

Junctions, Dead-ends and Uncertain Trajectories: Mapping Out the Greek Road Movie

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ABSTRACT

This article sets out to discuss a corpus of contemporary Greek films foregrounding mobility and travel as variations of a national version of the road movie genre. Following a textual approach in the definition of genres, I first critically engage with the aesthetic conventions and cultural significance of the road and travel film within the American and European cinematic traditions. Thus framing my discussion, I then chart an itinerary of the Greek road movie across a broad stylistic gamut and thematic repertoire, firmly situating it amid specific socio-cultural contexts. I show how, in consecutive periods, traversing the New Greek Cinema and the Contemporary Greek Cinema, as well as significant socio-political transitions, the Greek travel and road film in its various embodiments has been brought on to reflect on a series of crises marking the Greek cultural sphere. I argue that, by positing the journey as common narrative device, Greek film-makers have articulated filmic interrogations regarding the vicissitudes of contemporary Greek society as well as national identity, in its intersection with history, but also sexuality, ethnicity and gender.

KEYWORDS

history
identity
mobility
subjectivity
road movie

Ever since its designation and theoretical substantiation as a distinct cinematic genre in the postwar years, the road movie has become a contested site of conflicting viewpoints and shifting boundaries in Film and Cultural Studies.¹ The only points of convergence seem to be the genre's core motif, namely subjects on the move by means of individual or mass vehicularity, its conscious hybridity and the centrality of mobility as narrative drive. The question, then, of how one can go about defining (inter-, trans-) national inflections of the road movie genre in its diachronic syntactic and semantic variations hinges on a multivariant selective grouping of theoretical and methodological considerations.² In laying out my strategy in examining the indigenous version of the genre, it is crucial first of all to clarify what I do not intend to do: far from resorting to a rigid taxonomic ascription of a body of films, that is far from applying strict criteria of inclusion and exclusion in a predefined road movie genre, I will draw on the generic conventions of the road movie in their multiplicity, as one of the possible ways of reading recent Greek filmic texts.

In this respect, I draw on Celestino Deleyto's (2012[2011]) elaboration of Derrida's textual approach to genres, which posits films in a nearly impossible position regarding genres: the latter are always structurally inscribed in the former; at the same time, the former never fully belong, but merely participate in the latter. According to this viewpoint, genres are conceived as "sets of conventions that are created, constantly altered, and occasionally made to disappear within texts" (ibid.: 227), subject to internal formal innovations,

¹ In fact, offering a metacritical review of the relevant discussion, and based on Andrew Tudor's (1973) assumptions, Janet Staiger (2003[1997]) argues that none of the four possible approaches to the definition of genre itself stand to scrutiny. The *idealist method* (appointing one film to the status of prototype against which to judge others) is plagued by the arbitrariness entailed in choosing prototypical films; the *empiricist method* (observing empirically the necessary and sufficient traits that certain films should possess in order to be included in the genre) suffers from the circularity of its underpinning logic; the *a priori method* is rendered problematic by lack of consensus among critics over the setting of criteria; and finally, the *social convention* method prompts one to question the validity of assumptions regarding popular expectations.

² Indicatively, in providing a reading of the Irish road movie across structural and formal lines, Díóg O'Connell (2010) invokes a loose definition of genres and of the road movie itself, allowing, for instances, of repetition and difference, the latter being precisely the point where the 'national' (Irish) reveals itself with respect to its American prototype. An obvious objection to this otherwise thoughtful and theoretically robust analysis is that by identifying points of appropriation and rejection it lacks diachronicity, tacitly setting Irish film which exhibit road movie traits against an under-defined stable American canon. For his part, in dealing with French road movies, Neil Archer (2013: 1) includes in his research field films "made in France, generally with French money, in French with French actors", which fulfill certain criteria, drawn from the various theoretical formulations of the genre. By (perhaps too arbitrarily) minimizing the American (and Hollywood) influence, Archer correlates the generic transformations with contextual factors related to socio-cultural and institutional mutations, as well as aesthetic experimentations.

institutional advances and socio-historical transformations. To account for such malleability and volatility in envisioning the (non-linear) evolution of genres, Paul Watson brings into play the notion of the 'metaphor'. He describes film genres as "webs of metaphorical expressions [...] as metaphorical redescription, reworking or redeployment of cinematic and cultural vocabularies" (2012: 205).³ Correspondingly, then, on the one hand, individual films are viewed as "textual spaces in which the genres manifest themselves as part of the larger system" (Deleyto 2012[2011]: 232). On the other, to use Watson's terminology, through a process of transference, each new film bears an *implied resemblance* (2002: 205) to, without ever coinciding with, the generic canon. In so far as generic hybridity and instability constitute not only definitional traits of road movies but also a *sine qua non* condition of any filmic narrative, the analytical process with regards to each film should render visible how such generic 'miscegenation' acts upon and mutually alters the identified generic traits.⁴ Topical cultural and socio-historical discourses should also be shown to inform the respective articulations of the generic structural and thematic elements.

In what follows, I will first provide a brief overview of the road movie theorization, pinpointing its principal aesthetic codes and conventions. A more detailed exposition of its American and European variations on a diachronic scale will set the scene for the charting of the Greek filmic production from the mid-1960s onwards, exhibiting traits of the road movie genre. Such exposition will be framed by a discussion of the socio-economic shifts marking the Greek public sphere and a critical assessment of the concomitant institutional procedures and aesthetic dominants of Greek cinema. The sketching of the polymorphous genealogy of the Greek road movie will be effectuated by tracing the transformation and abandonment of dominant motifs and aesthetic codes in consecutive stages, while brief analyses of individual films which reflect, albeit in ways more complex than straightforward mirroring, more prominently on the predominant, each time, socio-cultural preoccupations, will help illustrate the diverse ideological implications of narrative patterns and thematic choices.

³ In so far as the concept of 'metaphor' draws on pre-existing 'cultural banks' and 'cinematic reservoirs', while depending upon a mental process for the production of meaning, it allows for combined considerations pertaining to cognitive, aesthetic and institutional aspects of the cinematic experience (Watson 2012: 205).

⁴ Essentialist text-based approaches to genre criticism have elicited acute criticism. John Fiske (1987: 111) notes that textual definitions of genre tend to circumscribe traits within generic boundaries which rarely correspond to individual texts. Susan Hayward (2000: 68) argues that codes and conventions should not be examined exclusively within their textual or generic context, as their change over time hinges on the mutability of the prevalent ideological climate. In so far as we employ a loose and fluid conception of genres, acknowledging their hybridity within texts and allowing for the influence exerted on generic shifts by the institutional and cultural discourses framing them, we address these concerns.

THE ROAD MOVIE, AMERICAN AND EUROPEAN STYLE

On a basic descriptive level, Corrigan argues that “road movies are, by definition, movies about cars, trucks, motorcycles or some other motoring soul-descendant of the nineteenth century train” (1991: 144). Allowing for the re-appropriation and re-imagining of the genre to reflect local geographies, institutional constraints and national cultural vocabularies, O’Connell identifies the general formal traits of the road movie as follows: “Narrative conventions of journey and travel; the iconographic details of the road and landscape; the recurrent patterns of wandering agents; and story elements that coincide with audience expectations” (2010: 45). In eliminating the use of automotive means of transportation as precondition for inclusion in the road movies genre, O’Connell seems to equate travel and road movies. Taking into account the specific aesthetic and thematic considerations defining the European inflection of the genre, as we shall see further on, I use the terms ‘road movie’ and ‘travel film’ interchangeably.

