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BETWEEN TWO CENTURIES  
CONTEMPORARY GREEK CINEMA AND THE  
READINGS OF ANCIENT GREEK TRAGEDY



ABSTRACT: In the present paper, the Greek films that have made use of elements from ancient tragedy and myth while commenting on the current political and social changes in Greece, the Balkans and Europe, are recorded and critically presented. Ancient myth and ancient tragedy adaptations in Greek cinematography during the 21st century are determined by the landmarks of the 2004 Olympic Games and the consequences of the 2010 economic/social crisis. After describing all types of films — and especially those of Theo Angelopoulos —, the paper focuses on the relation of ancient tragedy with contemporary immigration experience in the films *Hades* (1996, Stelios Charalampopoulos) and *Hostage* (2005, Constantine Giannaris). In *Hades*, the fictional Heracles brings back Alcestis from the “Hades” of Hoxha’s regime in Albania. Constantine Giannaris in *Hostage* (2005) connects the tragedy of Sophocles’s *Aias* with xenophobia and the construction of maleness. An Index of the relevant films of the period (1989-2018) is included.

INTRODUCTION

“IT IS A FOREIGN FILM, where its most alienating part appears to be purely Greek, within the cultural notion of the term, since it faces and reconstructs both directly and indirectly an ancient tragedy, a sheer Greek mode of expression.”<sup>1</sup>

The film *Interruption* (2015) by Yorgos Zois, to which the writer Dimitris Dimitriadis refers, is one of the most interesting cinematic portrayals of the relations of tragedy with politics during “the period of the crisis”. If *The Travelling Players* (1975) of Theo Angelopoulos was the film that

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\* I would like to thank the journal’s “anonymous referee”, for his insightful suggestions.

1. Dimitriadis, D., “Thoughts on an *Interruption*. A Foreign Film”, *To Vima*, 01/11/2015.



Figure 1. *The Travelling Players* (1975, Theo Angelopoulos).

introduced a complete proposal for applying Brecht's theories to the cinema<sup>2</sup> and to matters concerning representation<sup>3</sup> (Figure 1) to Greek cinematography, during the early Metapolitefsi, then in *Interruption*, set in the years of political and moral "crisis", the young director Yorgos Zois in his first full-length film creatively exploits features of performance art, postdramatic and postmodern theatre (Figure 2).<sup>4</sup> Both films discuss political issues (the history of Greece between 1936 and 1952 and cases about terrorism) and have received a number of prestigious awards in international festivals. However, the audience responded to the films differently:

2. See Koutsourakis (2015) 64-8; Sinnerbrink (2015) 95.
3. "The influence of antiquity in Angelopoulos's films is of course due to his classical education and environment which he first rejected, then resolutely reclaimed. Over the years, he has increased direct references to ancient authors in his films, moving away from the dramatic repertory (which greatly influenced his first films such as *The Travelling Players*) towards a complex reworking of the Homeric epic as in *Ulysses' Gaze*. It is as if his investigation of the turbulent times of modern Greece were gradually leading him to explore the history of ancient literature up to the heroic times of Homeric adventures". See Eades & Letoublon (2012) 143.
4. A post-modern theater adaptation of a classic Greek Tragedy takes place in a central theater in Athens. Every night the members of the audience take their seats and the play begins. Suddenly, the lights go out and the stage is dark. A group of young people, dressed in black and carrying guns, come up on stage. They apologize for the interruption and invite people from the audience to join them on stage. The play resumes with one main difference: life is now imitating art, and not the other way around. See *Catalogue, 56th Thessaloniki International Film Festival* (2015) 46.



Figure 2. *Interruption* (2015, Yorgos Zois).

only *The Travelling Players* has become a big box office success.<sup>5</sup> In *The Travelling Players* the world of the theatre (stage and backstage, actors and audiences), the exploitation of the mythical material, the dramaturgical and political argument and the personal relations of the filmic characters in relation to the characters of the tragedy (*Oresteia*),<sup>6</sup> are organised according to epic theatre (episodic dramaturgy, *gestus* and music). The visual aspects of the play within Zois's film are based on the methods and principles of post-modern<sup>7</sup> stage/theatre: space arrangement, lighting, and movement seem to come from the world of Robert Wilson and Romeo Castellucci.<sup>8</sup>

5. The film has been distributed "independently". The film *Deconstructing Interruption* (2016, Stelios Moraitidis) captures the way Yorgos Zois worked with his actors during the shooting of the film *Interruption*, as well as the atmosphere evoked on the filming set. The documentary follows the filming process closely, exploring the complex multilayered world of *Interruption* where theatrical myth mingles with reality, making the viewer both a protagonist and a pathetic consumer at the same time. In addition, the medium length film of Michel Dimopoulos *The Other Scene* (1975) shows the making of the film *The Travelling Players* by Theo Angelopoulos.
6. "*Oresteia* is both a Greek and a universal myth. It includes subjects that concern us also today, power, violence, roles, revenge, justice... at the same time though, it has something unhomely, which cannot be explained. I would like to believe in this unhomely, it intrigues you, it calls for exploration, it is in the film". See Yorgos Zois, an interview to C. Terzis: "Postmodern spectacle has been established in our times", *Avgi*, 01/02/2016.
7. "Contemporary postmodern spectacle is the new 'establishment' in our times. We see daily that everything can be turned into spectacle. And of course it is very difficult to discern the limits between spectacle and reality (...) A condition that I am interested in questioning". op.cit.
8. See Tsatsoulis (2011) 31-41.



Figure 3. *Interruption* (2015, Yorgos Zois).

Moreover, the central themes of both films seem to draw on events from contemporary Greek history. Theo Angelopoulos in *The Travelling Players* attempts to approach History through a Marxist ideology and in line with the methods of epic theatre, by intertwining the myth of the Atreidae with touring troupes. At the same time, Zois in *Interruption* tries to make a statement on the matter of contemporary terrorism during the period of globalisation, drawing also on the myth of the Atreidae within the framework of postmodern theatre, of devised theatre and by means of a commentary on the limits between reality, fiction and representation. The archaeological excavation into the mythical/historical stratification of Greece did not allow distractions: its analysis was absolutely vertical. That film's "curved trajectory" found in the myth of the Atreidae the model for the historical behaviour of Modern Greece, whilst enriching it with further structural relations and discovering the changes the myth had undergone at the hands of a profane popular tradition. "The dialectical relationship between the sacred and the profane resulted in a progression of internal links between the multiple interpretations of the First Narrative, thus shaping the hypothesis of an invariable archaeological structure. And this was effected through the imbrication of times and spaces, through the course of events and the plurality of situations".<sup>9</sup> The characters of Zois' film, exactly as the ones in the film *Hostage* (2005) of Constantine Giannaris, another film typical of the subject matter under investigation, find themselves in a hostage situation, or even in a limbo condition (Figure 3, 4).

9. See Areco (2012) 226.



Figure 4. *Interruption* (2015, Yorgos Zois).

In any case, film makers and script writers are asked to clarify how the cultural events that gave birth to a tragic play are nowadays in the margins of what contemporary art can achieve, and how they will only acquire immediacy through modifications, variations and the extension of the initial material.<sup>10</sup> Yet, the structure, the motifs, the dramatic characters and the acting codes can operate within various contexts, whereas the translations of ancient texts into scripts can be in their own right proposals for film making. At the same time, decoding all the above demands the participation of an informed and active spectator, and so a dialogue with ancient tragedy starts, sometimes directly, at other times indirectly. The spectator is also asked to recognise the use of “objective array”, that is how an object, a state or a sequence of events recall and activate a specific kind of emotion in the mind of the spectator. In the mythological-historical method elements from myth or history are often used, creating as such an analogy between the present and the past.<sup>11</sup> In the contemporary transformations of the “tragic” we seek for a moral, humanistic proposal, which often has to be redefined when the artists pursue matters concerning existential, social and universal issues, along with personal experiences.

10. For “Classics and Film” see Salzman-Mitchell & Alvares (2018) 9-12.

11. McKinnon (1986) 18-9, 22-8; Mavromoustakos (2003) 303-7; Michelakis (2013) 6-9; Nikoloutsos (2013) 2-10.



Figure 5. *Mourning Rock* (2000, Philippos Koutsaftis).

#### I. BEFORE AND AFTER THE OLYMPIC GAMES OF 2004

The attempt to read the ancient myth and especially the adaptations of ancient tragedy in Greek cinematography during the 21st century is defined by two landmarks in the contemporary political history of Greece: the Olympic Games of 2004 and the consequences of the diverse economic and social crisis (since 2010). However, if we wish to draw accurate conclusions, we should expand our research field and also examine the historical and political circumstances during the last decade of the 20th century (Figure 5).

