**ΠΑΡΑΔΟΤΕΟ 2**

‘Cinematic Urban Trajectories: Documenting the Shifting Athenian Experience in Greek Road and Travel Films’[[1]](#footnote-1)

In the course of this presentation, which draws on tentative conclusions of my postdoctoral research on Greek road and travel films, I will cast my attention on recently-produced Greek feature films, which register complex visual representations of the metropolitan, Athenian lifeworld, as set against a shifting urban landscape. In pondering on the visual imagery of such filmic narratives, I aim to piece together complementary, evolving or even competing discourses of spatiality related to the Athenian topos in a diachronic fashion and within single filmic texts, designating lived space as an arena of often conflicting social practices and cultural politics. My main focus will be on Greek “urban road movies”, such as, most notably, Nikos Panayiotopoulos’s 2004 *Delivery* and Argyris Papadimitropoulos’s and Yan Vogel’s 2011 *Wasted Youth*, although a brief discussion will also be dedicated to earlier cinematic renderings of landmark or nondescript Athenian locales, such as Stavros Tsiolis’s 1986 *About Vassilis*... and Thanasis Rentzis’s & Pantelis Zervos’s 1973 *Black + White.* What these films have in common, despite their stylistic and technical divergences, is that they feature characters inhabiting the Athenian urban space in an itinerant fashion, situating trajectories in real city spaces. On the one hand, films foregrounding mechanical or physical mobility allow for the emergence of a subjective itinerant overview of the urban topography, thus calling for a relativist approach in the construction of contextually-specific social identities and giving prominence to the urban landscape’s lived aspect as a social terrain of embodied practices. On the other hand, such films also introduce an element of self-reflexivity with regards to the selectivity and assemblage, and thus the productive function, entailed in the cinematic creative process itself. As Richard Ingersoll (2006: VII) aptly notes (and I quote), ‘driving a car is somewhat like editing a film’. At a slower pace, perhaps, walking also does the same.

In explicating the interweaving of situated social practices, subjectivities and the various scapes in recent Greek cinema, the Bakhtinean concept of “chronotope”, appositely multivalent and versatile, appears particularly relevant. Although Bakhtin himself never provided so much as a conclusive definition of the term, the following formulation of his appears succinct enough for our purposes:

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. The intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterises the artistic chronotope (1990: 84).

Two points concerning the above formulation require further elaboration: First, the adjective ‘literary’, which seemingly delimits the potential field of application of the term for analytical purposes and second, the adjective ‘artistic’, which would point to imaginary, rather than real life situations and surroundings as the composite elements and points of reference of the ‘chronotope’. With regards to the first reservation, we follow Michael V. Montgomery’s (1993) conviction that the category of ‘chronotope’ is applicable to film without requiring major adjustments and even, in this regard, Robert Stam’s (1989) assertion that in some respects the ‘chronotope’ is more pertinent as analytical tool for film compared to literature, to the extend that the photographic quality of the filmic medium permits the time-space compound to be deployed in a more direct, unmediated manner, compared to literature’s dependence on lexical expression. Regarding the second issue, which is the insistence on the qualifier ‘artistic’, Bakhtin himself offers a clarifying formulation, insisting on the ‘sharp boundary’ between the world as source of creative representation and the represented world, hastening to add, however, that this boundary is not impermeable or absolute, in that (I quote) ‘out of the actual chronotopes of our world (which serve as the source of representation) emerge the created and reflected chronotopes of the world represented in the work’. Now, his designation of the category ‘actual chronotope’, sits perhaps a little uneasily, suggesting the possibility of direct, ideology-free access to social lifeworlds; in that, I find myself more in tune with Richard Seaford (2012), who operates with a scheme of socially constructed chronotopes. In any case, as Jennifer A. Vadeboncoeur also notes (2005), the spaces and the temporality represented on textual level are based or real or imagined life experiences. In other words, shifting our focus on the cinematic imagery, extra-filmic perceptions of social space necessarily inflect the intra-filmic production of space.