In 2008, David Orgeron claimed that the inherent Americanness of the genre has been too readily assumed, as has its stylistic and structural descent from the western, even in cases when European influences are acknowledged and identified.⁵ Positing as structural nucleus of the earliest manifestation of the genre (1950s-1960s) the tension between rebellion and tradition in ideological as well as formal terms, Laderman (1996) has documented its reshaping over two consecutive stages: in the transitional phase (1970s), which already bears the aesthetic influence of the European New Waves, such tension is attenuated by a heightened emphasis on individual psychology, only to be completely effaced by the mid-1980s by a self-conscious, ironic and ultimately neoconservative take on the genre, with the exception of some notable, ‘politically-biting’ postmodern films.⁶ Eyerman & Löfgren (1995: 61-64) offer a partly different chronological account of the genre, identifying an initial period (1960-1975), when the narrative drive was flight from petit-bourgeois normality and the tone was set by pessimism and 1930s nostalgia; a second (1976-1984), when the genre seemed to fall almost to oblivion; up to 1985, when a new wave of road films emerged, this time framing the disillusioned ‘yuppie’ yearning for authenticity, for whom the road eventually leads to enlightened re-

⁵ Eyerman and Löfgren’s formulation is indicative of a widely-held view regarding road movies: “The journey as a metaphor for life itself is not a particularly American invention, the *homo viator* motif has a long European history, but the Americanisation of this type of narrative in the road movie format is the consequence of the way specific conceptions concerning the freedom and the function of the road were constructed in the United States” (1995: 55).

⁶ Laderman (2002: 248) claims that, in sharing a soul-searching inclination, European road movies resemble their 1970s American counterparts; however, in so far as theirs is of an introspective, contemplative quality and of a poetic resonance, they do not exhibit the latter’s fascination with flamboyant violence.

normalization. Michael Atkinson further observes that the recent proliferation of the road movie genre, from its formulaic to its more arthouse versions, results from a whole generation's familiarity with television and "the open-ended, road-like format of the weekly serial" (1994: 14). Such broad outlines should not, however, obscure alternative side trajectories, initiated from the mid-1980s onwards, which dealt with sexual politics, exhibiting feminist or queer sensibilities in terms of subject matter, main characters or aesthetics.

Despite identifying a common use of the travel motif in both American and European road movies as a means for engaging in existential interrogations about the meaning of life, Mazierska and Rascaroli (2006: 4-5) note three distinctively European structural elements in road films: firstly, instead of open highways and distant horizons signifying the promise of freedom and self-discovery, the European road network, dense and variegated, traversing a motley assortment of nations, civilizations and language systems, brings to the fore either the complex cultural and technical negotiations entailed in border-crossing or the geographic diversity and the social cleavages within national territories. Secondly, whereas American road films privilege the use of private automotive vehicles (primarily cars and motorbikes), in European travel films the means of transportation are often public or shared (buses, trains, hitchhiking) and even occasionally non-mechanised (travel by foot).⁷ Thirdly, the subject undertaking the journey fits the standard of the nondescript 'everyman', rarely embodying the social type of misfit or heroic rebel. Rather, the focus of European road films falls mostly on travelling groups –which are often invested with carnivalesque qualities–, rather than on the solitary voyager or on "car buddies" (Laderman 2002: 248), demotivating the itinerant characters' elevation to 'stardom' or exceptionality and discouraging any strong audience response along the lines of reverence or admiring identification. Finally, two points are also worth noting: first, the extent to which the concept of travel has been invested with differential connotations and cultural significations in Europe and US, subject to their diverse historical record. In the American case, it primarily conjures up the positive visions of upward and outward mobility, whereas in the European context it has been rather resolutely tied to the traumatic experiences of migration and exile, as well to a sense of homelessness, as a fundamental condition of postmodernity (Everett 2009: 166). On a second, and partly interrelated note, while road films are "*obsessed with home*" –the latter conditioning the narrative as a structural absence (Robertson 1997: 271 in Everett 2009: 170)–, in their European inflection homecoming becomes a problematic (if not altogether impossible) task, as 'home', in its transience or imaginary dimension, transmutes into a no-place, a utopian mental projection (Everett 2009: 170).

⁷ It thus follows readily that European road movies apply less emphasis on high-speed driving as spectacle and on the fetishism of the automobile (Laderman 2002: 248).

GREEK CINEMA ON THE ROAD

Despite the well-documented tendency of small national cultural productions to raise defensive claims for cultural distinction and exceptionality,⁸ we follow Maria Stassinopoulou (2012: 131) in viewing Greek cinema as one variation of European cinema, rather than as a singular case.⁹ This affirmation, however, posits no less problems, if one were called to provide a clear-cut and concise definition of the term 'European cinema', nor does it preclude the strong influence of Hollywood's stylistic codes and production practices. Indeed, it seems that the designation of a well-defined polarity between Hollywood and European cinema would require the disqualification of a vast group of commercially successful, yet of questionable artistic flair and value, European films. And yet, it does constitute a useful, provided it remains provisional, starting point for the identification of commonalities marking the variegated mosaic of national European cinemas (Everett 2005: 10). In any case, such insistence on art-house film and the centrality of politically engaged *auteurs* in discussing geographically-located films certainly befits the case of Greek cinema during, and well before, the 1970s (and partly the 1980s), when New Greek Cinema (NGC), articulated as a response to the principal demand of the 1960s, namely "to nationalize modernism" (Papadimitriou 2011: 496) with respect to the cinematic production, reached its creative peak.¹⁰

⁸ Andrew Higson's (1989) often quoted article 'The Concept of National Cinema' provides an excellent overview of the use of the elusive concept "national" in film discourses. Drawing on Higson's anti-essentialist approach, Jerry White argues against a prescriptive, ideologically charged definition of national cinemas that favors political content and artistic militancy as motivating factors and intended audience effects, and posits two interrelated criteria for the designation of a certain group of films as 'national': their origin within a community "reasonably considered to be a nation" and their diversity (feature, documentary, non-commercial sector) (2004: 224).

⁹ On a similar note, Vasilis Rafailidis defines Greek cinema as "par excellence Mediterranean" (1985: 231), establishing an affinities and analogies-based framework for approaching Greek cinema, while narrowing down his geographic and cultural field of reference.

¹⁰ Diamantis Levendakos (2002: 7-8) notes that the "quest for an individual artistic identity" has been a major preoccupation of the directors comprising the NGC production. Similarly, Nikos Kolovos (2002: 57-58) argues that, despite the lack of a robust concomitant theoretical substantiation, a 'politique des auteurs' was systematically implemented by the different filmic creative agents. Kostas Vrettakos (1993: 9) aptly summarises the defining traits and cultural motivations of this film current: "Far from proposing a new genre of artistic expression, New Greek Cinema aimed at preserving the diversity and dissimilarity as well as the promotion of national cultural traits, in an effort to counterbalance the emerging trend towards the formation of a homogenized, monolithic view and hegemonic way of thought and expression, advanced by TV standards". For a comprehensive exposition of the cultural discussions and institutional practices related to Greek cinema production in the 1960s see Chalkou (2008), whereas for a detailed account of its formal and technical particularities see Skopeteas (2002a).