The aim of the present paper is to record and critically present the Greek films that have made use of elements from ancient tragedy and also from myth, and have sought to describe the political changes and their social impact on Greek, Balkan and European areas during the last thirty years.<sup>12</sup> After describing all types of films, we will focus on the following sections: (a) the relation of ancient tragedy with contemporary immigration experience in the films *Hades* (1996, Stelios Charalampopoulos) and *Hostage* (2005, Constantine Giannaris); (b) the political readings of *Antigone* from the Metapolitefsi until the period of the 2010 crisis in the films *Proceedings* (1976, Demos Theos), *The Photographers* (1998, Nikos Koundouros), *Standing Aside, Watching* (2013 Yiannis Servetas), *A/Alpha* (2014, Stathis Athanasiou), *Queen Antigone* (2014, Telémachos Alexiou); (c) the tragic myth as reflected in theatre and cinema: the inclusion of structures and (sub) plots that concern the making of a film or the staging of a play in the narration of films whose subject matter draws on ancient themes. We will indicatively

12. See Kyriakos (2013) 191-233.





Figure 6. *Medea Louder Than Any Thought* (2014, Nikos Grammatikos).

refer to the films *Medea's Summer* (1987, Vassilis Plaitakis), *Lilly's Story* (2002, Robert Manthoulis), *Recycling Medea* (2013, Asteris Koutoulas), *Playing with Fire* (2014, Anneta Papathanassiou), *Medea Louder Than Any Thought* (2014, Nikos Grammatikos), *A/Alpha* (2014, Stathis Athanassiou), and *Interruption* (2015, Yorgos Zois); and (d) readings of ancient tragedies and myth from a queer perspective, placing emphasis on the films of Panos Koutras: *Real Life* (2004), *Strella* (2009) and *Xenia* (2014).

Myth is asked to describe synecdochically, metonymically and metaphorically the political and economic circumstances of every historical period. The readings and the significations of ancient myths remain inexhaustible and depend on the historical periods, the way every reader perceives them, and the intertextual and hypertextual correlations (Figures 6 & 7). A political perception was never absent from these readings, whether it was distinct or indistinct. We should bear in mind that from the Metapolitefsi onwards we always see that fiction in the New Greek Cinema employs and exploits tragic myths in order to describe the political and moral Greek condition.<sup>13</sup> In the first years after the Metapolitefsi and even later,<sup>14</sup> Dimos Theos, Theo Angelopoulos, Jules Dassin and Costas

13. See Van Steen (2011), 8-12, 57-61.

14. In addition to Koundouros, Cacoyannis and Angelopoulos there are also other important directors who appropriate and use mythological elements: the myth of Eurydice and Orpheus within the framework of the poetics of confinement in the filmography of Nikos Nikolaidis (*Eurydice BA2036* [1975] and *Morning Patrol* [1987]), the Dionysiac erotic elements in the films of Yorgos Panoussopoulos (*Mania* [1985] and *Testosterone* [2005]),



Figure 7. *Medea Louder Than Any Thought* (2014, Nikos Grammatikos).

Ferris interpreted and made different use of the myths of the Atreidae, the Labdacids, Medea and Prometheus so as to describe governmental changes, class conflicts, new female identities and the continuous antiauthoritarian cause.<sup>15</sup> In particular, films such as *The Travelling Players* (1975), *Prometheus in the Second Person* (1975), *Proceedings* (1976) (Figure 8) and *A Dream of Passion* (1978) brought to the fore the relation between cinema and theatre; they also started to incorporate new fictional elements within

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and the anti-authority dynamics in the work of Costas Ferris (*Prometheus in the Second Person* [1975] and *Oh! Babylon* [1989]). Motifs from the *Odyssey* resurface in the filmography of Theo Angelopoulos, connected with the repatriation of refugees (*Voyage to Cythera*, 1984), and also of Vassilis Vafeas in the dream of a middle class man (*The Love of Ulysses*, 1984). Three films created by Greeks of the Diaspora present the contemporary Greek reality through a dramatic and comical prism: *The Girl from Mani* (1986, Paul Annet) and *The Athenians* (1990, Vassilis Alexakis) and also the Greek-German production *Der fall Ö* (1991, Rainer Simon). Koundouros and Andreas Panzis are both inspired by their country of origin and its myths, the first one in the *Bordello* (1985): the Cretan liberation fight and the Minoan labyrinth/Theseus/Minotaur, and the second one in the Cyprian trilogy: *The Rape of Aphrodite* (1985), *The Slaughter of the Cock* (1996) and *Evagoras' Vow* (2001). See Constantinides (2014) 162-8.

15. *Orestes* (1969) by Vassilis Photopoulos, the *Reconstruction* (1970) by Theo Angelopoulos and the *Symposium* (1972) by Dimitris Kollatos, all filmed during the Regime of the Colonels, are three representative films where we can perceive three different ways of exploiting (tragic) myth: multiculturalism and intertextual dialogue with the political culture of the counterculture movements in the sixties, immigration, traditional folk songs, the Greek countryside, the Homeric nostos and the Atreidae myth, spectacle and sexual liberations, changes in sexual relations within the artistic environment, homoeroticism and early queer reflections. See Kyriakos (2017) 225-6; Valverde García (2017) 86-103.



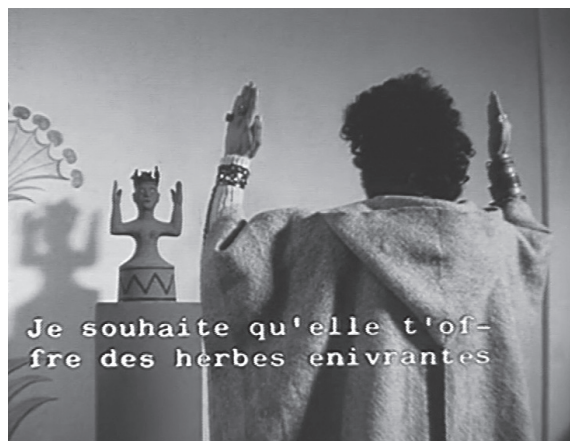


Figure 8. *Proceedings* (1976, Dimos Theos).

the main film narrative, describing how the film was shot, the staging of a theatrical performance or the writing of a play inspired by ancient tragedy. Accordingly, throughout the nineties there was an increase in the number of fiction and non-fiction (documentary) scripts displaying a panoply of elements from ancient Greek myth.

The (funded) Greek cinema was able to portray only a few aspects of the atmosphere of preparations during the Olympic Games period (summer 2004). Fifteen years later, the viewer would recognise traces of that period in very few films (multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, the spirit of national pride) (*Planet Athens*, 2004, Dimitris Athanitis); on the other hand, only recently have the Olympic Games of 2004 been part of the Greek cinematography fiction when the latter adopted a demystified viewpoint. Very few films document the atmosphere of confidence and optimism that prevailed when Greece prioritised its goals around its inclusion in EMU (European Monetary Union) in 2002 and the successful organisation of the 2004 Olympic Games. Greek optimism and confidence reached their peak in 2004 after Greece won the UEFA European Championship and also organised the successful Olympic Games in Athens. However, in the eve of the Olympic games, Nikos Panayiotopoulos, in his film *Delivery* (2004), describes the landmark of Omonoia as the Athenian “bottom” of the “social margins” of society. The hookers, the drug addicts and the homeless are the “visitors” of a different Hades that is described lyrically without any moralistic undertones. *Real Life* (2004) by Panos Koutras is set in Athens where the first modern “Olympic Games” were held, a city of prosperity and extravagance.

Along the lines of a demystifying irony the Acropolis of Athens is in flames, a victim of the vanity of Greek tycoons, while the quaternary schema of *koros-hybris-ate-tisis* determines the behaviour of the film's protagonists. In the film *Atlas (All the Weight of the World)* (2003) by Thanos Anastopoulos we follow and watch the actions of a large number of characters representing the multifaceted nature (local people and immigrants) of Modern Greek society. The "weight" of an Olympic medallist in weightlifting (the myth of Atlas) becomes a metonym for the costs of a fictitious economic prosperity. The aforementioned significant films document that contradictory reality as the beginning of all the policies and strategies that led to the Greek economic crisis. Moreover, they constitute a comment on the vision of modernisation that was the driving force of Hellenism since the establishment of the Modern Greek state in the 19th century, a vision that has again decisively moved to the forefront at the beginning of the 21st century. Yet, efforts for structural reforms aiming at the creation of a more productive and competitive economy were met with strong resistance from trade unions and party policies.<sup>16</sup> It is a period when the global economic crisis of 2008 had long-term consequences: high unemployment, insecure work, high cost of living, and less opportunities for the weakest and underprivileged social groups to access public goods.<sup>17</sup> From 2010 until the middle of 2015, there had been a strong dispute towards the neoliberal tolerance for austerity measures and the resulting collective deprivation. Within this context we can question how tragic myth coincides with cinematic imagery that describes future expectations for rearranging social and political relations, and also the need for socio-political participation;<sup>18</sup> in particular when the "indignant" citizens of the country protest collectively in the streets. We see in two award winning films, the *Park* (2016) by Sofia Exarchou and *Son of Sofia* (2017) by Elina Psykou,

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16. We shouldn't forget that in the period 2002-2009, when Greece was borrowing money from the financial markets with the same low interest as Germany, the governments inflated away the public debt by borrowing in order to enlarge their customer base (new appointments of civil servants and generous increases in their salaries and pensions).

