**ΠΑΡΑΔΟΤΕΟ 3**

‘Probing National Anxieties: Greek Cinematic Explorations Across the Border’[[1]](#footnote-1)

Road and travel movie theory has often accentuated the genre’s engagement with critical moments of social or national unrest (Cohan & Rae Hark, 1997; Laderman, 2002). Such visual narratives foreground mobility in order to reflect upon internal divisions and anxieties, offering a complex reworking of concomitant cultural restructurings. Starting from the early 1990s, a growing consideration with mobility across eastern, western and especially northnern borders is traceable in Greek cinema: films such as Vassiliki Eliopoulou’s *The Crossing* (1989), Panos Karkanevatos’s *Borderline* (1994), S. Goritsas’s *From the Snow* (1993), Theodoros Angelopoylos’s *Ulysses’s Gaze* (1995) and *The Suspended Step of the Stork* (1991), feature forays, or the prospect of them, in both Balkan and Turkish territories, addressing ontological insecurity, personal crises and a search of origins as a means to touch upon and ponder over a wider Greek identity crisis.

The intricate socio-economic complexities and the erosion of the nation-state’s cohesion associated with the advent of globalization, the reshuffling of geographic and political cartographies following the collapse of Communism and the 1990s Balkan Wars, as well as the reformulation of the European project, brought about by the effectuated or discussed integration of additional member-states (most pertinently, Turkey), have resulted in staggering geopolitical transformations, also impacting strongly various regional national identities. At this juncture, Greece’s precarious and unstable imaginary positioning simultaneously within and outside, or even culturally above Balkans, a self-perception aptly encapsulated as ‘“the bearable heaviness of being” Balkan’ (Todorova, 1997: 45) and its self-perception as both the cradle of European civilisation and its lagging underdog, as an ambivalent bearer of both western and eastern cultural traditions, in other words, its ‘disemic’ tribulation between Hellenism and *Romiossini* (Herzfeld, 1987) has been forcibly shaken and brought to the fore. Two other ideologemes of national self-identification have also been strongly challenged during the last few decades: the myth of national exclusivity (see Σεβαστάκης, 2004) and the nationalist credo of ethnic cohesion as embodied in the nation-state (see Pollis, 1992).

Although inbound and outbound cinematic journeys across borders filmed since the early 1990s concern mostly neighbouring, non-EU countries, this announcement argues that Greek road and travel film narratives deal primarily with the parameters of a collective re-imagining of “Greekness” with respect to the changing discursive construction of “Europeanness”. The latter does not hinge exclusively for its self-definition upon the political fermentations occurring within the institutional framework and geographical boundaries of the European Union but it has also, crucially, depended upon what it has excluded on a cultural level: the “non-European”, both Slavic and Oriental, as enemy both within and outside Europe (see Yapp, 1992; Helvacioglou, 1999), an identity marker connoting negative attributes. A critical examining of two films which fall within the genre of road movies, namely *Balkanizater* (Gkoritsas, 1997) and *Athina – Konstantinoupoli* (2008), will help illustrate how such national reckoning involves a (re)negotiation of interrelated symbolic divisions and polarities, a task which does not always reach fruition.

*Balkanizater* features an archetypal road movie male heterosexual duo, consisting in two business partners and best friends based in the town of Edessa, in Northern Greece, who embark on a road trip across Balkans, aiming to reach Switzerland and effectuate their planned heist involving currency exchange. Fotis’s exuberant personality as a serial philanderer and scheming buccaneer clashes with and complements Stavros’s placid cautiousness and settled, if insecure concerning fatherhood, domesticity, each personifying schematically a pole in the dichotomy which has traditionally underpinned the definition of Modern Greeks, namely that between ‘Hellenic sophrosyne’ and ‘Romaic cunning’, as Tziovas puts it (Tziovas, 2001: 201). A similar duality permeates other binary oppositions which coexist more or less uneasily, such as the one typified by the returning *gastarbeiter*, who is referred to with the pejorative appellation «Βλαχογερμανός» or «hillbilly German», a combination expressed with subtle iconographic cues in a shot featuring the back side of the latter’s car: the word ‘Anatoli’ (Orient) is reflected vertically along the windscreen, while the camera slowly pans to the symbols of German, i.e. West European, prosperity (Eagle, flag, BMW).

