunny Dido that represent their childhood past. They indeed need to "go back in time" to trace back to their mother's past in order to find their father, but the fantasies of the childhood and the mother become something else entirely. Fantasies in classical Hollywood narratives are supposed to give the characters agency or resolution, but it is not the case in *Xenia*. In fact, the fantasies have little influence on the characters, to the point where it is not clear whether the characters are actually experiencing them. One scene of fantasy features Petty Bravo singing on a cruise ship at the beginning of the film separates her and Danny by the sea. At one point, the singer suddenly turns to Danny and says "Put on your jacket. It's chilly", which is what Danny's recently deceased mother Jenny would say. The scene is constructed as an idealistic picture with the dreamy singer in the spotlight and wind blowing up her hair. The colorful light of the cruise ship light up the sea beautifully, but the fantasies do not motivate Danny. Instead the otherness that the fantasies originate from are already embedded in his present personality, such as the obsession of Petty Bravo and the memories of his father's chest hair.

The source of the fantasies does not come from the characters, but rather from the film itself. This decision gives control to the narrative more than the characters, making it come across as fatalistic and written-in-the-book. For example, the film hints at the fantasy that Tassos might actually be the brothers' biological father. The audience can see the reactions of Tassos when he looks at the brothers, and the look in his eyes when he sings to them in the cafe, but the characters cannot. Instead, the characters are guided by the narrative through the semi-diegetic music. In one scene when Oddy is hanging clothes and listening to Petty Bravos, he suddenly starts to sing along and feels the motivation to track down his biological father. This act is a parallel to Oddy's singing on stage which leads to Danny's confrontation of his supposed father. These impulsive decisions of the characters seem fatalistically predetermined rather than inspired by a logical cause. This plot decision draws to the fact that this is an attempt of modernizing the ancient Greek classic story *The Odyssey* and plays with the idea that the plot must follow the storyline of the historical fiction. In the end of the film, this notion is dismissed when instead of reuniting with the family like Odysseus, the characters go back to their old way of being unsupported kids struggling to live in the city of Athens. Through this resolution, the other, alternative narrative of the greek mythology is staged.

In the discourse of Greek cinema, the word "queerness" is often used to discuss otherness. Other than materializing its more common meaning in describing the divergence of sexuality, it also captures the digression from the course in the chronology. Psaras's book *The Queer Greek Weird Wave* theorizes the fantasy that queerness and otherness is threatening:

"Caught up in a chain of ceaseless deferrals politics, then constitutes 'the temporalization of desire, its translation into a narrative, its teleological determination', offering history

as the continuous staging, the fantasmatic narrative of desire's movement across the endless reconstruction of what we construe as reality." (Psaras, 41)

Queerness is a disruption to the temporal flow of transitions and making decisions. Because the transitions cannot be completed, the temporal in-between spaces from origins to destinations turns into permanent places of refuge. The first institution in *The Lobster* which believes that people should live as couple articulates the concept that if people cannot make the transition from being single and finding a loved one, he or she will be turned into an animal. David has trouble making the transition because the method that the institution used to help them find partners does not work for him. In this film and in many other greek weird wave films, sexual queerness is used to express the divergence from the social norm. David's queerness makes finding a partner difficult for him because of the designs of the societies. He cannot fit himself into the institution of binary, of finding another person with unique common traits than he is. He identifies himself as bisexual, which does not fit into the binary institution classification of either heterosexual or homosexual. David's troubles in his transition works similarly with and perhaps takes inspirations from the Greek crisis in which the country cannot adapt to the changes in the bigger picture of Europe because of its internal structures. For the majority of the 20th century Greece had been ruled by dictatorship like the way that it had been earlier when the impact of the outside Europe had not been so drastic. As the rest of Europe goes increasingly democratic, capitalistic and globalized, Greece's economic model and societal policies do not have the ability to adapt themselves to those changes. Greece's reality have been filled with the changes such as having more immigrants and cultural influences from countries such as France and the United States, but the Greek idealism still seeks for resolutions to contemporary issues such as economic crisis and the troubles with entering the EU from history and what had been considered "Greek" .