17. For this subject see: Serdedakis, N. & Tompazos, St. (2018).

18. The financially strapped hero of the *Gadfly. The Riders of Pylos* (2010, Nikos Kalogeropoulou) finds shelter in the Greek countryside at ancient Messene, while modern versions of Antigone fight against conservative and corrupted people they meet in their provincial environment. The films *Standing Aside, Watching* (2013, Yorgos Servetas) and *Queen Antigone* (2014, Telémachos Alexiou) discuss matters such as sexual harassment, unemployment, social conventions and migration. Finally, in the political and social satire *Fate* (2015, Andreas Marianos) a critique on the economic situation is combined with references to the orthodox religion and ancient Greek myths.

how children and adolescents perceive the traces left from the period of the Olympic Games. In the first film, the rituals of the Olympic Games, ideologically coloured and fetishized, are described from a child's point of view (an economic migrant), when he gets to know a man who militantly expresses his Greek Christian beliefs, a retired school teacher and a foster Father (teaching and enforcement). In *the Park* the buildings (already named "Olympic properties"), remnants of the same Olympic stadiums that lived moments of glory, are inhabited by gangs of children and teenagers that live together as heirs of a constructed glory.<sup>19</sup> The rituals and spectacles that highlight ancient Greek glory in Psykou's film constitute a contemporary version of similar portrayals in fiction films about the dictatorship (*Backdoor*, 2000, Yorgos Tsemberopoulos) and deconstructive documentaries (*Acropolis*, 2001/2004, Eva Stefani).<sup>20</sup> The way Exarchou shoots her film reveals a contemporary gaze at ancient ruins, even if modern and expensive buildings, as symbols of vanity, do not bear the same status of the classical and of the multiple ideological uses of ancient buildings.<sup>21</sup>

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19. Isolated and abandoned, surrounded by decaying sport venues, the Athens Olympic Village is today a nearly deserted place, its only residents being a few working-class families who were offered free housing following the 2004 Games. Stuck inside the Village, a group of boys wander around the ruins playing distorted versions of Olympic Games and organizing dog matings for money.
  20. In *Acropolis* (2004) Eva Stefani addresses the issues of national memory, intellectual and robust, and of episodic memory with the experiences of daily life. She focuses on national stereotypes by restructuring her instruments of expression: pompous voice over from *Sound and Light*, footage from the celebrations of Metaxas Youth (N.Y.O.) and events drawing on ancient Greece during the Seven Years Dictatorship, criticism of the use of symbols and monuments, quaint tours of the Acropolis, and inserts of German porn films with tampered colours.
  21. Zacharias Mavroeidis in *The Guide* (2011) discusses this relation between monument and sexuality by using the codes of comedy: Athens is presented as a city in (architectural) confusion, as is the young architect before he acknowledges and comes to terms with his gay identity. The gay man and also the metrosexual males in the film *E-mail* (2001, Markos Holevas), referring to the constellation of Ganymede, wander around the centre of Athens, filled with summer loneliness and desire, between the ancient monuments and the cyberspace. Similarly in the films of Psykou and Exarchou details from coming-of-age stories are combined with the modern kitsch of the 2004 Olympic Games (the bell-shaped doll mascots "Athena" and "Phevos").

## II. IN THE THRESHOLD OF THE 21ST CENTURY: ANCIENT TRAGEDY AND CONTEMPORARY MIGRATORY EXPERIENCE

At the beginning of the nineties two sequences from the film *The Suspended Step of the Stork* (1991) by Theo Angelopoulos, when the two opposite worlds face each other during the scene of the wedding and the collection of dead bodies belonging to illegal immigrants from the Greek seas, not only proved to be prophetic for the ensuing international political situations, they have also inaugurated a new chapter in the subject matter of contemporary Greek cinema. Tragic myth and ancient myth in general<sup>22</sup> would be employed in order to present the migration adventure. Immigration policies and at large the atmosphere of instability and fluidity, but also matters concerning the renegotiation of national and personal identities, are approached with references to the myth.<sup>23</sup>

Angelopoulos in *The Suspended Step of the Stork* and *Ulysses' Gaze* portrayed in a humanistic way and political clarity<sup>24</sup> the upheaval in the

22. "En affirmant éliminer le 'texte', au profit du seul 'mythe du retour d'Ulysse', Angelopoulos semble précisément poser la possibilité d'un 'jeu' entre le récit homérique et l'histoire qu'il narre. En disjoignant ce que l'épopée a adroitement ajointé, en creusant l'écart entre les deux niveaux, le film afficherait alors, simultanément, la puissance intacte des éléments mythiques et l'impossibilité d'un retour aux solutions narratives de l'*Odyssee*. Ce sont elles qu'il nous faut examiner, afin de mieux cerner l'enjeu du processus d'anamorphose dans lequel est pris le poème homérique". See Rollet (2003) 76.

23. On the other hand, *Ulysses' Gaze* reveals what the Manaki Brothers' first film depicted, without the prejudices resulting from discrimination and segregation, every person and every social condition, regardless of position, ideology, race and creed. "It was an artistic endeavor that established no priorities, classifications, and hierarchies. It was a cinematic representation driven by the vital demand of totality and unity, by a synthetic disposition in the face of the diversity of historical development. (...) This approach did not mean that particularities or individual cultural constructs were being dismantled but that they were being perceived in a holistic framework, which truly lacked credulous dogmatisms, closed, rigid ideological schemas, as well as a priori immutable axiological interpretations. (...) Therefore, the purpose of such a cinematic approach was to demonstrate under what conditions a secular social and inter-national system would develop, which would be exclusively based on the perspectives of self-regulation and self-determination, i.e., in a way, excluding those external interventions triggered by the promotion and widespread realization of a specific type of considerations that would impose one-dimensional functions on the social body". See Terezis (2012) 130.

24. "Theo Angelopoulos will scratch very deeply the parchment on which the history of the peoples of the Balkans is written. And he will reveal many different years recorded on Homer's ancient palimpsest; the archetypical literary matrix for the great and never-ending human adventure. However, what he will find in the palimpsest in the end will not be consecutive spaces with their frozen times, like in painting, but imbricated times, piled up in a narrow and difficult space —the space of the Balkans. This is a space which is



Figure 9. *Ulysses' Gaze* (1995, Theo Angelopoulos).

Balkans and the Yugoslavian Breakup: the Ulyssean adventure, the upper and the under worlds<sup>25</sup> (Figure 9). In the film *Hades* (1996, Stelios Haralambopoulos) the environment of Epirus,<sup>26</sup> the Acheron and the myth of Alcestis would be combined with the existential crisis of an affluent lawyer. Sarcasm and cosmopolitanism are profuse in the film *Monkey Queen* (1999, Christopher Christofis) where elements from the myths of Atreidae and Labdacids are employed. In particular, the process of redesigning the borders and the issue of economic migrants and refugees were combined with changes in the economic and political organisation of European space. All these concern changes that resulted from the collapse of the communist regimes and the changes of the power balance after opening the borders.<sup>27</sup>

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wholly unsuitable for the development of an epic and, consequently, unrelated to the spatial comfort that Homer gives himself". See Rafailidis (2012) 291.

25. See Stathi (2012) 21.

26. The following films are set in the area of Epirus: *Pandora* (2006, Yorgos Stamboulou-poulos) in the period after the Greek civil war; *Icarus' Dream* (2005, Costas Natsis) presenting the apprenticeship of a modern young musician; *The Guardian's Son* (2006, Dimitris Koutsibassakos) experiencing the world of natural springs at Pindos as an antidote against the urban deadlock; *Hercules, Achelöos and My Granny* (1997, Dimitris Koutsibassakos) commenting on traditional and ancient structures as opposed to technological progress.

27. The cinematic representations of the (illegal) immigrant in the Greek cinema of that period are not characterised by xenophobic attitudes. Very rarely do we see the immigrant as a dangerous invader or as a carrier of evil. The films usually delve into how the immigrants live and the difficulty of integrating into the new social context (economic exploitation, illegitimacy). Moreover, the discourse expressed did not have any propagandistic or far-right political character, but described the migration flow as a continu-

Many of these films that draw on ancient myths describe the social exclusion and the metonymic aspect of the presence and the speech of the “Other”. In this point we should mention that during the nineties we see many “free” adaptations of tragedies such as the one of *Antigone* (*The Photographers*, 1998) by Koundouros, of *The Bacchae* by Yorgos Stambouloupoloulos (*Two Suns in the Sky* (1991), of *Oedipus at Colonus* by Kostas Aristopoulos (*The Starry Dome*, 1994), of *Electra* by Frida Liappa (*The Years of the Big Heat*, 1991), and of *Prometheus Bound* by Costas Sfikas (*Prometheus Retrogressing*, 1998). Other directors who turn to myth, though drawing on it differently, are Alexis Damianos, who employs aspects of the Delphic idea (*The Charioteer*, 1995), Dimos Theos (*Eleatis Xenos*, 1996) and Tonia Marketaki (*Crystal Nights*, 1992), the last two incorporating in the fiction of their films components from the myth of Orpheus and Persephone. Theo Angelopoulos also works on the relation between the under and upper worlds by referring to Homer in his films *Voyage to Cythera* (1984),<sup>28</sup> *The Suspended Step of the Stork* and *Ulysses Gaze*, adding beyond the motif of traveling and homecoming the one of Nekyia. Many young directors also borrow from the myth, among whom Nikos Cornilios (*Equinox*, 1991 and *Desert Sky*, 1997), Sofia Papachristou (*The Golden Apples of Hesperides*, 1997), Thanassis Rakintzis (*Ariadne Lives in Leros*, 1993), Dimitris Athanitis (*No Sympathy for the Devil*, 1996), Stella Belessi (*Maria – Electra*, 1996), Stelios Haralambopoulos (*Hades*, 1996), Alexandros-Evangelos Fassois (*Nekyia II*, 1998), Yiannis Soldatos (*The Enigma*, 1998). Moreover, the director and producer Yorgos Zervoulakos comes back to the cinematic scene with the film *Orpheus Descending* (1995).<sup>29</sup>

We should bear in mind that Greece during the nineties turns from a country of emigration to a destination of migration flows, a fact that will seriously affect the social fabric and instigate political initiatives as well. Issues about the borders, the refugees and the economic migrants will directly become a focal point in Greek cinema. These films adapt mythemes and ideas from ancient tragedies. Alongside these topics, the vision of modernisation and assimilation with the Europeans has always been a constant aspiration for Hellenism and especially for a political elite who has had a western

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ous historical phenomenon and not as something threatening and unprecedented. See Kyriakos (2002 b), 117-41.