In mapping our overview of the Greek road movie in its divergent thematic preoccupations and aesthetic outlooks on a diachronic scale, we draw on Cohan & Rae Hark's assertion, locating the genre's popularity in its tendency to "problematizing the uniform identity of the nation's culture", while providing "a ready space for exploration of the tensions and crises of the historical moment during which it is produced" (1997: 1). Similarly, Laderman (2002: 1) claims that the impetus of road movies lies in their positing of the journey as a means of cultural commentary or critique, whereas Corrigan (1991: 145-146) seems to reiterate this emphasis on the road movie's critical potential in times of socio-historical transition, by highlighting the genre's ability to mirror the crisis of the family unit and the resultant destabilization of the traditional norms underpinning patriarchal masculinity. In assessing Corrigan's formulation, Wendy Everett (2009: 167) notes that its pertinence regarding European cinema can still be maintained, provided we downplay his assertion about masculinity's prominence, replacing it with a broader preoccupation with identity issues, and tweak the concept of family, viewing it instead as a metaphor for diverse social groups and communities.

Although Greek cinema in general (both its commercial and more experimental or art-house/auteur branches) and Greek road movies in particular, as peripheral productions, bear the marks of American and Continental influence in terms of visual expression and narrative structure, the indigenization of the genre in the Greek context correlates with its adaptation to fit the requirements of the national physical landscape, cultural milieu, socio-political context and cinematic practices. The periodicity proposed below, along the axis of three major crises, does not define strict taxonomies and rigid chronological delimitations, but merely locates dominant diegetic themes and aesthetic codes in a genealogical account which allows for overlapping and imbrication.

1) Social, Historical and Political Crisis

By the mid-1960s, the contradiction between the widely-held claim for a long-awaited political, social and cultural democratization, expressed both in terms of grassroots political organizing and the circulation of liberal, progressive rhetoric, and the conservative, die-hard character of the institutional framework defining the Greek political scene had reached volatile proportions, defining the Greek 1960s as a "cycle of protest" (Seferiadis 2007). Such antinomies erupted clamorously in the July 1965 demonstrations, following the political crisis precipitated by the *apostasia*¹¹ and the clash between the then Prime Minister, Georgios Papandreou and King Constantine II, a crisis which, in its continuation,

¹¹ *Apostasia* refers to the gradual, within a three-month period, breakaway of 45 MPs from *Enosis Kentrou*, the centrist governing party at the time under Papandreou's premiership, and their participation in the formation of new, unstable parliamentary majorities, following Papandreou's deposition by the King.

eventually concluded in the imposition of a military junta. Nevertheless, the political regression in authoritarianism did not suffice to curb oppositional, critical cultural discourses – in fact, if anything else, it helped to render them more robust and influential, if only more cryptic and symbolic. Focusing specifically on the cinematic field, the radical socio-political drive which permeated the NGC production in its infancy and subsequent consolidation, investing it with a realist aesthetic and a preoccupation with current affairs, on the one hand tapped into public disaffection concerning unresolved social issues. On the other, it sought to articulate an ideologically and aesthetically deviant cultural vocabulary, exposing the image of “another Greece” (Skopeteas 2002a: 90).

Emblematic in this respect, Alexis Damianos's *...Mehri to Ploio/...Until the Ship Sails* (1966), is a gritty wayfaring across diverse geographic landscapes (mountain, flatland, urban space successively, as way stations) and corresponding social settings, as it follows the protagonist's course from his village to the port of Piraeus, with a view to embarking on a migratory journey to Australia.¹² Structured along a three-episode loosely integrated plotline, based on two early 20th century Greek short stories and a popular song, it marks a departure from the largely formulaic aesthetic principles which defined the Greek studio era, by means of Damianos's uniquely personal and reservedly naturalist visual idiom, based on a “barely perceptible substrate formed by the genres of ‘study of manners’ and melodrama” (Katsounaki 2006).¹³ Although drawing on iconographic markers of the then prevalent generic form of ‘mountain film’¹⁴ and insisting on unearthing an ‘authentic’, original version of the ‘Greek Man’, it shuns bucolic idealisation for astute social criticism and the visual aesthetic codes of realism, while firmly grounding subjectivity within its specific socio-historical positioning. Damianos resolutely counters the picturesque and folkloric stylization of the Greek topography as a place of romance, pastoral authenticity and classical culture in Greek musicals of the same era, promoted by a visual aesthetic informed by, and addressed to, the

¹² The investment of migration with negative connotations is by no means a self-evident fact or standard artistic outlook. The symbolic construction of migration as a pressing social issue resulting from financial deprivation and its representation as a mostly negative experience, with the use of experimental expressive means in 1960-1970 clashes with its ‘innocuous’ generic envelopment by comedy, starting from 1955 (Sotiropoulou 1986: 25-27).

¹³ During the same year (1966) a limited number of artistically acclaimed films were produced, as the dominant generic modes during the period 1965-1975 were social melodramas and comedies (Sotiropoulou 1989: 95). The fact that Damianos joined the nascent ‘wave’ of directors-producers, who assumed financial responsibility in return for creative freedom, certainly benefited his highly individuated artistic expression.

¹⁴ For a detailed elaboration of the ideological parameters, stylistic traits and narrative conventions of the mountain film and its sub-genres (dramatic idyll & mountain adventure) see Kymionis (2000) and Dermentzopoulos (2002).

tourist gaze (Papadimitriou 2006). ...*Until the Ship Sails* dramatises precarious routes undertaken by socially marginal or disadvantaged individuals, representing in their anonymity or nondescriptness their social group of provenance. Characters in this particular film, as in Corrigan's formulation, are acted upon excessively by the historical context and other menacing encounters along the way (1991: 145-146), whereas the effacement or filtering out of the landscape foregrounds the positionality of the characters within an oppressive social field. Situating action mostly in open-air settings, emphasising natural lighting, downplaying dialogue, opting mostly for a non-star cast, employing characters of lower social strata for which the plotline does not hold any prospect of redemption or moral retribution, featuring explicit sexual scenes, it paves the way for the subsequent turn to distinctively personalised artistic idioms in Greek cinema. It also accommodates a non-conformist ideological vision of contemporary Greek society, in both its rural and urban dimensions, and charts pressing social grievances and contradictions (economically motivated migration, neglect of peripheral Greece, thwarted sexual desire, sexism and patriarchy) defining a static background, from which mobility as flight seems like the only, and yet barely comforting solution.