The obscurity of the concept and the lack of a clear-cut, widely accepted definition about ‘chronotopes’, has given rise to a proliferation of different approaches and concomitant terminologies. For our part, in drawing on Bakhtin’s theory of the chronotope for our analysis of recent Greek urban road movies, we identify the following two functions of the term, as designated by Martin Flanagan (2009). The first revolves around the signification of ‘localized renderings of time and space’ and the second around the mediation of ‘the world of real and represented” (p. 12). The first function of the chronotope refers to what Morson and Emerson (1990, p. 374) have termed ‘chronotopic motifs’ − alternate appellations include the terms ‘minor’ or ‘local’ chronotopes (Ladin, 1999, p. 216). Bakhtin himself has identified the chronotope of the encounter, the chronotope of the castle, that of the road, of the threshold, the provincial town, the public square, etc., which provide sites and locales for the delineation of narrative action within specific time frames and act as ‘condensed reminders of the kind of time and space that typically function there’ (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 374). The second trope of the chronotope which I will utilize is ‘plotspace chronotopes’ and has been proposed by Bart Keunen (2011). ‘Plotspace chronotopes’ refer to temporal developments in the totality of the represented world and can be grouped in two subcategories: The first one is the teleological -or monological- chronotope which structures goal or end-oriented plots. As Nele Bemong & Pieter Borghart (2010, p. 7-8) explain, within the frame of monological chronotopes, suspense is built through a succession of chronotopes of equilibrium and conflict. In constrast, in ‘dialogical chronotopes’ there is no end-point of the plot in sight, but a series of conflicting networks which communicate with each other. The focal point of the narration concerns not a final resolution of an overarching conflict but distinct, critical moments, mostly psychological in nature.

Equally useful from an analytical point of view is Bakhtin’s theorization of the spatial coordinates of the plot within a narrative, which have been presented in a more systematic manner by Eduard Vlasov (1995). The latter distinguished three types of spatial chronotopes: The first is chronotopes on an objective level, a category which resonates with Chris Lukinbeal’s (2005) elaboration of cinematic landscape as place, i.e., as a concrete location, through on-location shooting, infusing the filmic narration with geographic realism, whether place acquires a specific significance within the plot or not. The second category concerns the levels of relationship between the protagonist(s) and the spatial forms within the text. Vlasov sketches two variations, a) the ‘alien chronotope’, wherein the surroundings seem either strange or hostile to the protagonist and b) the ‘native chronotope’ which designate a familiar chronotope for the protagonist, their ‘own real homeland’ (Vlasov, 1995, p. 43). The third category refers to the space’s static or dynamic quality in terms of change and transformation.