The passage to the Balkans for the two traveling buddies is not fraught with danger or hostility; in other words, Gkoritsas mostly refrains from reiterating commonplace Balkanist discourses in cinematic terms, which hinge upon the pejorative stereotyping of Slav people as ferociously violent and irredeemably uncivilized (Jameson, 2004: 232; Iordanova, 2001: 163; Imre, 2009). In their chance encounters with the plain Bulgarian folk, the two travelling buddies are received with cordiality and treated with integrity and generosity, although this is not the case with the Bulgarian authorities, whose corruption is taken for granted by the two protagonists (a remnant of the common Ottoman rule). However, Gkoritsas’s stance towards Greek and Bulgarian differentiation resonates partly with the strategy of ‘nesting orientalism’ (Bakić-Hayden, 1995), whereby one’s Balkan neighbor is viewed in orientalist terms, so that it becomes possible to present oneself to oneself and the West under the light of European standards. This process becomes apparent by juxtaposing the two establishing shots within Greece and Bulgaria. In the first case, which also constitutes the opening scene of the film, the camera slowly pans away from the back of the returning *gastarbeiter’s* BMW car and frames a night club, whose sign features the appellation ‘Las Vegas’ in the Greek alphabet while the soundscape is dominated by blasting Oriental (*tsifteteli*) tunes, blaring out at full volume from within the club. Upon entering Bulgaria, a similar soundscape prevails, dominated by an extradiegetic folk song, while the camera cuts from a close-up to a donkey’s snout to a long shot framing a donkey standing in front of Fotis, who is seemingly engaged in rigorous negotiations with two unknown men, all of them set against a coca-cola wall advert, whose particulars are written in the Bulgarian alphabet. In each of the two cases we are presented with a symbolic dramatization of each country’s encounter with the West through glocal processes. However, a considerable comparative belatedness is registered through the means of transportation employed, or, to draw on Appadurai’s terminology, by emphasizing asymmetries of participation in terms of ‘technoscape’.

Αn analogous asymmetry is emphasized in the scene featuring a night of revelry for the two protagonists in a Bulgarian dance hall, accompanied by two local girls. Despite the fact that the latter seem equally acquainted with corny pop tunes, which they sing along to enthusiastically, a few songs later Fotis and Stavros are the only ones singing along with the flamboyantly clad singer the Italian 1960s hit ‘Teresa’, albeit bellowing the Greek version of the ballad in an -already- nostalgic manner, thus registering their synchronic contact with western cultural products, or else, Greece’s decade-old penetration in European ‘mediascapes’. Skopetea (2003: 174) notes the “different timing in the encounter of individual Balkan nations with the West”, whereby a “‘Western identity’” may be looked upon as a privilege or right. Nevertheless, at this point, it should be mentioned that Gkoritsas does not seem to endorse whole-heartedly Western values (perceived as aligned with or even dictated by the laws of free market capitalism) or promote an unflinching compliance with them; by juxtaposing the greediness of a Greek automotive engineer with the generosity of a Bulgarian colleague he does seem to nod to what Calotychos (2013: 19) has termed ‘Balkan Good’, as a fiat of resistance to neoliberal policies. However, Gkoritsas does seem to consider the advent of transnational capitalism an inevitable reality to be reckoned with, for which already modernised nation-states seem to be better prepared and hence entitled to some short of national hauteur.

During the course of their journey, the two protagonists get acquainted with an ethnic Greek man, whose father resorted to Bulgaria in the aftermath of the Civil War and are cordially invited to attend to a collective feast, during which the man’s spouse, a heavily pregnant Bulgarian native, goes into labour. They assist in the parturition of a baby boy, whose birth overtly signifies, as every birth does, the future prospect, thus setting the seal of transnational reconciliation and seamless Balkan syncretism. At the same time, however, the effectuation of such symbolic union may also retroactively shake widely held and deeply-rooted nationalist claims to ethnic cohesion, homogeneity and purity, such as those reiterated earlier by Fotis, who vehemently spurns Stavros’s exposition of regional multiculturalism: “You insist on proving that I am a bastard breed!” This process of rapprochement and avowal of an always already existing hybridity, however, involves unequal power relations in terms of gender articulation: After being transferred to the delivery room, the Bulgarian woman does not reappear in the screen and only the ethnic Greek man is congratulated, upon receiving the new-born baby.