28. See Rollet (2003) 33-8, 66-8. Also see Rollet (2015) 221-4.

29. In the early seventies Zervoulakos drew on ancient subjects, filming *Lysistrata* (1972) and the diptych *House on the Rocks* (1974) and *Naked in the Snow* (1974) where he is attempting a free adaptation of mythemes from the myth of Hippolytus and Phaedra.



mentality. In films of the same period and similar in their subject matter, the activation of the dipoles Greek-Romios, West-East, Europe-Balkans and Europe-Greece is again brought forward. Anachronisms are used here in order to update the film and connect the ancient myth to the present age without really distancing from the original and revoking its meaning, but touching upon the political climate of the present. In adaptations of myth we can locate references to current affairs such as terrorism, the prevailing western civilisation in contrast with the civilisation of the “others”, the world of the East and the western canon. It is quite clear that we refer to ideological projections that reality brings to the fore. Thus we can trace a contemporary political and cultural natural order: political ideologies and historical events as parameters of space and societies.

In Angelopoulos's *Ulysses' Gaze*, Nekyia (Ulysses's passage to the underworld)<sup>30</sup> is set in Yugoslavia, torn by the civil war, and the touring of Ulysses-artist has a retrospective and experiential character.<sup>31</sup> Ulysses makes a comeback in *Ulysses' Gaze* as a wanderer who lays claim to an innocent gaze and a series of early moving images in a neighborhood of the world that is now both troubled and unrecognizable. The myth of Ulysses<sup>32</sup> has permeated Angelopoulos himself as an acting subject. From the moment the search begins or mention is made of a new film project to the writing of the screenplay, the raising of the funds, the selection of the film crew, the confirmation of the shooting schedule, and the promotion of the film towards nearer or more distance horizons, a collective Odyssey is written, the main traveler and poet/narrator of which is Angelopoulos himself. “The pre-production, production and post-production of each one of his film texts are tied to the main axis of the Ulyssean myth as both discourse and action. *The*

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30. See Rollet (2003) 234-40.

31. Angelopoulos's *The Dust of Time* is a poetic account of the past century which, through a love story which challenges time, takes a visionary look and seeks out the horizon of the present century. The film's main character is a woman. “Eleni of the myth, Eleni of all myths; she is a laid claim to and herself lays claim to absolute love. More than ever before, an elegy on human fate. A story that begins in the present but, through a meandrous path, unearths the collective history of a nation. Exiles, separations, peregrinations, deceptions, the trials and tribulations of history. Life in exile, far from the Greek soil. Greece, an absent Ithaca, the form of emptiness, the lost center. Surrounding this dark nostalgia, a series of consecutive cracks open up, like concentric circles, embracing the characters one by one. The cracks of history, fragments of an Ancient Greek tragedy”. *Greek Films 08*, Greek Film Centre (2008) 30.

32. For the “Angelopoulos's Female Odysseys” see Horton (2015), 275-91.



Figure 10. *Ulysses' Gaze* (1995, Theo Angelopoulos).

*Beekeeper* is also a version of the Angelopoulouian Odyssey; a genuine aspect of the perforated and constant open wound”.<sup>33</sup>

In *Hades* of Stelios Haralambopoulos, the fictional Heracles brings back Alcestis from the “Hades” of the Hoxha’s regime in Albania. Constantine Giannaris in *Hostage* (2005) connects the tragedy of Sophocles’s Aias with xenophobia and the construction of maleness; Costa-Gavras in *Eden is West* (2009) blends the experiential personal factor, the Ulyssean adventure and the constructed social utopias. References to political parties as power mechanisms and to the Mass Media (Figures 10 & 11) will be associated with what happens behind the scenes and the conflicts between the factions in the House of Atreidae and the Labdacids, and also the relevant oracular statements.<sup>34</sup> Besides these historical and geographical components, Angelopoulos’s films also present modern resurgences of mythological and literary narratives, as in the works of major film-makers, such as

33. See Kolovos (2012) 270.

34. In the film *On Course* (1985, Stavros Konstandarakos) the new political tendencies of the eighties are juxtaposed with events of the past: the “secret” of the Greek resistance (narratives) becomes an oracle of Apollo. The film combines the summer Greek island landscape (fields with wheat, rocks, the sea, horses), the antiquity (columns, temples and the Greek light, the particular names of the characters), Christianity (small churches with icons of saints riding their horses), and the Greek tradition of seamanship (the vessel as a symbol).



Figure 11. *The Photographers* (1998, Nikos Koundouros).

Hitchcock, Fellini and Ford. Angelopoulos achieves this through the use of characters' names (Aegisthus, Orestes, Electra, Chrysothemis in *The Travelling Players*, Orestes in *Landscape in the Mist*, "Odysseus" in his most recent film, *Ulysses' Gaze*); of general themes (the couple's reunion in *The Suspended Step of the Stork*, devious family relations marred by violence, crime and incest in *The Travelling Players*, war and peace with constant references to the *Oresteia*, the fragility of the human condition in *Voyage to Cythera*, the quest for the Other as for Oneself in *Ulysses' Gaze* and *Landscape in the Mist*); and even of particular literary passages. The presence of specific Homeric scenes and action-patterns in the film does not however betray any intention to achieve a film adaptation of the *Odyssey*, precisely because they are scattered by various processes of fragmentation and condensation throughout the original plot, which describes the return of A, a Greek filmmaker exiled in the United States, to his country in search of three undeveloped reels once shot by the Manakis brothers at the turn of the century in the Balkans.<sup>35</sup>

Near East will prove to be the starting point of a migration flow that will be portrayed in documentaries using references from the antiquity: *Supplicants* (2006, Stavros Ioannou), *Qadir. An Afghan Ulysses* (2008, Annetta Pappathanassiou), *Matriarchy* (2014, Nikos Cornilios). These migratory environments will allow directors to focus on approaching firstly the myth

35. See Eades & Letoublon (2012) 144.

of Antigone through a postcolonial perspective (*The Photographers*, 1999, Nikos Koundouros) and secondly that of Electra (*Electra*, 2014, Petros Sevastikoglou). In addition, Yiannis Soldatos in *The Enigma* (1998) and Filippos Tsitos in *Plato's Academy* (2009) work on the landmark<sup>36</sup> of Kolonos differently. The first questions the official version of Greek history by presenting the conditions of urban margins (hookers, immigrants and petty criminals), while in the second what we see (identity crises, the behaviour of modern Greek men and national stereotypes) are all combined and herald the national and economic crisis. Yet, the area of Kolonos may also become and represent a final destination as in the film "*Monkey Queen*".<sup>37</sup> At the same time in the Greek countryside we see evil spreading like a *Symptom* (2015, Angelos Frantzis): a creature, of unknown origins, spreads fear everywhere, similar to a filmic interpretation of a famine (*Oedipus Rex*), which is also central in the film *Desert Sky* (1997, Nikos Cornilios). The impressive black and white 'colour' in Cornilios's film and the depth of field in Frantzis's film are very effective in creating an atmosphere of fear and desolation. Thus the relation between tragedy and the audience is revived, and the existing references can be understood through the blend of the contemporary, the timeless and the atemporal.

The ever-changing limits of (self) defining the nation and the individual are the central themes of films such as *The Suspended Step of the Stork* and *Ulysses' Gaze* by Theo Angelopoulos, *Borderline* (1992, Panos Karkanavatos), *Ephemeral Town* (2000, Yorgos Zafeiris). We are able to recognise in the symbolic language of these films the "open ending", the loneliness of the "Ego" and the foreigner as the mirror image of the "Ego", the function of "Us" within the new conditions, the uncertainty of the refugee, the borders as no man's land, and the connotations regarding the concept of homeland. As we can discern from the titles (*The Suspended Step of the Stork*, *Borderline*, *Ephemeral Town*), we can recognise in the films the sense of

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36. Shooting fiction films would spread all around Greece: in the islands such as Milos (*The Years of the Big Heat*, 1991) and Leros (*Ariadni Lives in Leros*, 1993), in Epirus (*Hades*, 1996); at festivals in Thessalia (*Orpheus Descending*, 1995) and at Delphi (*Der Fall Ö*, 1991), in archaeological sites (*Equinox*, 1991) and in the city of Athens (*The Enigma*, *The Golden Apples of theesperides*, *No Sympathy for the Devil*, *Morning Patrol*).