We have, thus far, briefly sketched the basic components of our theoretical approach. Casting our focus on selected recent Greek films which feature more or less prominently aspects of the Athenian urban topography, it seems apposite to weave a linear chronological sequence. Starting from Rentzis’s and Zervos’s BLACK + WHITE, produced in 1973, Athens, as the endpoint of a young aspiring artist’s trajectory, is in the opening sequence designated on voice-over by the protagonist as a place where upward social mobility and the attainment of material success seems feasible. Counterpoised to the static, archaic and quaint landscape of the countryside, the cityscape emerges as an energetic cluster of modernization and boisterous, or even potentially subversive, activity. Thus embedded in the cultural politics of stability versus change, the cinematic place is invested with a metaphoric signification, which, however, appears rather dubious in terms of ideological undertones. Readily identifiable within the course of the film are a string of prominent ‘chronotopic motifs’, such as the ‘Athens Polytechnic School front courtyard and façade’, the ‘concrete apartment block’, the ‘salon’ (either as bourgeois living room or as political meeting point), the ‘office’ and the ‘street’. If the first four constitute what Shane (2005) has termed as ‘enclaves’, i.e. as bounded territories, which add friction to mobility, they are not, for that matter, equally sealed to the crisscrossing by ‘armatures’, i.e., by channels and points of continuous traffic, such as the ‘street’. The university setting and the political meeting parlor seem to be connected to the street, which either leads to the idyllic, unchanging chronotope of the countryside or, as ‘the dwelling place of the collective’ (Benjamin, 2002, p. 879), gradually −if only temporarily− becomes a politicized site of contestation to the dictatorial regime, and thus a vector for a socio-temporal rupture. In contrast, the minor chronotope of the office, as the locus of the sealed-off world of corporate advertising, and the upper floor apartment living room, as a symbol of bourgeois conformism, individualism and quietism, where the protagonist finds himself enclosed by the end of the film, are cut-off from the street. This eventual physical and mental fixity to private interests becomes on the one hand evident in the scene where as an advertising executive the protagonist browses through a glossy magazine with his back turned on the wall, while the off-screen soundscape of a demonstration rages, signifying the protagonist’s transposition from an initial tentative concern with the political realm and the public sphere to the isolation of an egotistical careerist. Equally, his ground floor student room adjoining the street through a window view on street level is replaced with a hanging, upper floor balcony, which only permits a bird’s eye, detached view to a gloomy cityscape dominated by concrete apartment blocks. Other symbolic spatial loci of bourgeois self-centeredness and pursuit of hedonistic recreation which feature in the film include the beach and the fractured chronotope of the night-club.

At the end of the film, the young ex artist’s reckoning with his heretofore life-course is played out through jump-cut editing, leaving him pondering on an uncertain self-reflecting state. In this regard, Stavros Tsiolis’s 1986 film *About Vassilis* could be regarded as a fast-forward glimpse into an Athenian lifeworld where the afore-mentioned contextual and social tendencies have been firmly established. Its main protagonist, a university professor of Sociology finds himself immersed in a mid-life crisis, which leads him to abandon his family and career and retreat to his seaside cottage. When he does venture in the urban cityscape, he is either framed individually, rarely engaging in social interaction or appears against isolated or blurred surroundings, with either a dramatic, instrumental, extra-diegetic sonoral landscape or the aggressive commotion of the traffic jam, both elements being evidential of his intensified social alienation and inner torment. The Athenian topography is recorded in lugubrious, wintery hues, where prominent landmarks of westernized commercialism (lit display windows) and impersonal habitation (hotels) alternate with humble street markets and a shady, underground pool-room (an old hangout of his, obviously part of an irretrievable lifestyle), which fail to provide any sense of emotional anchoring or social situatedness to the protagonist. In the third and final part of the film, the latter decides to embark on a trip back to his family roots and his origins (and seemingly back to memory lane), initiating Tsiolis’s growing preoccupation with the cultural significance of the countryside as a locus of authenticity and undiluted Greekness −in other words, as a ‘native’ chronotope− and his increasing anti-urban sentiment. A static shot of a railing which cuts to the protagonist leaning over a grave in a provincial graveyard epitomizes the latter’s psychic entombment within the Athenian lifeworld.