A similar ambivalence seems to transpire Greek national self-consciousness vis-à-vis the conception of Western Europe. Situated in the midst of an idyllic agrarian landscape, the camera tracks the two protagonists’s arrival by car, ironically underscoring Fotis’s comment: “We have finally reached civilization”, as the Swiss customs enter the frame. The customs officer inspecting their papers and their physiognomy seems distrustful, a sense reinforced by a close-up of the hound-dog accompanying him and by the fact that bikers arriving at the customs after them pass uninspected. Fotis later wonders in respect, to which Stavros comments: ‘Have you seen what we look like?’. Stavros retorts with an ironic and defiant tone: ‘Don’t they like us?’ This self-conscious sense of inferiority, thus challenged, would seem to partly clash with, or resist, what Rastko Moćnik (2002) has identified as a crucial component of the mechanism undergirding balkanist discourse, namely ‘vertical submissiveness’ towards Europe. Inevitably, in the course of their route, their ramshackle vehicle breaks down and they are in desperate need of spare parts, which, as locals advise them, they won’t be able to find in Switzerland, given the outdatedness of their car model. Their predicament is fixed by the courtesy of the afore-mentioned locals, who offer them for free the right to draw materials from their grandfather’s same model abandoned car. An analogous belatedness with regards to modernization is thus registered, this time presenting Greece as lagging behind a much more prosperous and technologically advanced West.

Such lack or deficiency, however, is partly remedied or countered by appealing to gender and sex stereotypes. When Fotis confirms Stavros’s sense of disapproval on behalf of the Europeans, Stavros quips: “That’s ok, their ladies like us”, resorting to a self-congratulatory and defensive hypermasculinist discourse of sexual prowess, which, despite being presented as an act of resistance, only serves to reinforce associations of a common Balkan identity with primitiveness. It is indeed telling that Fotis and Stavros capture the attention of two young Western women in the Swiss B&B that they lodge while Stavros toils until late at night with the car mechanics, smeared with oil. Later, in the B&B’s bar, Fotis promotes a masculinist form of cultural nationalism, by discrediting Nana Mouschouri’s multilingual, feminine, soft-toned singing and promoting instead Poli Panou’s, appropriately folk, rugged *zeimbekiko* tunes. He then bursts into an energetic dance solo, thus publicly performing ‘a tough, swaggering yet also introspective style of masculinity’ (Cowan, 1990: 173), or else *mangia*, as a form of both intimate self-recognition and outward display of proud gendered Greekness along the lines of Romiosyni. Inevitably, by means of his physical articulation of masculinity, he manages to woe one of the West European women, who he ends up bringing along back home, a symbolic merging also signified by their repaired car’s dichromatic, combined frame, which has incorporated parts of the abandoned, Swiss piece.

Although Gkoritsas shows no intent in subverting the generic frame of the road movie’s masculinist bias (see Corrigan, 1991; Cohan & Hark, 1997: 3), he does refrain from reiterating the self-colonising logic, prevalent during the 1990s, according to which national modernization should entail the repression of the ‘backward’ Ottoman and thus Balkan past (Calotychos, 2013: 26). The two protagonists use words of Turkish origin (“Communist χουβαρνταλίκια”) to address a Bulgarian automotive engineer, the film itself features a mosque in Sofia and a discussion regarding national independence form the Ottoman rule, as well as, most crucially, an encounter with a Turkish family in Swiss territory. During a heavy rainfall, thwarting visibility, Fotis crushes into a mini-van pulled over in the middle of the street, which turns out to belong to a Turkish man and his family, with whom Fotis manages to settle accounts amicably. It is equally telling that Gkoritsas codifies the prospective of Turkey’s further modernization as Westernisation in terms of variable cultural consumption along generational lines: as soon as the Turkish father of the family steps out of the car, his underage son turns off the car radio transmitting traditional Oriental tunes and begins enacting a pop choreographic routine to a US popular hit playing in own cassette player.