37. Fleeing from Athens constitutes an indirect parable in the film *Runaway Day* (2013, Dimitris Bavellas) when another cataclysm — of an economic nature — features "Deucalion" and "Pyrrha" as characters, and the desolate city is transformed in a run-down area. This Athenian centre is absent from the screen or remains in the background (the camera takes only close ups of the young man) as a nightmarish and hostile environment in the film *Boy Eating the Bird's Food* (2015, Ectoras Lygizos).



Figure 12. *A/Alpha* (2014, Stathis Athanassiou).

suspension and transience, where the relation of the individual with alterity is examined as a process of redefining its identity. Travel as a narrative motif allows the fictional characters to recognise a social reality and also take a stance on social conflicts. The protagonists are often intellectuals or pass through an identity crisis. Moving across an urban or rural space acquires existential dimensions. For example, the structure of *The Suspended Step of the Stork* is that of a *passacaglia* (variations upon the same theme) and the subject matter of exile, restrictions and borders is represented in the scene where a village close to the borders is inhabited by minorities and the self-exiled “visitor” politician. In the films of Angelopoulos we can trace unchanging conditions of pain, collective experiences and pictures of human compassion.<sup>38</sup>

Anti-war mentality, the concepts of historicity, the dialogue and the conflicts of cultures acquire political meaning: strategies and arguments, declarations and denunciations, fabrications and political utopias. In the scripts of Greek filmography during the crisis (2010-2018) we can identify impartial and unfair speech, corruption and collusion, the values and the institutions of the past, and future political practices.<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, the myth of Antigone (Figure 12) proves to be the most popular: *Standing Aside, Watching* (2013, Yorgos Servetas), *Queen Antigone* (2014, Telémachos

38. Nobus & Pouli (2015) 191-205.

39. “Angelopoulos, despite his personal exasperation at the commercial failure of his films, was elevated to the status of a “national and cultural icon” beyond criticism or “questioning” [...] However, in the euphoria and optimism that dominated Greek social life before and after the Olympics, Angelopoulos’ films could not find their place. Society was going through a major transition from the monoculture of the previous century to the polyculture of the new millennium”. See Karalis (2017) 218.



Alexiou),<sup>40</sup> *Playing with Fire* (2014, Anneta Papathanassiou),<sup>41</sup> *A/Alpha* (2014, Stathis Athanassiou).<sup>42</sup> Then, there are films that have a more indirect relation to the myth of the Labdacids: *The Enigma* (1998, Yiannis Soldatos), *Trilogy I: The Weeping Meadow* (2004),<sup>43</sup> *Charlie's Son* (2008, Karolos Zonaras), *Strella* (2009, Panos Ch. Koutras), *My Blood* (2012, Diamantis Karanastassis); and to the myth of the Atreidae: *Minor Freedoms* (2008, Costas Zappas), *Electra* (2014, Petros Sevastikoglou),<sup>44</sup> *Interruption* (2015, Yorgos Zois).

A number of the films from that period are contemporary versions and receptions of three ancient Greek myths of the Underworld;<sup>45</sup> the films

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40. A young woman lives with her critically ill father and the teenage brother in a small seaside town in Greece. She has been working in a fashion-shop for months but is still unpaid, so she is unable to pay for her father's medical care. Meanwhile, she is also hopelessly trying to protect her little brother from the school bullies. She wants to cry out, but finds no words. She wants to run away, but her legs are tied. One day, as she's looking for cigarettes in her brother's school bag, she finds his copy of Sophocles's *Antigone*. Gradually, she begins to identify with the heroine. Powerless and self-destructive, she becomes a victim of her fate, walking the path to her own tragic fall and final catharsis, with a chorus of three young men leading the way.
  41. *Playing with Fire* is a documentary about actresses in Afghanistan, who are courageous enough to be involved with theatre arts and consequently find themselves facing harsh criticism, social disapproval and even threats against their lives and the lives of their families. A young actress was in fact murdered on Kabul and many young actresses have been forced to flee the country. Anneta Papathassiou, the film director, visits Kabul to teach ancient Greek drama and to record the lives of Afghan artists.
  42. A woman is forced to sit under her brother's rotting corpse in the middle of a burned forest, until the authorities decide that she has been punished enough.
  43. "Like Eteocles and Polynices, the children of Oedipean incest, Eleni's sons will also die by each other's hand during the civil war. The entire narrative seems thus to become inscribed in the universe of the tragic error and in particular, incest, which transforms the future of the heroes of the Theban cycle into destiny. But let us not forget that tragedy is, first and foremost, a playground for mythical reference and modern-day stakes; a place for the expression of the primordial and the politic". See Rollet (2012b) 309.
  44. The story is a contemporary version of the ancient Greek myth of Electra. Electra is a young girl, a stranger in her own land, as she is in every other land. From Africa to Europe, the film is a puzzle made up of pieces of her fragmented identity.
  45. These filmic mythological references describing a younger generation of Greeks who find themselves in danger can be perceived as political statements. These are parables around apprenticeship and an uncertain future. Myths about Hades are combined with fairy tales about monsters and grandmothers' curses (*The Cistern*, 2001, Christos Dimas), while the threatening worlds are presented in a road movie (*The World Again*, 2002, Nikos Cornilios). Versions of the myth of Orpheus can be seen in films showing their protagonists fleeing from "the city in crisis" (*Orpheus' Path*, 2013, Costas Kolimenos), the world of drugs (*The Case of Eurydice*, 2009, Freddy Vianellis), and music (*Icaros' Dream*, 2005, Costas Natsis). At the same time, the construction of a genealogy in stories about the male



discuss the myths of Alcestis and Admetus, Persephone and Hades, Orpheus and Eurydice. The mythic and tragic intertextual elements aim to express an ideological meaning. The reference to the myth is defined by a specific ideology so as to criticize the society it receives it. The mythemes and symbolisms of the Underworld appear to indicate a transition from life to death. In these adaptations the aims and effectiveness of some politicians are questioned, especially the vision for a European unification as a step towards an economic integration and part of an ambitious political plan.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, we can detect recognizable traces from other fiction or non-fiction texts. Many directors resort to using visual metonyms and metaphors, others end up to a strict stylized form, where the familiarity of the original text converses dialectically or controversially with the unfamiliar, the tragic with the parodic or grotesque sophistication.

I. TRAGEDY IN THE BORDERS: ALCESTIS IN *HADES* (1996)  
AND *AIAS* [*AJAX*] AS HOSTAGE (2005)

At the beginning of the nineties, after the end of the cold war, the atmosphere in Greece was characterised by geopolitical phobias,<sup>47</sup> resulting from

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(*The Guardian's Son*) and female coming-of-age (*The Surface of Things*, 2017, Nancy Biniadaki) by using the landscape and myths of Pindos and the river Heridasos is also traced.

46. The European Union had initiated the economic and monetary union, therefore governmental officials expected the euro to serve as an anchor for a macroeconomic stability and contribute to the growth of within-the-Union commerce, an increase in investments, and the development of all European economies. The Maastricht Treaty (the Treaty on European Union, 1991-1992) led to the use of a single European currency (the euro) in all countries until the end of the nineties and the establishment of a European Central Bank (ECB). At the same time, it assisted in the coordination of the economic policies of the member countries, while special attention was given to the "budgetary discipline", that is, to a reduction and avoidance of budgetary deficits. The member countries had to fulfil "The Maastricht criteria" within a given transition period, in order to participate in the Eurozone. After Greece was accepted to participate in the Economic and Monetary Union, the liberal plan of the Mitsotakis government and the modernisation changes during the Simitis governments led to an exceptional rise of the Greek Stock Exchange, decreased the national deficit, promoted privatisations and constructed major projects, such as the Athens Metro and the "Eleftherios Venizelos" airport.
47. We can see an ironic touch to the way the Greeks are perceived (mentality and how they manage their relation with antiquity) in the following cinematic genres. For example, the historical splatter *Evil: in the Time of Heroes* (Yorgos Noussias), the documentary *Black Bee* (2005, Theodoros Maragos), the coming out comedy *The Guide* (2011, Zacharias Mavroeidis), the 3D fantasy farce *Magic Mirror* (2015, Christos Dimas), and the historical biography *Alcibiades, the Untamed Student of Socrates*, 2016, Dimitris Makris). In



Figure 13. *Hades* (1996, Stelios Charalambopoulos).

the breakup of Yugoslavia, the dispute between Athens and Skopje about the name of the neighbouring country and, finally from the Imia crisis in 1996. At the same time, the attitude of the Greeks towards Albanians has undergone many changes.<sup>48</sup> In *Hades* (1996) Stelios Charalambopoulos attempts an intertextual reading that intertwines the political<sup>49</sup> with the myth-

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the English language film *Promakhos. The First Line* (2014, Coerte & John Voorhees), which follows a schematic dramaturgy, the description of a desolate Greek reality (hunger, poverty, demonstrations) is combined with the claim for the return of the Parthenon marbles to Greece.