If, in the case of Black + White, Athens appears as an alien and dynamic chronotope, on account of it being an unfamiliar and swiftly changing place, in the case of *About Vassilis*.., produced more than ten years later, and during the Socialist party’s second term, Athens seems to have acquired a more consolidated, and hence static quality, remaining however ‘alien’ for its inhabitants, to the extent that it embodies an estrangement with their youth aspirations and cultural practices. The designation of Athens as an ‘alien chronotope’ is also a distinct feature of the two other films under discussion, produced in subsequent decades (2000s and early 2010s), although in a much more objectively hostile sense. Both films could be identified as fitting the ‘adventure novel of everyday life’ chronotope (film in our case), as designated by Bakhtin. This kind of chronotope, in variation to the simple ‘adventure chronotope’, structures narratives in which the hero does undergo transformation through decisive events, such as encounters, separation, escape, etc., which are intertwined with the spatial coordinates of the action. Nicos Panayotopoulos *Delivery* concocts a monological chronotope in terms of plotspace, a ‘fall from grace’ or ‘loss of innocence’ narrative for the main protagonist, a young man of unknow provenance and few words, who reaches Athens by bus one night and disposes of no financial means or acquaintances to help him go by. After a brief stint as a street vendor, he ends up getting a job as a pizza delivery boy, before having his motorcycle stolen; he then becomes a beggar. No further information is provided throughout the film about either his past or his personality; he remains a terra incognita, a passive receptacle of his surroundings and interactions, a blank canvas where the chronotopic motifs of the ‘encounter’ and the ‘street’ can be imprinted undiluted and in full potency. By the end of the film the protagonist, despondent and hopeless, finally decides to act, reflecting back to the world its image by going wild: he shoots to kill a random car driver and walks around Omonoia with a gun in his hand, only to be executed by police forces, before ascending upwards, in a dreamlike scene witnessed by his drug-addict co-worker, with whom he enjoyed a brief, unsatisfying fling. Having been acclimatized in an ‘alien chronotope’, he departs like an alien indeed.

Throughout the film, the camera records the protagonist’s wanderings as he tries to navigate his way across the labyrinthine cityscape of the gloomy Athenian city centre. The film casts a dismal glance on the 2004 Athenian underbelly, tracking the composite urban ecology around Omonoia square, consisting of various types of deviant underdogs, from drug addicts to beggars to eccentric sages. Through Panagiotopoulos’s poetic realist lens, Omonoia square and the surrounding streetscapes emerge as a locus horridus, a babel of multiculturalism gone bad, a morbid fresco of urban decay, whose inhabitants constantly reference death. This is indeed an infernal land where sinful or tormented souls are devoid of agency, hope and above all: privacy. The public spaces (streets, arcades, bus stations, squares, apartment block communal areas) of the city center are appropriated by this motley human tribe and become the sites where private practices are normally executed (from love-making to fighting to drug-using to urinating to sleeping), in what amounts to an ‘intimization’ and transparentisation of the public sphere. Such processes run parallel to, and comment on, the concomitant growing privatization and control of the public sphere in the early 2000’s, dominated by the advent and consolidation of modernization as hegemonic ideological paradigm and the institutionalization of a tight surveillance system on the occasion of the 2004 Olympic Games. The interchangeability and interpenetration of the private and the public sphere is further accentuated by the variegated soundtrack, both in terms of musical aesthetics and narrative function. Techno beats, oriental melodies, commercial mbouzouki tunes and rock ballads echo throughout the film, in many cases starting off as diegetic sound in interiors (as performed by a singer or as radio music), only tο be continued as extra-diegetic sound in outdoor scenes.