Starting from 1974 and the fall of the dictatorship, a period widely known as *metapolitefsi*, the newly-institutionalized civic liberties and creative freedom allowed disputed political issues to form a viable thematic palette for filmmakers to draw upon. With the gradual consolidation of the "progressive-democratic" ideology and the displacement of cultural and social conservatism by a liberating culture (Voulgaris 2008: 29-30), the dramatic historical past emerged as an accessible *topos* to be aesthetically and critically revisited, overclouding social and subjectivist issues, which, in other European countries, in the wake of the May 1968 upheavals, had already taken center stage. In this context, mobility in its plural narrative modalities represents a self-reflexive retrospective 'time-travel' from today's standpoint, a distant critical positioning towards the past and the present (in so much as the former 'survives' in the latter), a means for observing a society in flux, striving to attain political and social 'maturity' on democratic grounds and heal its historical and collective traumas. In this respect, the figures of migration, exile, wandering and repatriation represent not only navigational tropes, but also metaphors for the critical positioning of the director as "ethical intellectual" and the "intellectual as outsider": "Outside the mainstream, unaccommodated, unco-opted, resistant [...] always a traveller, provisional guest" (Said 1996: 52, 53, 60), a revered, lofty and yet curiously tormented figure wallowing in his existential alienation, always in search of experimentation and avant-garde artistic expression, oblivious to (or dismissive of) popular taste and profitability. In the Greek case, in early *metapolitefsi*, that also involved rejecting and frowning upon the rising

consumerism and the concomitant increasing influence of American cultural vocabularies.

Critical distance and historical reflection feature emblematically in Theodoros Angelopoulos's *O thiassos/The Travelling Players* (1975), both as intended ideological effect and aesthetic style. The storyline follows the personal tribulations and geographic dislocations of a theatrical troupe staging the popular melodrama *Golfo/Golfo, the Shepherdess* (Peresiadis, 1893) against a backdrop of national history and a background of rural landscapes. During a period of sixteen years (1936-1952) we are carried along with the itinerant artists amongst the most dreadful events of Greek history and we witness the fermentations occurring in the composition of the group as the mythical plot (Oresteia tragedy) unravels and historical events (Metaxas's dictatorship, Italian and German Occupation, the Resistance, the Civil War and the *Dekemvriana* of 1944,¹⁵ until the 1952 elections and the victory of Papagos) progress. In this respect, such troupes seem to re-enact the passage of refugees and itinerants across the mountains during the Occupation and the Civil War, while by exhibiting perseverance through adversity, they also metaphorically embody the fate of the Greek nation (Myrsiades 2000: 137). The directorial critical agency manifests itself in meticulously orchestrated plan-sequences which disjoint time-place continuity and subvert linear temporality. Long shots replace close-ups and shot/reverse-shots, forming carefully composed tableaux, wherein the travelling players, as a collective narrative agent, become the site of a complex negotiation of the "activity<->passivity" dialectic –which Dimitris Eleftheriotis (2010: 17) posits as a fundamental axis structuring travel narratives–, acted upon by forces of history as well as Angelopoulos's historical-materialist vision and will for experimental spatio-temporal exploration.

In both Damianos's and Angelopoulos's films, dealing with social-historical-political crisis, in tune with the quintessentially European inflection of the road movie, the moving subjects are stripped of superhuman or exceptional qualities, in order to become the neutral medium, the avatar, through which the directors, employing distinctly personal visual styles, invite the audience to critically revisit contemporary social issues and the recent traumatic historical past (Civil War, post-war repression and dictatorship); the exploration of national identity is meant as an introspective meditation, occurring within a territorially-bound national space; for the most part, the heroes do not employ any mechanized means of transportation and are driven by necessity rather than leisure or any

¹⁵ "Dekemvriana" designates the 33-day armed struggles which erupted in Athens, in December 1944, between, on the one hand, EAM/ELAS, the principal resistance movement, and on the other, British forces and the Greek government. Its triggering factor was the violent thwarting of an EAM/ELAS demonstration in the heart of Athens and its concluding act consisted in the signing of the Treaty of Varkiza (February 2, 1945), whereby it was stipulated that EAM/ELAS was to disarm.

escapist longing for adventure; the aesthetic construction and topography of provincial Greece posits brutal challenges and defines degenerative courses, delineating the pattern of Fall or doomed wandering, lacking, however, a nostalgically invested spatio-temporal point of departure.

2) *Existential Identity Crisis*

The mid-1980s, which marked the culmination of the process leading to the erosion of the social-democratic Keynesian consensus and the prevalence of neoliberal conservatism as the dominant ideological paradigm of the West, also signified a decisive ideological turn in the Greek public sphere: Left-wing hegemony in the cultural domain started waning and political resistance was attenuated, as utopian visions gave way to ironic pragmatism. In terms of the dominant binary oppositions “statism vs. private enterprise”, “collective vs. individual”, “national self-sufficiency vs. European orientation” structuring public discourse, the pendulum started swinging towards the latter, a tendency which was not so much evident on political affiliations as affecting collective dispositions and mind-frames, issuing into the quest for individual success and “narcissistic consumerism” (Voulgaris 2008: 281). Within this context, landmark historical *topoi* of heroism and rebelliousness (Resistance, Civil War, opposition to dictatorship), innocuously appropriated by official discourse, also lost their poignancy and radical potential (Karalis 2012: 212).

Consequently, engaged NGC filmmakers found themselves in an existential and artistic quandary, unable to grapple with the growing individualism of the Greek society and the erosion of political and ideological certainties.¹⁶ As Panagiotis Basteas (2002: 138-9) notes, in this phase of NGC, which privileges symbolism and hermetic undecidability, passive contemplation and observation, and an insistence on esoteric landscapes, characters are plagued by the failings (or even impossibility) of interpersonal communication and a lack of navigational and existential orientation.¹⁷ A crucial case in point, Theodoros Angelopoulos’s “loose road trilogy” (*Taxidi sta Kythira/Voyage to Cythera*, 1984; *O melissokomos/The Beekeeper*, 1986; *Topio stin omihli/Landscape in the Mist*, 1988) (Quandt 1990: 25) illustrates the gradual transition of his creative vision and intent from a rumination over collective destinies in their entanglement with the historical

¹⁶ Reduced audience turnout and the waning interest in the Greek cinema, phenomena perhaps unsurprising, also taking into account the consolidation of TV and home-entertainment consumption habits, constituted an additional source of despondency for Greek filmmakers.

¹⁷ Yannis Bakoyiannopoulos (2002: 28-9) also describes this phase as one of “existential crisis”. Road films falling in this category, featuring marginal wandering characters, sometimes devoid of any social identification, also include Stavros Tsiolis’s *Akatanikiti erastes/Invincible Lovers* (1988), Vasiliki Eliopoulou’s *To perasma/The Crossing* (1990), Nikos Grammatikos’s 1991 debut, *Kleisti strofi/U-Turn*, and Panos Karkanevatos’s *Metaihmio/Border Line* (1994).

past to lyrical existentialist interrogations on a vacant, meaningless present. In *Voyage at Cythera*, an elderly ex-fighter of the Democratic Army, exiled in the aftermath of the Civil War, returns to his native land, only to be eventually re-exiled on a raft adrift on the sea; in the *Beekeeper*, a namesake (Spyros) middle-aged man in crisis flees conventional family life in the North, follows the 'path of the Spring', his ultimate destination being his family home in the South, meets with a renegade young woman, only to succumb to bee-stings; in *Landscape in the Mist*, two young children, Voula and Alexandros, depart for Germany in search of an imagined father, confront diverse hostile communities along the way, are assisted by a young man, named Orestes (Stratos Tzortzoglou), whom Voula falls in love with, meet the now redundant theatrical troupe of *The Travelling Players*, who are also acquaintances of Orestes, and then disappear in a landscape of poetic transcendence upon perilously crossing the border. Notably, *Landscape in the Mist* features strong iconographic, thematic and structural road movie elements: a duet of 'travel buddies', 'quest' as central narrative drive, the use of multiple means of transportation (train, walking, truck, motorbike), main action occurring during rest stops (café-restaurant, hotel), the foregrounding of the crisis of the family unit (both parents being essentially absent), obsessively restricted horizons as a negation of freedom, perspective and future prospect.