48. Initially the newcomers, the majority of whom were Greeks living in the south of Albania, were seen with sympathy. However, the illegal entrance of convicts coming out of Albanian prisons caused a rise in the crime rate, therefore Greek society started facing the Albanians with mistrust and prejudice, a fact that many times led to racism. This treatment changed after 2003, when immigrants arriving at the country (e.g. from Pakistan or Somalia) possessed other cultural features. The majority of the Albanians proved to be hard-working, while their children integrated quickly, as they attended Greek schools. After a number of legislation initiatives, starting in 1997, a large number of illegal immigrants acquired legal status.
49. The film converses cleverly and inventively with *The Suspended Step of the Stork* by Angelopoulos. The intellectual journalist (Gregory Carr) looks into the conditions refugees live in a village near the borders and traces the steps of a missing politician. Being a TV reporter he constitutes the main filmic vehicle for ideas, as it is also suggested in the film's poster where he is flying nude over the borderline of prohibitions. The other vehicle for ideas in the film is the politician "visitor of the world" (Marcello Mastroianni), who opts for silence as he considers himself a political refugee in his own country. "Borders in *The Suspended Step of the Stork* are, first of all, the ones that separate the world of men from

ological element. The principal mythological features of this film involve Heracles entering Hades in order to bring back to the upper world Alcestis, who had sacrificed herself for her husband Admetus. In *Hades*, Heracles is represented by Manos (Yorgos Moroyannis), a forty five-year-old lawyer (Figure 13), who has to go down to Hades, in order to redeem and purify himself. Coming back, he will bring with him Evanthia-Alcestis who, in a way, has sacrificed herself for her husband, who is of Albanian origins, while looking for his relatives in Albania. Greece and Albania represent here the “upper world” and the “underworld”, the “here” and the “other side” of the riverbank. The film describes a journey through the ever-changing historical environment of the Balkans, one of insecurity and financial destitution; a journey to the North to find a woman who had disappeared twenty-five years ago. The setting of the film is an area where, according to the tradition, there was the passage to the Underworld. The deadlocks of the three main characters of the film are linked with the spaces of the film’s narrative: Athens, Ioannina, Florina, Necromanteion and Borders. Evanthia is in Albania, and her husband secludes himself in a monastery near Florina, whereas the existential crisis of the lawyer strikes him in the capital of prosperity, Athens.<sup>50</sup> The choice of the areas the film is shot, where we can see physical or emotional action, discloses the psychological state of the main characters. Indoor areas (hotel room, Athenian flat, monastery) with their labyrinth like corridors depict the deadlock of the characters. The claustrophobic, humid and dark space of the Necromanteion and the subdued light of the monastery suggest the “formidable room” in the House of Hades. The borderland space where illegal immigrants negotiate the price of their escape refers to the myth of the coin paid to Charon by the dead person’s relatives for allowing passage to the underworld. Considering that theatrical space has often been used as a reflection of the characters’ mental state, it is not by coincid-

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the black, formless, faceless mass. Precisely because, even here, chaos lurks, the ancient Greeks invented gods to protect them in the land of the living. “It is this far away (far away from the thresholds and borders) that Angelopoulos unflaggingly explores. Though the river in the *Suspended Step* or the lake in *The Hunters* (1977) evokes the marshes and lagoons where Artemis dwelt, it is mainly to the myth of Medusa that Angelopoulos seems to be referring. (...) Undoubtedly, the articulation of the near and the far in Angelopoulos’s films is the continuation of the archaic ‘Gorgonic’ image of otherness”. See Rollet (2012a) 284.

50. The feast at the house of the tragedian Admetus is depicted in the film with the sequences where we see the prosperity of professional success and the serenity of the familial environment. Solving the mystery case of a woman’s disappearance triggers an unexpected death and the concomitant financial arrangements.

ence that the first meeting of Evanthia with Manos should take place in the impressive ruins of an ancient theatre. The hero, after completing his mission, will come back to the familiar world of the Athenian capital, having had a taste of the world of the “Other”. Yet, the Other has infiltrated Greek daily life and has become a new reality. It is not accidental that the Albanian intermediary at the borders is a musician and a father; the strange and dangerous turns into the familiar, revealing as such their hidden traits.

Although *Hades*’ plot does not include any death, we can indirectly understand the passage to the world of the dead. Necromanteion remains the area where the living communicate with the spirits of the dead, the snow-capped mountains of Albania symbolise the Underworld and the borders between the countries become the gates of Hades. Evanthia and Manos cross the “borderland”: the first one vanishes for twenty-five years; the second has to face his existential void. Manos as a modern Heracles and Fotis as a new Admetus are trying to save their beloved; however, when she (Alcestis and Evanthia) dies, they continue their lives in the upper world despite plunging into grief (monastery).<sup>51</sup> Evanthia-Alcestis appears in the last third of the film (Figure 14): when she first meets Manos in an ancient theatre, she has an eerie look, silent, dressed in black and is reminiscent of people coming from the world of the dead. In the Upper World she changes: according to the myth, when Alcestis comes back to the world of the living with the help of Heracles, she seems younger and more beautiful. As for her moral behaviour, Evanthia acts similarly with Alcestis, a pious woman, a model of marital faithfulness and devotion. Evanthia sacrifices personal ambitions and then her life (being a victim of the political situation in her husband’s country), in order to bring his parents to Greece.

The actions of the “dark guy” Giole (Charon) and the Albanian Fotis (the ferryman) reverse the myth: they transfer the refugees (the dead) to the world of the living (Greece). The refugees (the “scrawny”) are the “dead” who come from the Underworld, victims of political and social circumstances. A sequence of narrative details and solutions employ mythemes and motifs of ancient tragedy. We can also trace other elements beyond the descent to Hades/resurrection, and self-sacrifice/marital devotion; among

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51. An important difference from the actions and ethos of the mythological Admetus is that Fanis knows about the deeds of Manos/Heracles and becomes an accessory in what he does, whereas at the end of the film he lets Evanthia choose from that moment on her lifestyle as a return for her sacrifice.



Figure 14. *Hades* (1996, Stelios Charalambopoulos).

them the christening of Fanis corresponding to the deeds of Admetus,<sup>52</sup> the passage of Evanthia to the Underworld for the sake of Fanis's parents,<sup>53</sup> the fight of Heracles with Death, the return of a more beautiful, "resurrected" Alcestis, and elements of grief in common with mythological tradition<sup>54</sup>. In one of the last sequences (in Athens) Evanthia is removing the paint off her face (the face as a mask) and Fotis is singing an Epirotic variation of the song: "*I wish I had two lives*", which recalls a critical comment by Evanthia: "You should have two lives; so we can accommodate everything in both".

#### MAN AND IMMIGRANT

"This film is about a child who wants to have an honourable life, like a man, and also die like a man. His new country, however, rejects him violently and

52. Fanis Zygouris, the Albanian husband of Evanthia, is christened for her sake, as Euripides's Admetus, who yokes a lion and a wild boar to a chariot for the sake of Alcestis.

53. Alcestis could have been saved, if she had accepted that Admetus's parents die instead of him (vv. 614-740).

54. The lament of the woman in the boat, who after losing her husband cuts her braid and throws it together with the dead body into the sea, is parallel with the lyrical song of lamentation in ancient tragedy and the cutting of the hair (vv. 215-217 of the Euripidean tragedy) as an expression of grief. Still, the money paid to the ferryman and the expressions of grief are elements dispersed in different times.



Figure 15. *Hostage*.

his old one does not provide him any shelter. The viewer will hate him at the beginning — because all his fears of the Greeks towards the Albanians will surface. I hope though that at the end he will have understood something about his motives. Does anyone like Oedipus? He was a punk. What really matters is to understand his tragic existence”.<sup>55</sup>

What helps the audience understand what Constantine Giannaris has attempted to do<sup>56</sup> is the way in which Sophocles in *Aias* presents and discusses male honour and the renowned saying from vv. 479-480, ἀλλ’ ἢ καλῶς ζῆν ἢ καλῶς τεθνηκέναι τὸν εὐγενῆ χροή (“a man should have a life of honour or die with honour”) (Figure 15) that is written in the opening titles (Figure 16) of the road film *Hostage* (2005). The director sets the action in the period before the 2004 Olympic Games and utilises the ancient myth, in order to reflect about cultural and national differences and matters concerning maleness and national (in)security.

The impetuous Aias with his majestic carriage is portrayed in the film by a delinquent Albanian, suspended between the two countries and Balkan

55. Constantine Giannaris / an interview to E. Kanellis: “Constantine Giannaris. The director who will divide Greece (...and the Hollywood will *pinch* him)”, *Tachydromos*, 19/2/2005.

56. See Fotopoulos, N. & Apostolakis, S., “An upheaval over the film *Hostage*. Protests against C. Giannaris’ film”, *Eleftherotypia*, 30/11/2004; Georgakopoulou, V., “Hostage-ship of prejudice: a bomb postpones the premiere”, *Eleftherotypia*, 3/3/2005. Giannaris comments: “at least the film — functioning as an indicator — managed to show how much this country has changed, how xenophobic it is, how suspicious and how intolerant it has become”. (*Proto Plano*). The critics write cautiously about the film in the morning press after its premiere at the cinemas, but they don’t mention its relation to ancient drama.





Figure 16. *Hostage*.

societies<sup>57</sup> (Figure 16). At this point lies the contemporary notion of the tragic element that Giannaris is trying to describe in his film: “What is the meaning of an ancient tragedy? In this film the hero is placed in the centre of a very significant historical change. The collapse of the socialist regimes and the inflow of thousands of people into Greece is a situation that involves hubris, curse and catharsis (...). If we dig into this insecurity, we can learn a lot about the modern meaning of national identity and the fear for national alteration”.<sup>58</sup> Although the film seems to be a fictional reconstruction of the bloodstained bus highjack by an Albanian unskilled worker in April 1999, Giannaris aims to generalise: “It is not my intention to be anti-Hellenic or anti-Albanian. I was interested in showing the personal tragedy of a person who lives through momentous historical changes: the collapse of civilisations, border and myths”.