Despite the fact that Panayotopoulos showcases Omonoia’s district multicultural façade, he ultimately subsumes cultural alterity under the umbrella of the largely undifferentiated category of the ‘subaltern’ in an attempt to counter the dynamic, self-confident and celebratory modernization and globalization paradigms. In contrast, Argyris Papadimitropoulos’s and Jan Vogel’s film *Wasted Youth* establishes a dialogism of chronotopes, through the use of intercut, whereby an extraordinary day in the ultra-mobile life of an adolescent skater is juxtaposed to the tedious life of a policeman confined within unhappy domestic and work settings. Recording nondescript incidents of each character’s daily routine in alternation, the chronotopic configuration of the film proceeds as a succession of dichotomous sets defined by clashing stylistic and rhythmic qualities. The opening sequence is telling in this respect. Temporally rigorous, energetic and bordering on a documentarist aesthetic, the sequences concerning adolescent antics feature mostly outdoor settings as arenas of flow within the city or indoor sites with passageways to the exterior, whereas the adult-centered scenes are steeped in an almost claustrophobic, slumbering atmosphere, whether they involve circulating in the street (filmed within the cramped bounds of a car) or in the domestic habitat (obstructed horizons, lowered shutters). Crucially, when offered a chance to forge a business investment partnership, the policeman cowardly backs off, favoring stasis to risk. Even though, on a first, deceptive level, this mirror-opposite chronotopic arrangement seems to structure a conflicting topography of the crisis-ridden Athenian metropolis, marking it as an eventual space of tragedy, it is in paying closer attention to the type of obstructed mobility offered by skating in the city that oppositions collapse: banging against the walls of a swimming pool, pendulum swinging within wide tubes, unlucky jumps at the Syntagma square steps, right to left and left to right trajectories within metallic enclaves; the urban space as inhabited by adolescents seems equally hostile and desire-thwarting, the most apposite setting for an arrested coming-of-age narrative or for a botched ‘adventure film of everyday life’, with no transformation possible for the juvenile hero. The title of the film, *Wasted Youth*, corresponding to the stickers the group of adolescents print and inscribe the city space with, is not only indicative of the pivotal role spatial forms play in defining social affect, but is also reminiscent of another generation’s predicament, encapsulated in the title of an Athens-based novel, namely, *Lost Spring* (1960’s decade). As Angeliki Milonaki (2013) notes, the film resonates with the cultural discourse of what Vrassidas Karalis calls the ‘Athenian negative’, which focuses on the negative aspects of the contemporary urban frame and the destabilisation of social relations.

Drawing loosely inspiration from the incidents related to Alexandros Grigoropoulos’s assassination in downtown Athens in 2008, the two directors mobilise cultural stereotypes based on binary oppositions, only to subvert them: the luscious upper-class domicile the young protagonist awakens in at the beginning of the film belongs to a friend of his mother’s, whereas he turns out to be of a more modest, lower-middle class provenance, just-like the policeman, who is stripped of sexual potency and the unbridled machismo normally attributed to the forces of the law. Eventually, the plotspace chronotope, initially geared towards a monologic trajectory, turns out to be dialogic, in the sense that it is only when the ‘threshold chronotopic motif’ emerges that the final confrontation between the two characters erupts. Defined both in topographical terms as the distance between the two quarrelling characters and symbolically as a moment of crisis, the ‘threshold motif’, coupled with the ‘encounter’ and ‘road’ motifs would potentially introduce chance and contingency as the defining factors within a context of social and cultural crisis, where knee-jerk reactions should replace patterned behaviors and conventional rules, but these do not, and cannot, concern the two heroes. It is, therefore, not for reasons of mere manipulation of the audience expectations that the triggering shot is fired by the policeman’s sly and unpredictable partner.

In overall, throughout this paper, we have attempted to assess the filmic imagery with regards to the Athenian urban space in key political and social moments of transition. Acknowledging the socio-cultural significance of the metropolitan topography as both setting and defining actor in the unravelling of social life, we have drawn on Bakhtin’s concept of the ‘chronotope’ as a means to elucidating the spatio-temporal coordinates of specific filmic texts and their ideological subtext. Shying away from a familiar tourist topography, the recent Greek filmic production has adopted a mostly realist aesthetic in order to portray the gloomy and alienating aspects of the urban experience. From Athens as a place of possibility and moral compromise to Athens as a place of existential malaise, anonymity and westernized commercialism and from then on to Athens as a multicultural site of widening social cleavages to Athens as a disintegrating and oppressive container of human souls, Greek cinema seems to promote a less than flattering and inviting image of the national social life, encapsulated perhaps in the slogan: ‘Leave your myth in Greece’.

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1. **This research is co-financed by Greece and the European Union (European Social Fund- ESF) through the Operational Programme «Human Resources Development, Education and Lifelong Learning» in the context of the project “Reinforcement of Postdoctoral Researchers” (MIS-5001552), implemented by the State Scholarships Foundation (ΙΚΥ).** [↑](#footnote-ref-1)