Gkoritsas indigenises the road movie genre by retaining the episodic structure and the iconographic markers of the road, albeit employing a Balkan soundscape and toying with regional cultural and ethnic stereotypes with a familiar, benevolent and innocuous comic streak. He further opts for a quietist resolution, whereby familial values are re-affirmed and male identity is normalized along the lines of circumscribed patriarchal fatherhood, restoring both a down to earth confidence in the future prospect and an equally measured national self-esteem, as the nation is proven able to integrate difference without shaking its foundational premises.

An altogether different approach is followed in Nicos Panayotopoulos’s existential and poetic road movie ‘Athens-Konstantinoupoli’, filmed approximately a decade after *Balkanizater*, and well after the exhaustion of the then hegemonic modernization project. The film tracks the vicissitudes of a middle-aged, angst-ridden and divorced lawyer, on his way to Thessaloniki to meet his dying father, as he gets swayed by a gypsy Balkan clarinet musician and tricked by his elusive Greek female companion, with whom the protagonist becomes obsessively infatuated, to the point of following her to Konstantinoupoli in search of some friends of her, offering her a precarious loan and committing suicide by falling from the Bosporus bridge when she abandons him. Panayotopoulos draws upon myths from the ancient Greek cultural tradition, the presumed cornerstone of European civilization, myths which are subsequently twisted by Balkan and Eastern intrusions: his hero is a Ulysses heading back home, albeit unable to protect himself from the seductive Balkan Sirens’s song; a Theseus whose Ariadne at first helps him navigate through the unknown territory of Istanbul, only to leave him unattended and wondering helpless to his death. Equally, Panayotopoulos’s story could be read as a variation of the German, and hence Western, Pied Piper of Hamelin’s myth, in which an outsider leads astray by means of the beguiling sounds of his pipe the village’s children, although in this case the blind ones are tricked rather than saved («I keep following you […] like a blind man»). Panayotopoulos’s film is replete with anxiety, directed both towards the West as modernization, as embodied in his crisis-ridden, depressed and uptight protagonist, and the East as exotic backwardness: presented through low-angle shots, the urban space in Istanbul appears poorly-lit, shabby, gloomy and cramped, conveying a sense of danger and claustrophobic suffocation. Symbolically invested binarism abounds throughout the narrative: the protagonist is, fittingly, a divorce lawyer, one of the night clubs where the clarinet player performs is called ‘Twin Moons’, the female protagonist dances between a bar called ‘Nowhere’ and a ‘Byzantine bakery’, the hotel room’s windows form a dual reflection of the city views, the film’s soundscape is divided between Balkan and Oriental sounds and the strict tonality of Stravinsky’s *Apollo musagète*. It should be noted, however, that, unlike Gkoritsas, although Panayotopoulos’s narrative strains to contain undialectical binarisms, it does subvert gender stereotypes with regards to movement and stasis, rootedness and nomadism. The properties of fluidity, difference and mobility are bestowed to the female character; she is the one who has embraced a hybrid identity, being a descent of migrants in Germany, in contrast to the static, uniform male character, who had repressed his Asia Minor descent and seems unable to reappropriate it.

In drawing this announcement to a close it is worth noting that both films feature a prominent cultural icon associated with the Balkans, namely the bridge (Todorova, 1997: 16; Calotychos, 2013; Augoustinos, 2003; Skopetea, 2003). However, whereas in the case of *Balkanizateur* it serves as a symbol of national advancement via incorporation and combination, in the case of *Athens-Konstantinoupoli* it stands for an impossible ‘place’ for the protagonist to stand at, a hybrid identity he cannot possibly endorse: ‘somewhere in Europe and Asia’, as the female protagonist notes. This is the place, to be sure, where the protagonist, just like a country in profound cultural crisis, despondent, commits suicide.

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