In all three of Angelopoulos's films, his protagonists enact variations of the Homeric myth (a symbolic return of Odysseus to Ithaca, Odysseus wandering in compliance with natural/divine laws, and Telemachus searching for his father). If, in *Voyage at Cythera*, Spyros stands as an incarnation of Greek History, which finds itself unable to return to its place, since the latter has become a literal inhospitable u(non)-topia, colonised by the fraudulent *Ethnikofron* fraction,¹⁸ in the *Beekeeper*, Spyros finds himself unable to dwell any space matching his imaginary internal geography (the past as memory), since the present is absent, interrupting historical continuity and banishing History to mere dormant archival reverence (Rafailidis 1986). In *Landscape in the Mist*, on the other hand, much like the young woman intermittently accompanying Spyros in his wandering in the *Beekeeper*, the young protagonists, unlike adults, are unburdened by –and devoid of – both collective memory and personal history. History itself, recited without an audience, in sketchy loops and repetitions (an argument poetically rendered at the seaside scene with the travelling troupe), has become an "absurdist postmodern cacophony" (Horton 1999: 149), a floating, petrified fragment, fluctuating like a broken compass (allegorically portrayed in the scene with the ascending marble hand at Salonica port), unable

¹⁸ The term "Ethnikofron" was ascribed to the winning, fiercely anti-communist and stringently conservative, side of the Greek Civil War.

to perform its guiding function towards the future.¹⁹ As Stephanie Hemelryk Donald shows (2015), in *Landscape in the Mist* contemplation on modern Greece does occur, albeit in a spiritual and poetic manner, and is effectuated by means of a tension between mobility and stasis; in moments of stillness, it is only the two children (and when present, Orestes too) who retain activeness and awareness of the predicaments befalling their surroundings, and it is through such moments that the children's flight away from national disappointment and into transcendental fantasy can continue unobstructedly.

Two more films are worth considering during this period, as they encapsulate the gradual transition of the Greek road movie to new thematic considerations, in tandem with the overall ideological orientation of the Greek cinematic field and the socio-cultural developments in the Greek context. Panos Karkanevatos's *Metaihmio/Border Line* (1994) narrates the story of a police officer at the Department of Immigration, who, upon discovering forged documents featuring his long-lost and presumed dead brother's name, embarks on a quest for tracking down the latter. His wandering, which brings him back to his border-line birthplace, featuring an army camp and a mining site, and his father, morphs into an escape from his former self, an odyssey of open-ended self-(re)discovery, as he refuses to re-integrate in his habitual social norms. On the one hand, Karkanevatos foregrounds a case of accidentally-induced existential identity crisis, which turns into a voluntary loss of symbolic anchoring underpinning the construction of the protagonist's subjectivity, a process signified by the voluntary destruction of his identity papers. The protagonist relinquishes his former self as Yannis Markou and becomes a Nobody; if his brother staged his real death, the protagonist stages his symbolic death. Karkanevatos infuses his film with subtle Oedipal undertones: the blind father, the will to recovering and 'putting to rest' a sibling's body, the mine-as-tomb, all point to the designation of the protagonist as a modern-day Antigone, which excludes herself from the social-political order. On an additional note, however, being one of the first films to address the issue of mounting immigrational waves in Greece, as Lykidis notes, the film "internalizes the external criticisms that accompanied

¹⁹ As stated earlier, this article does not propose an exclusive taxonomic ranking of a corpus, but a critical appreciation of individual films under the lens of road movie theory. As such, although the theme of travel features prominently in Angelopoulos's 'trilogy of silence', all three films could also readily fit other generic models. For instance, *Landscape in the Mist* equally – if not mainly – presents itself as a coming-of-age film, a common genre in nascent national cinemas (O'Connell 2010: 48) or an allegorical contemplation on cinema itself. The motif of the underage runaway drifting in search of a family haven (grandmother's house), a symbolical embodiment of the search for an originary source, also features in Stavros Tsiolis's *Akatanikiti erastes/Invincible Lovers*, produced during the same year (1988). Travel and road motifs feature prominently in Tsiolis's filmography, most commonly intertwined with buoyant male camaraderie and a return to the provincial birthplace (Arcadia).

Europeanization and links them to anxieties associated with territorial nationalism in an era of heightened immigration” (2015: 348).

Vasiliki Eliopoulou's *To perasma/The Crossing* (1990) stages another road narrative, which initially follows the aimless wandering of two young men, recently released from their army service, only to turn into the frantic escape of one of them (Giorgos Ninios), after a tragic incident, where his companion loses his life and murder is committed. Subsequently, he wonders helpless and frightened, until he finds a female lorry-driver, who, in collaboration with her boyish-looking daughter, secures his rescue, by providing him with a hideout and arranging for him to travel as a clandestine all the way to Italy by boat. In many respects, Eliopoulou delivers a feminist take on the road movie: a) By relegating the male character to a passive agent and endowing femininity with activity she thwarts and subverts the traditional sexist hierarchy underpinning road movies, which marginalises women, as Laderman (2002: 20) claims; b) she posits the naked male body (in the scene where her male protagonists take a swim) as an object of (female) voyeurism; c) she toys with audience expectations regarding gender roles and exposes the social construction of femininity and masculinity, a strategy rendered especially prominent when she frames with a close-up a young child with a short haircut and a hat, only to reveal, two shots later, that the child is indeed wearing a skirt. In any case, Eliopoulou, as well as Karkanavatos, provide us with travel narratives which succinctly reflect upon the crisis of hegemonic masculinity and 'male hysteria', as a component of a wider existential identity crisis, while refusing to offer any redeeming reintegration into the social order. At the same time, they evidence a growing cinematic preoccupation with migration and illegal border-crossing, which was intensified from the 1990s onwards.

3) National Identity Crisis

Up to this point, cinematic mobility as a vehicle of exploring national and historical identity remained mostly bound within state territory and barely involved encounters with diverse ethnic subjects. Greek film-makers rarely ventured outside the national borders, showing a certain reluctance in handling the imagery of foreign landscapes, a phenomenon which Eleftheriotis assesses as a “historical deficit” (2012: 22). Specific spatio-temporal arrangements (especially in Angelopoulos's films, where historical, natural and existential time interweaves with symbolically-invested space) defined highly individualized “chronotopes” which underpinned poignant ideological critiques related to contemporary Greek history. However, starting from roughly 1990, a conjunction of international and national socio-political and artistic shifts altered the geographic coordinates and cultural signification of cinematic mobility (Eleftheriotis 2012). The gradual ideological depolarization and violent topographic rearrangements following the end of the Cold War, the influx of

Balkan migrant flows, the disillusionment with national politics following a series of governmental crises, the gradual consolidation of the neoliberal consensus and the advent of globalized networks and supranational identity discourses led to an upsurge in the production of Greek travel narratives and their repositioning on a new thematic and artistic basis with regards to cinematic space.