It is easy to distinguish, even from what the film’s title signifies, elements drawing on ancient Greek themes: on the one hand, the great epic

57. “In our postmodern world a man did a hopeless act mainly in order to restore his lost honour. This was exactly what moved me: the notion of male honour. Elion is a naive and mindless child who breaks the codes of a society, the ones he himself followed and so he is brutally punished. He decides to restore his masculinity and honour, in these outdated pre-modernist terms, he goes out armed to claim what he has lost and finds himself suspended between two homelands: the homeland that cannot assimilate him and is his future and the homeland he has denounced but has also betrayed him”. Constantine Giannaris / an interview to E. Kanellis: “Constantine Giannaris. The director who will divide Greece (...and the Hollywood will *pinch* him)”, *Tachydromos*, 19/2/2005.

58. See Constantine Giannaris / interview to G. Kaplani: “I want to dig into our insecurity”, *Ta Nea*, 4/12/ 2004.

Figure 17. *Hostage*.

poet, and on the other the description of an extreme action (hostageship), which in parallel signifies an “internal hostageship” of the perpetrator-kidnapper (“all passengers are captives of a secret passion of some illicitness”). ‘Hostageship’ of seven passengers in the hands of an armed young Albanian in a twenty-four hour (unity of time) wandering in Northern Greece that unquestionably leads to death. The environment of the bus that functions, in a fictional economy, as a microcosm of the rural and urban contemporary conservative Greece, ascribes the necessary unity of space (Figure 17). The co-passengers do not just accompany the anti-hero, but they represent facets of Greek society: drugs, homosexuality, adultery, frustrations, phobias and aggression. If the tragedy’s dispute over the weapons of Achilles is portrayed in the film with the fights between men who are trafficking arms, Elion’s criminal conduct functions as a contemporary imprint of insolence and hubris. The fictional reconstruction of the events moves beyond the manichaeism of the patterns: Elion has not only broken the love codes of an closed provincial society, but also the rules of the state. Moreover, just as Aias, he is also extremely vulnerable to feelings of shame. Since apart from bravery and glory, the ideal of the mythological hero is the appreciation and admiration of others as traits that endow his dignity and self-respect, in the same way the Albanian immigrant invokes as a confirmation of his diligence the opinion the Greeks had about him in the village.<sup>59</sup>

59. The Albanian unskilled worker feels like an outsider and isolated like Aias, who was ridiculed. The second part of the tragedy, the trial of Aias, corresponds to Elion’s conflict with the police and the mass media. If in Aias the captive Briseis and the armour are the

Figure 18. *Hostage*.

Elion, like Aias, is psychotically distressed and in a manic state he turns into an isolated victim. Elion is not closed to the tragic “eloquence” but rather to the hero of the Homeric tradition who is deprived of eloquence. We see the young hero stuttering to allow slips of the tongues that insinuate his sexual abuse (“these that cannot be said”).<sup>60</sup> Moreover the director shows that the characters’ motives are driven by sexual interests: “the fear of the Greeks towards the foreigners includes the threat of an intense sexuality expressed by these unmarried men who have suddenly flooded the countryside, threatening as such an aging society that is slowly dying out”.<sup>61</sup>

The intentional abuse of a man’s honour in the confinement cells of the Police connects Aias’s myth with the male version of the cinematic subgenre of the “rape revenge movie”.<sup>62</sup> That is because a man rarely kills himself in

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trophies, in *Hostage* these correspond with the fiancée in Albania and the (smuggled) weapons.

60. The sodomised young man stutters when trying to imply his rape (“what the hell are you doing, I am not a faggot”), and in the film we see successive references to male frankness and bluntness (“I can’t stand being screwed over anymore”). Moreover the immigrant’s body has acquired erotic qualities (bathroom, exercising). Additional elements that refer to the body and voice of Aias (sweating, stuttering), the character (stubbornness) and the conditions: madness, humiliation, sorrow.

61. See Giannaris, C., “From Flamur Pislit to my Elion Senia. The director of *Hostage* gives to *A.V.* his notes on the film”, op.cit.

62. When facing (not accidentally) the infertile and vengeful Greek husband and policeman (“to fuck his wife... a cock inside his own house”), the Albanian economic migrant and

public as a revenge for him being raped; the specific narrative sequence of the film serves, on the one hand to utilize the device of “Aias’ laughter” as an expression of triumph and pleasure or derision and, on the other, to portray it as a desperate act in order to restore the lost male honour. Aias leaves his tent to murder Greek generals; likewise, Elion gets out of his den to restore his honour after being abused by Greek policemen (Figure 18). There is only a difference of political nature in the way it is used in the film: “He does what a man has to do. He decides to restore his masculinity and honour, using these out-dated pre-postmodern terms, and he goes out armed to claim back what he has lost, but he finds himself suspended between two homelands: the homeland that he cannot integrate and is now his future and his own homeland that he himself has denounced but which has also betrayed him. This is the homeland that finally kills him and so he experiences the loss of both his homeland and honour”.

The Sophoclean version of the myth regarding the fight over the burial of the hero is settled after a speech competition; in Giannaris’s film this is presented in contemporary terms: anachronisms express the speech of immigrants, the speech used by the authorities (police, mass media) and the speech of “diversity”. The tormented face of Elion Senia (“pure dirt”) becomes a catalyst and a mirror for the Greeks, who oppose him by using offensive anecdotes. At the same time, the element of violence (beheaded oxen and rams) and the sadistic description of torturing animals in the tragedy are conveyed in the film as violent and aggressive episodes that happen during the bus highjacking. Giannaris is opting for the diptych structure of the tragedy (using environments in Albania and Greece),<sup>63</sup> while at the same time the bus passengers acting as a chorus, underscore the (tragic)

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delinquent bus hijacker appears as an “agent of causing conflict”. At the same time Elion continuously collates the position of women, love affairs and matters of honour with the relations between Greece and Albania. If in *Aias* the captive Briseis and the armour are the trophies, in *Hostage* these match with the fiancée in Albania and the (smuggled) weapons.

63. TV crews act like predators: the car procession accompanied by the police moving in the Greek countryside seems to be heading for the Underworld (“he wants to have young victims to lament as he was lamented by his mother”). Once again the Greek-Albanian borders acquire political and mythological dimensions: the demand of the immigrant to return (“but we still have much road ahead for my house”) proves to be a lie. The trap of democracy is set beyond the Greek territory (“Greek democracy, do not enter beyond this point”). Similarly, the bus driver (Arto Apartian) acts as a Psychopomp.

moral isolation of “Aias”. The seven other passengers in the bus understand the motives of the foreigner, while his actions become the incentive for the emergence and description of their own personal deadlocks. The second part of the tragedy, which in a way is Aias’ trial with the corpse of the hero present on stage, could be paralleled to the filmic conflict of Elion and the passengers with the police and the mass media. Having the representatives of the authorities participate in continuous speech competitions (again we see a loudhailer and a television camera) reveals the boundaries of authority and hostility, the political motives and the traps of the official state. In the film the roles of the policeman and of the hostage-victim share similar traits with the character of Ulysses (respectively that of “deceit” and “humanity”). Elion’s mother is another character in the *dramatis personae* who is reminiscent of the well-mannered Tekmessa, since she also has an advisory and imploring role (especially in lamentation).<sup>64</sup> This female figure sanctified and deprived of any erotic characteristics, is employed in order to convey orphanhood, deportation and homage to the Woman. This emerges, in particular, from the offensive way the family of Elion’s fiancée in Albania regard her (“*all the people laugh at your son’s abjection*”) and when the mother appears as a mediator, imploring and vehemently supporting her son’s offended masculinity (“*my son is a man, you hear me*”). We should keep in mind that in the opening scene of the film the mother’s letter is being burnt (“*foreign lands eat even your bones*”), while at the end we listen to her lamenting her dead child.

The use of the myth does not aim to challenge but to denounce the mechanisms of violence.<sup>65</sup> Giannaris’s film utilises the details of the tragic myth to express a political filmic discourse that concerns national and sexual identities drawing on subjects such as immigration,<sup>66</sup> political differ-

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64. “A nice woman, a tragic figure”: long hair, used as a mediator, she uses the speech as a command and as a supplication, she talks without seeing him: being lost in her recollections (she lost him when he was a child), she thinks about the future “smiling, like nothing has happened, that’s how I want you to come again, you have the rest of your life to enjoy” and she laments at the edge of the cliff behind the clouds.

65. “For the Greeks, Albanians represent the “Other”, the foreign, they are violent with a tendency to criminality, have too much testosterone and do not have credibility (“besa”). When you visit Albania, you realise that the people there believe the same for you. What we see then is two distorted mirrors facing each other”. Constantine Giannaris / an interview to E. Kanellis, *Tachydromos*, 19/2/2005.