In the attempt of reverse-engineering such idealisms, the characters in the three films exist in duality and in contradiction with each other in all three films in order to access the otherness within the self. David does not find his partner in the institution that allows him to do so, but in the gang in the woods that forbids it. The existence of both heterotopian spaces defies the idea that there is one and only one companion that is perfect for a person. David's defining trait is nearsightedness, and he was not able to find his other half within the institution. When he goes into the woods and finds the gang that tells him that everyone should live and die alone, not only does he find the nearsighted woman, but another man that is nearsighted as well. In *Xenia*, there are two heterotopian spaces on the opposite spectrum from each other. One is Xenia, a broken-down hotel in the middle of the woods where Oddy and Danny run to for shelter to escape from the real society in Athens. The other one is their supposed biological father's house: a luxurious-looking mansion on the outer edge of the city. Both spaces give the characters hopes of money, citizenship and familial love, something they need to stand a firm ground in the society of Athens. For Xenia, the brothers make plans to renovate it and open up a hotel so that they can live together in affluence and government recognition. For the mansion, the brothers hope to be recognized and supported by their biological father who will give them money, citizenship, and a family. The fact that neither of these heterotopias end up offering a real resolution in the film argues for the nature of queerness which is "wasted time, wasted lives, wasted productivity"(Schoonover, 73). The temporality of *Thread* reference to the real political situation of the lost cause resulting from opposing ideas, with its concrete timeline and propaganda-like mise-en-scene.

Around the 1970s when *Thread* narrate as the revolution of Visionaries, Greece is undergoing a political revolution in the attempt of overthrowing the dictatorship. Later in the

1990s, the country was still troubled by the fervent rebels infamously known as the “rebels without causes”. *Thread* challenges the assumption of binary and questions the boundary between “the one” and “the other”. The other would not be problematic without the context of the self. Sabtaolalla’s paper notes that in mainstream European visual culture, the racialized images “allow the hegemonic observer to gain a sense of power by gazing at a fetishized and therefore controllable image of difference.” (Santaolalla, 156) While the local Greek citizens during that era are filled with xenophobic ideas, the truth is that Greece had already turned into a country that consisted of many immigrants. However, the country refused to change the way that it operates and thus the identity crisis emerges. The unresolved problem passed on to the younger generation who grow up in the environment of political fervor but do not know what they are fighting for.

In *Thread*, there are two opposing political parties rivaling for political control. One is Faces, the party of the protagonist Niki who represent the Greek locals; the other is Visionaries, illegal immigrants from Paris who gain control of the government. When Niki runs for the position of power of Athens as the representative of Faces, she says in her speech, which she reads from despite her previous insistence to speak for herself, that “I gave my life up for those days. I do not have love for anything else...anymore. I fell in love with the voices of my leaders. For me, they are my fathers, I can’t help it.” Besides these passive words, Niki does not offer another reason in the speech as to why people should support her ideologies other than that she is “passionate” about her political group. The film does not offer distinct ideas about what the two parties are, nor about how they are different. The film makes effort to exclude the identification of the party leaders by not showing the faces and changing the tune of the recordings to avoid identification. As a result, the two parties give the same impression to the audience. There are

other places where the film suggest that the two opposing sides are one and the same, and that otherness does not really exist in that space. For instance, the film speaks of a wall called “The Mirror” which the Visionaries built around Athens after they won the war in 1980 to protect themselves from their enemies. The naming of the wall suggests that since the party is surrounded by mirrors, there should be no space for the other, and only the self. Therefore, the revolution is only about the renewal of identity, of getting rid of the mirrored images to make changes, of breaking down the mirror that the self is trapped in, as the film stages in one of the scenes. The mirror serves as a dystopian heterotopia, a passageway between the inner and the outside, where no one escape to the outside world successfully through. The destruction of the mirror destroys the symbolic distance between two parties that do not exist literally, since the two parties co-exist in Athens. Furthermore, it symbolized the openness towards the outside world and a temporal orientation contextualized by it.

In considering the experiences of both the self and others, the identity of the self would no longer be stagnant and instead would be considered a transitioning process. By blurring the boundary of the origin and the destination, heterotopia can be turned into a space of productivity because the identity would not be lost in the journey. Unfortunately, this resolution to the Greek crisis is difficult to materialize because Greece is not in reality one entity but rather a compound of the government, the people, the economy and many other factors. A more microscopic analysis of the inner workings of Greece would be required for a proposal of a plan for resolution.

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