The cultural impact of such processes is best encapsulated in Angelopoulos's *To meteo vima tou pelargou/The Suspended Step of the Stork* (1991), which "expressed the transition from an introverted national culture to the new condition of transculturality as the central mode of self-articulation and self-understanding" (Karalis 2012: 231).²⁰ Henceforth, the spatial configuration of the filmic scenery would be articulated in terms of arbitrary and yet inviolable borders and divisions, whereas on the thematic level, clandestine border-crossing and illegal immigration would be emphasized as recurrent narrative motifs. Mobility and wandering beyond the bounds of national territory reflected a precarious negotiating in terms of similarity and difference –and, inevitably, inferiority and superiority–, Self and Other and inclusion and exclusion in reassessing (or reaffirming) one's own national identity against the collective imaginary constructions of Greece's neighboring counterparts and Europe.²¹ As Lykidis notes, articulations of Greek national identity during this period had to measure with the externally mediated positioning of Greece across the "East – West" and "Europe – Balkans" axes (2015: 353) and its self-perception in terms of both cultural primacy and economic marginalization.

²⁰ In fact, Angelopoulos's growing preoccupation with the concept of the 'border' and the practicalities of border-crossing had already manifested itself in *Landscape in the Mist*. Consolidated with the *Suspended Step of the Stork* and fully developed in *To vlemma tou Odyssea/Ulysses Gaze* (1995), Angelopoulos's expansion of his filmic backdrop reflects his shift toward an increasingly transnationalist outlook. As Jameson notes, "what has changed is the self-sufficiency of the meaning of internal national politics [...] The bitter new subalternities of the world market can only be fully represented elsewhere, outside the national boundaries, at the various new world centers" (1997: 91). This is expressed in Angelopoulos's later works by a shift in spatial focus: the locale is no longer detached small towns, but border zones and liminal spaces, invested by certain emotive states, arising from displacement, such as nostalgia or exilic angst (ibid.). That said, in *Ulysses Gaze*, horizontal advancement and the foregrounding of a cosmopolitan view, transcending national boundaries into a common humanist outlook, is paralleled by a diagonal, downward, nostalgia-infused counter-drive to reach an imaginary, pure, originary gaze-as-memory, always elusive and only seemingly in the past, as in essence it lies beyond historical time, the latter being always predicated on identity conflicts and divisions.

²¹ Such remarks about national self-understanding are not meant to obscure the greater trends in Greek cinema during this period, with interrogations about the private and the personal outbalancing critical reflections on the collective and the national. Although we do not purport to establish exclusive causal connections, we do hold that this shift of focus is partly attributable to the scandal-ridden political climate of the time and the wide disillusionment with the political establishment.

Meanwhile, various processes pertaining specifically to the cinematic field, such as the productive boost offered by the Nea Matia (New Gaze) funding programme launched by Greek Film Centre, the growing decentralization, commercialization and internationalization of production and distribution processes led to the advent of Contemporary Greek Cinema (CGG). Its basic features could be summarized as follows: more refined scripts, closer adherence to generic formulae, faster narrative pace, infusion of otherwise dramatic narratives with a slightly ironic or humorous tone (Kokonis 2012: 46), heavy editing, a substitution of epic reconstructions of the past for episodic realism (Karalis 2012: 241) and a thematic focus on the neglected, the marginal, the everyday and the trivial. Just like NGC, CGC also constitutes an umbrella-term, describing heterogeneous practices and aesthetic codes. One of its key strands, following Yannis Skopeteas's formulation, is "New Classic Greek Cinema", employing continuity editing, a focus on characters and dialogues, sound-image synchronicity, configuration of a well-defined filmic space and mostly linear plots (Skopeteas 2002b: 57).

A prominent exponent of the "New Classic Greek Cinema", Sotiris Goritsas, with his film *Ap' to hioni/From the Snow* (1993), dealt with the flipside of outward ventures, namely, inward mobility originating from the Balkans, while also retaining a thematic reflection on gender and sexuality, thus embroiling broad socio-political critique with subject-centred interrogations.²² The camera documents the illegal crossing of Greek-Albanian borders by three Northern Epirots (members of a Greek minority in Albanian state territory), two adult males and an underage orphan boy, in search of better life prospects. It follows their wandering in the Greek countryside and the exploitation that they experience as manual workers, their subsequent brief stay in Athens, their social rejection on the grounds of ethnic otherness (Albanians), the tragic suicide of one of them and the resigned decision of the surviving two to return back home.²³ In the meantime, one of them (Spyros) meets with a sympathetic civil servant, of whom he grows fond of.

Although Goritsas produced an artistically accomplished and sensitive film, intent on eliciting empathy by foregrounding the perilous crossing of material

²² For a broader in-depth discussion on the Balkans as a contested symbolic construction, articulated on both pejorative/Orientalizing and positive terms, and a recurrent *topos* of Greek cultural production and public discourse after 1989, see Vangelis Calotychos (2013).

²³ The ambiguous ending (a bus stopping in front of the two heroes, hiding them from sight, and then departing, leaving an empty bus stop and the audience wondering about whether the heroes did get on the bus or disappeared, changing their minds), reflects by means of ingenuous *mise-en-scène* a wishful thinking of a second chance from the part of the audience, rather than a possible alternative reaction of the protagonists with respect to the predicament they have found themselves trapped into.

borders and the overt or implicit racism underpinning the impossible task of assimilation for economic migrants, he does so by both concealing and then insulating his main protagonist's ethnic otherness. Spyros, the protagonist, has a good command of the Greek language, his name is Greek and he has relatives in a Greek village, beyond the Greek-Albanian border, thus embodying the figure of the Greek repatriate. Furthermore, Spyros's attraction towards the Greek civil servant is at no time invested with sexual energy, remaining instead firmly anchored on platonic romance, played out merely as Spyros's daydreaming or impersonation (in the scene where Spyros, the civil servant and the boy pretend to be a family, as a stratagem for avoiding police harassment), thus shielding the *body politic* from the threat of ethnic miscegenation.²⁴ In that, he follows a general trend in contemporary Greek cinema: as Papanikolaou notes, many films dealing with immigration to Greece rely on a subtext predicated upon the "Greek diasporic subject vs. non-Greek immigrant" binary, playing out fantasies of national cohesion against feared heterogeneity (2009: 256).

The insistence on national continuity is indicative of the extent to which the economic and cultural marginality of Greece within the European homogenization processes redounds on its conception of migration flows from 'underdeveloped' Balkan countries as a threat against an imagined ethnic and racial purity (Tzanelli 2006: 30), reinstating the archetypal fear of invasion by, and equalization with, the 'Barbarians'. The consolidation of such fear, as Michael Herzfeld notes, is a typical manifestation of "crypto-colonialism", of which Greece has been a prominent victim,²⁵ resulting in an impossible condition: the measurement against a superior Hellenistic past, which would always find Modern Greece lacking, or the folding back on familiar cultural vocabularies, which are deemed as Slavic or Oriental imports (2002: 902, 920). Goritsas grapples aptly with this cultural predicament and the competing outward and inward-directed national self-representations through the gaze of his repatriate protagonists: on their first tourist exploration of downtown Athens, the image of

²⁴ In examining the Greek filmic construction of alterity in recent decades, Kyriakos asserts that the relevant cinematic production falls into two categories: a) those which sought to provide a realistic depiction of the harsh life conditions befalling illegal immigrants and b) those which employed parabolic and mythological elements in order to reflect on issues of national identity and social cohesion (2002: 120). As Lykidis (2015: 346) notes, however, the narrative function of immigrant characters in Greek filmic narratives of the 1990s is systematically downplayed, giving primacy to preoccupations regarding the complexity and marginality of the Greek identity. In fact, in an era conditioned by increasing multi- and trans- culturalism, interrogations on national identity can only be articulated provided that versions of ethnic and racial alterity are called into play.

²⁵ "Crypto-colonialism", according to Herzfeld (2002: 900-1), refers to the singular predicament whereby certain states acquired their political independence while remaining financially dependent, an embodiment of which being the formation of an "aggressively national culture" according to foreign ideological interests.

the neoclassical façade of a National Bank of Greece building, shot from a low angle, enhancing its imposingness, is juxtaposed with a folkloric soundscape, which continues as they stroll through the busy Omonoia streets, where iconic indexes of classical antiquity (the Macedonian symbol, ancient Greek tunics) are commercialized as kitsch merchandise along with European ones (European Union symbol) among cheap counterfeit products of Western luxury. At a later point, the two protagonists look about themselves wearing sunglasses, as the non-diegetic sounds of a Stratos Dionysiou's *laiko* (popular) song are heard; filtered through the brown-tinted lenses, as the camera adopts their point of view, the nearby landscape figures as at once exotic and modernised, only to be fully exposed in its shabby urban reality, through a very wide shot, situating the protagonists in mundane surroundings.

The degree to which cinematic itinerancy continues to raise interrogations on ethnicity and national identity along with gender and sexuality issues and the shifting pattern of such intersection in Contemporary Greek Cinema are further evidenced by Constantine Giannaris's *Omiros/Hostage* (2005), a gritty, partly based on true events, recounting of the hijacking of a bus by an Albanian immigrant, presented through his own point of view.²⁶ As the bus continues its forced trajectory towards the Greek-Albanian borders, under the commands of the high-jacker, named Elion, his tragic personal story unfolds, through flashbacks and dreams: after his engagement with his Albanian fiancée was called off, due to his losing face on account of his unsuccessful initial migration to Greece, he decided to re-migrate. Once in Greece again, he became involved in illegal gun trafficking, under the commands of a Greek policeman, with whose spouse he embarked on a sexual affair. When her husband found out that his wife had also had an abortion, Elion was badly beaten, his stay permit was destroyed and he was arrested on false accounts. Once detained for interrogations, he was sexually abused by the fellow policemen for having insulted the honour of one of their own and kept prisoner in appalling conditions. As the bus crosses the borders, Elion is caught off guard by the apparition of his mother and is subsequently killed.

The road, and especially the confined spatial configuration of a bus on the road, also offers a unique panoramic view underpinning social observation, as "people who are normally kept separate by social and spatial distance can accidentally meet, any contrast may crop up, the most various fates may collide and interweave with one another" (Bakhtin 1981: 243). As such, various other passengers' micro-histories and personal dramas are delineated, most notably

²⁶ The word *Omiros* also translates as Homer, alluding to the main protagonist's modern-day impossible odyssey on his way back to his homeland.

one married woman's (and mother's) illicit affair with another co-passenger.²⁷ The latter is also accidentally killed by Albanian policemen, when he descends from the bus, in order to console Elion's grieving mother. The thwarted desire for reunion with the maternal and the latter's inadvertently beguiling image codify the impossibility of return to the (ethnic and cultural) origins for the immigrant as well as the deceptively stable mental representation of homeland sustained by nostalgia. Liminality and transience, as encapsulated in the road ride, define the condition of precarious survival for the migrant subject, while also probing and subverting the stability of the other passengers' entrenched social positioning.

With *Hostage*, Giannaris lays bare and reflects upon the intricate articulation of discourses on masculinity and ethnicity in the construction of national identity. On the one hand, he brings out the de-sexualisation of the male migrant subject as a precondition for his social acceptance and partial assimilation, a symbolic representation of which is encapsulated in the tearing up of Elion's work permit as part of the policeman's revenge. On the other, however, he also exposes the commonalities underpinning the national discourses on gender identity in both Albania and Greece: When the cheated policeman confronts Elion about his sexual intercourse with his wife, it becomes apparent that they share the same, essentially sexist and patriarchal code of honor, which establishes male dominance, predicated upon the normalization of female bodily practices and sexuality. The closing scenes of the film draw another parallelism pertaining to the regulation of female sexual performance in Greek and Albanian national narratives: The refusal to reconcile the maternal and the erotic sides of femininity (the protagonist's mother is a widow, whereas the man with whom the married woman/mother in the bus cheats her husband is eventually killed).

²⁷ On an additional note, the flipside of the relative (merely superficial and non-inclusive) dynamic affluence of the early 2000s, and the widely-propagated modernized transnational and multicultural cosmopolitan outlook, was articulated by cinematic intra-social explorations in the 'dark underbelly' of the Athenian capital. The main cultural hero in recent Greek road movies has been the "stranger from outside and the stranger from within", migrant subjects and marginal or socially-deviant figures, defining a pessimist "cinema of the narrow path" (Karalis, 2012: 241-2) and obstructed horizons. Urban (almost exclusively Athenian) road films such as *Delivery* (Panayotopoulos, 2004), *Wasted Youth* (Papadimitropoulos & Vogel, 2011) and *Ki avrio mera einai/Tomorrow is Another Day* (Masklavanou, 2001), with their decentered gaze, patch together a fragmented mosaic of random micro-histories, unearthing invisible aspects of the metropolitan lifeworld. Similarly, in her comprehensive and insightful Ph.D. thesis on urban movies in Greek cinema (1994-2004), Afroditi Nikolaidou notes that the road in these urban road movies acquires the status of a motif, signifying the marginal and precarious social position of the heroes, and of an in-between space, where the private and the public converge (2012: 188-189).

With his 2008 *Athina-Konstadinoupoli/Athens-Istanbul*, Panayotopoulos delivers a transnational (self-proclaimed) road movie, which filters the tentative positionality of Greece in the West-East axis through an encounter of masculinity in crisis with beguiling femininity.²⁸ His protagonist, a middle-aged relatively wealthy widower embarks on a journey to Salonica, in order to see his dying father, who is of Asian Minor descent, a legacy which the protagonist is tempted to ponder over. Along the way, he meets a seductive young woman, with whom he becomes erotically involved, and they both head to Turkey, where she deceives him, robbing him along with her accomplices of his car. Led to despair, the protagonist commits suicide. Although endowed with poetic sensitivity and existential depth, the film reproduces the traditional road movie formula, which as Laderman (2002: 20) and Eyerman & Löfgren (1995: 65) show, relegates women to the roles of erotic distractions or seductive hitch-hikers. At the same time, by retaining binary distinctions and reiterating the predominant, gendered Western view, which equates femininity with the East and male patriarchy with the West, while subverting the active-passive correspondences (here, the male protagonist is shown to be exploited and acted upon, whereas the female co-passenger is cunning and scheming, driving the plot forward), it expresses a profound anxiety regarding the stability (or even feasibility) of the hegemonic ideological paradigm of Europeanized modernization as applied in the Greek context.

Considerations on ethnicity, gender and sexuality also intersect in Panos Koutras's road movie *Xenia* (2014), although here thoroughly diverse politics of representation are employed, which problematize, in typical road-movie rebelliousness, established norms and ideologies. Its formal means and thematic considerations place it firmly within the second major sub-current of CGC, namely, the "post-modern oppositional" (the other being the "mainstream postmodern"),²⁹ which employs formal experimentation, irony, subversion and

²⁸ Panayotopoulos's 1993 downbeat and leisurely-paced *Oneirevomai tous filous mou/I Dream of My Friends* also invests transnational wandering with the undertones of existential anxiety. It tracks four incidents in a man's life, taking place in diverse localities and spanning several decades. Its loose episodic structure, undercutting the dramatic continuity, and limited attention to geographical specificity infuse this film with a distinctive (if not hermetic) tone of introversion.

²⁹ Vassilis Tselemegos's television drama *O dromos/The Road* (2005) abides by mainstream narrative formats, channeling the iconic feminist road movie *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991), as it follows two women on board a vintage car fleeing everyday provincial mundanity and oppressive patriarchy. However, the political drive of the narrative is eventually thwarted, as one of the female protagonists (Eleni Kastani) is reintegrated in the habitual familial norms and the other (Dimitra Matsouka) commits suicide, not as a final act of heroic and self-destructive social rebelliousness, but in the face of a doomed health diagnosis and as a means for re-uniting with the maternal (her mother, the true *Louise*, was allegedly killed by her father in a premeditated car accident, on account of planning to leave him for another man).

mixing of codes and styles (Skopeteas 2002b). Heavily referencing Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991),³⁰ this extravagant, queer road movie of strong melodramatic overtones follows two Albanian brothers in their Oedipal quest to locating their Greek father in the North, in order to ground their claim to Greek citizenship after the loss of their mother. Throughout their trip across the Greek hinterland they reinvigorate their fraternal connection by drawing on common, maternally-derived cultural *topoi* (Italian 1960s pop music) with queer undertones. Their meeting with their presumed father ends in violent altercation, when the latter denies his paternity, upon which the two brothers depart, hitting once again the road, this time, however, as aimless nomads.

The motivating factor of the road narrative, (traditional) family crisis as loss of origins, is never resolved throughout the trip, but merely compensated for in the end with a newly-established bonding, structuring a diverse version of the family institution, one not predicated upon heterosexual procreation, but rather upon personal identification (Pullen 2008: 56) and desire. By eventually relinquishing the need to be 'recognized' by the father, the signifier of familial normativity and Greek ethnic identity through blood lineage, they upset the regulated, imposed approaches to national identification, opting rather for a 'hyphenated', liminal positionality within the national space. The father figure is toppled as cultural transmitter by queer intermediality (Italian 1960s pop music as heard through digital technology apparatus), thus defining alternative, rebellious forms of citizenship and belonging. Whereas one of the two brothers strongly foregrounds his queer identity, the other embodies male heteronormativity; however, as the narrative progresses, the latter abandons dominant masculinity codes, exposing gender and sexuality as performances, rather than as essentialized identity markers. This becomes particularly evident in two extravagant scenes which involve frenetic dancing and singing by the two protagonists, the second one, when they dance to a cheesy Italian pop tune semi-naked in the ruins of a Xenia hotel,³¹ expressing particularly prominently the multi-layered queerness with which the film is invested: on the one hand, the two protagonists enact a queering of a quintessentially Greek landmark, a topographic index of tourism and traditional national self-representations about

³⁰ Such playful mimicry is prominently declared already in the opening scene, which features inter-male eroticism, just like one of the opening scenes in *My Own Private Idaho*. Other instances of creative intertextuality concern, on a thematic level, the sexual tension with Oedipal undertones between the two travel companions, the quest for a lost parent, the romance of one of the companions with a foreigner, and on a formal level, the intermittent insertion of hallucinatory and oneiric scenes.

³¹ "Xenia" is an ancient Greek term, meaning "hospitality". In this context, it obviously acquires a dryly ironic tone. From the period of the 1950s through to the 1970s, a series of Xenia Hotels were built, constituting prestigious assets of the dynamic public tourism infrastructure programme. By the end of the 1980s, however, they had already lost their gloss and lapsed into dilapidation.

Greek hospitality. On the other, the camera focuses hedonically on the two protagonists' bodies, exposing its own sexualized gaze and inviting an equally pleasurable audience response. As such, to borrow Papanikolaou's terminology, it is "(queer) desire that articulates the main ethics of contact" (2008: 193) both between the two protagonists and between the audience and immigrant Other, rather than humanist tolerance and understanding.

Greek filmic road narratives from the mid-1990s onwards, in tandem (if not, perhaps, with a slight belatedness) with the repoliticized 1990s American version of the genre (Lalderman 2002) and its European counterpart, sought to temper their ethnocentric bias, while grappling with the changing social composition of the Greek social fabric and its specific positionality in the European and Balkan territorial and symbolic geographies, investing the indigenous inflection of the genre with a new dynamism and potential to reflect upon a condition of increasing multiculturalism and transcultural connectivity. As Katie Mills notes, "the once-masculinist road story of the lone anarchist on the run is reborn when genre becomes a vehicle for the representation of 'otherness' along the lines of marginalized class, race, sexuality, or gender" (2006: 323). Such self-conscious quest for openness and intercultural dialogue has also been pursued on the level of aesthetics, where intertextuality and playful pastiche have, to a large extent, effaced the pursuit of an authentically Greek cultural idiom. By foregrounding the imbrication of the foreign with the familiar/national and alterity within sameness, the Greek road films since the early 1990s, to varying degrees, destabilize normative identity narratives, while also drawing attention to uneven power relations sustaining such intermingling.

Wrapping up our discussion concerning the road movie genre and contemporary Greek cinema, we ought to draw attention to an emerging trend followed by cinematographers of Greek origins who situate themselves amid, and reflect upon, postmodern mobility and transnationalism, attesting to the partial transcendence of the category of the 'national' in defining cinematic practices. Athina Rachel Tsangari, with *I diarkis anahorisi tis Petras Going/The Slow Business of Going* (2000) and Yannis Fagras, with *Forget Me Not* (2014) defy clear-cut generic categorizations (although they are structured on a diegetic level as travel narratives), mix styles and subvert mainstream cinematic codes with their experimental approaches (especially the former).³² That such films should foreground voluntary transnational displacement predicated upon a variety of motives (nomadic exploration, existential exploration, etc.) is not only contingent

³² Both being (almost) exclusively English-language films, directed by filmmakers who draw on their diasporic experiences and "not only inhabit interstitial spaces of the host society but also work on the margins of the mainstream film industry" (Naficy 1995: 43), they could equally, if not more appropriately, be read along the generic conventions of "independent transnational cinema" (ibid.).

on the film-makers' biographical background and the globalized networks they reflect upon, but also arises as a thematic choice dependent on the shifting patterns of cinematic production and financing, which veer towards increasing internationalization. As such, articulating new cinematic vocabularies intent on reflecting on Greece's (and Greek cinema's) position within the web of various imbalances of power structuring today's polycentric, fluid world and on probing entrenched national narratives, in their imbrication with gender and sexuality discourses, constitutes a major desideratum, which the road and travel movie genre is in a *par excellence* privileged position to face in the future.

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