66. *Philoctetes. An Outsider’s Myth* (2016, Katrin Kelketenidis) is a short documentary that redefines the classic Greek tragedy *Philoctetes* through the prism of everyday life and the struggles of a refugee from Sierra Leone. The film takes place in Athens, amidst growing

ences, relationships between men and how authority imposes its will (police misconduct in Greece and Albania). There is also a connection between the two terrorist worlds, this of the bus and that of the police and the mass media, and a reference to petty-bourgeois bigotry, fake news and the illusion that we deserve something more. “My intention is neither anti-Greek nor anti-Albanian. I was interested in showing the tragedy of a person who lives through significant historical changes: the collapse of civilisations, borders, and myths. It is not a film about an Albanian, but about Greece”.<sup>67</sup>

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anti-immigrant sentiments as a result of a country entering its eighth year of economic recession.

67. See Giannaris, C., “From Flamur Pislit to my Elion Senia. The director of *Hostage* gives to *A.V.* his notes on the film”, op.cit.



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## INDEX OF FILMS (1989-2018)

1. *Oh! Babylon*. Costas Ferris. 1989.
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3. *Two Suns in the Sky*. Yorgos Stambouloupoulos. 1991.
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5. *The Years of the Big Heat*. Frida Liappa. 1991.
6. *Der Fall Ö*. Rainer Simon. 1991.
7. *Nike of Samothrace*. Dimos Avdeliodis. 1991-94.
8. *Equinox*. Nikos Cornilios. 1991.
9. *Antinoos*. Dionisos Andronis. 1991. (Short film).
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11. *The Starry Dome*. Costas Aristopoulos. 1993.
12. *A Daring Story*. Dimitris Makris. 1993.
13. *Ariadne Lives in Leros*. Thanassis Rakintzis. 1993.
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19. *The Stranger from Elea*. Dimos Theos. 1996.
20. *The Slaughter of The Cock*. Andreas Pantzis. 1996.
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23. *Idaeen Myths*. Lefteris Haronitis. 1996-99. (Documentary).
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31. *The Enigma*. Yiannis Soldatos. 1998.
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33. *Nekyia II*. Alexandros Fasois. 1998. (Documentary).
34. *The Vernal Convocation of the Rural Guards*. Dimos Avdeliodis. 1999.
35. *The Monkey Queen*. Christopher Christophis. 1999.
36. *Mourning Rock*. Philippos Koutsaftis. 2000. (Documentary).
37. *Medea's Nurse*. Yorgos Tzaneris. 2000. (Short film).

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39. *Ancient Greek's Symposium*. Dimitri Vorris. 2000. (Short film).
40. *Thief or Reality. Three Versions*. Antouanetta Angelidi. 2001.
41. *Acropolis*. Eva Stefani. 2001/2004. (Documentary).
42. *Reflection on the Role*. Freddy Vianelis. 2001.
43. *Evagoras' Vow*. Andreas Pantzis. 2001.
44. *The Cistern*. Christos Dimas. 2001.
45. *The Dance of the Horses*. Christos Vouppouras. 2001. (Documentary).
46. *Lilly's Story*. Robert Manthoulis. 2002.
47. *Guardians of Time*. Margarita Manda. 2002. (Documentary).
48. *The World Again*. Nikos Cornilios. 2002.
49. *Ancient Greek's Symposium (Part 2)*. Dimitris Vorris. 2002. (Short film).
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54. *Real Life*. Panos Ch. Koutras. 2004.
55. *Delivery*. Nikos Panayotopoulos. 2004.
56. *Testosterone*. Yorgos Panoussopoulos. 2004.
57. *The Sacred Rock*. Myrto Paraschi. 2004. (Documentary).
58. *Hardcore*. Denis Iliadis. 2004.
59. *Hostage*. Constantinos Giannaris. 2005.
60. *Icarus' Dream*. Costas Natsis. 2005.
61. *Black Baaa...* Thodoros Marangos. 2005. (Documentary).
62. *Supplicants*. Stavros Ioannou. 2006. (Documentary).
63. *The Guardian's Son*. Dimitris Koutsibassakos. 2007.
64. *Pandora*. Yiorgos Stambouloupoulos. 2007.
65. *Styx*. Alexia Roiter. 2007. (Short film).
66. *The Dust of Time*. Theo Angelopoulos. 2008.
67. *Minor Freedoms*. Costas Zapas. 2008.
68. *Strella. Woman's Way*. Panos Ch. Koutras. 2009.
69. *Eden is West*. Costa-Gavras. 2009.
70. *Charlie's Son*. Karolos Zonaras. 2009.
71. *Plato's Academy*. Philippos Tsitos. 2009.
72. *Evil in the Time of Heroes*. Yorgos Nousias. 2009.
73. *Qadir. An Afghan Ulyseus*. Anneta Papathanassiou. 2009. (Documentary).
74. *The Case of Eurydice*. Freddy Vianelis. 2009. (Documentary).
75. *Lithi*. Gavril Tzafkas. 2009. (Short film).
76. *Dos. A Love Story, in Reverse*. Stathis Athanassiou. 2010.
77. *Voyage to Mytilene*. Lakis Papastathis. 2010.
78. *Gadfly. The Riders of Pylos*. Nikos Kalogeropoulos. 2010.
79. *Oedipus*. Ioakim Mylonas. 2010. (Short film).
80. *Venus in the Garden*. Telémachos Alexiou. 2011.

81. *A Ship for Palestine*. Nikos Koundouros. 2011.
82. *The Guide*. Zacharias Mavroeidis. 2011.
83. *About Love Reason. Plato's Symposium*. Dimitris Makris. 2011.
84. *My Blood*. Diamantis Karanastassis. 2012.
85. *Higuita. The Boy*. 2012.
86. *Standing Aside, Watching*. Yannis Servetas. 2013.
87. *Orpheus' Path*. Costas Kollimenos. 2013.
88. *Runaway Day*. Dimitris Bavelas. 2013.
89. *Recycling Medea*. Asteris Koutoulas. 2013. (Documentary).
90. *Trip to Delphi*. Apostolia Papaioannou. 2013. (Documentary).
91. *Passage into History*. Yiannis V. Lapatas. 2013. (Documentary).
92. *Xenia*. Panos Ch. Koutras. 2014.
93. *Queen Antigone*. Telémachos Alexiou. 2014.
94. *A/Alpha*. Stathis Athanassiou. 2014.
95. *Electra*. Petros Sevastikoglou. 2014.
96. *Forget Me Not*. Yiannis Fagras. 2014.
97. *Promakhos*. Coerte and John Voorhees. 2014.
98. *The Revenge of Dionysos*. Dimitris Kollatos. 2014.
99. *Matriarchy*. Nikos Cornilios. 2014.
100. *Playing with Fire*. Annetta Papathanssiou. 2014. (Documentary).
101. *Medea Louder Than Any Thought*. Nikos Grammatikos. 2014. (Documentary).
102. *The Archaeologist*. Kimon Tsakiris. 2014. (Documentary).
103. *The Great Goddess of Cyprus*. Stavros Papageorgiou. 2014. (Documentary).
104. *Medea Melea*. Christos Karambelas. 2014. (Short film).
105. *Fragile*. Maria Leonida. 2014. (Short film). (Documentary).
106. *The Secret of Theseus*. Marios Iordanou. 2014. (Short film).
107. *Interruption*. Yorgos Zois. 2015.
108. *Symptom*. Angelos Frantzis. 2015.
109. *Magic Mirror*. Christos Dimas. 2015.
110. *Suntan*. Argiris Papadimitropoulos. 2015.
111. *Blind Sun*. Joyce A. Nashawati. 2015.
112. *Hail Arcadia*. Philippos Koutsaftis. 2015. (Documentary).
113. *I Own to Dionysus*. Yiannis Voultisidis. 2015. (Documentary).
114. *Icarus*. Yorgos Fortunis. 2015. (Short film).
115. *Eratosthenes*. Costas Vakkas. 2015. (Short film). (Documentary).
116. *Delos*. Andonis-Theohari Kioukas. 2015. (Short film). (Documentary).
117. *Drink and Be Merry*. Lena Athanassopoulou. 2015. (Short film). (Documentary).
118. *Alcibiades. The Untamed Student of Socrates*. Dimitris Makris. 2016.
119. *In the Shadow of Atrides' Curse*. Dimitris Dimitroulias. 2016.
120. *Park*. Sophia Exarchou. 2016.
121. *33.333. The Odyssey of Nikos Kazantzakis*. Menios Karayannis. 2016. (Documentary).

122. *Into the Centre of the Wheel*. Orfeas Peretzis. 2016. (Documentary).
123. *Philoctetes-An Outsider's Myth*. Katrin Kelketenidis. 2016. (Short film). (Documentary).
124. *Deconstructing Interruption*. Stelios Moraitidis. 2016. (Documentary).
125. *The Surface of Things*. Nancy Biniadaki. 2017.
126. *Son of Sofia*. Elina Psykou. 2017.
127. *The Journey of Orpheus*. 2017. Theofilos Dadis. (Documentary).
128. *Olympus: Four Paths to Reach the Gods*. Nikos Nturlios. 2017. (Documentary).
129. *In Search of Orpheus*. Tzeli Chatzidimitriou. 2017. (Documentary).
130. *Persephone's Mystery*. Vassilis Papaliouras. 2017. (Documentary).
131. *Free Subject*. Stella Theodorakis. 2018.
132. *Sunrise in Kimmeria*. Simon Farmakas. 2018.
133. *Five Good Gliafia... Three Drachmas*. Dimitris Thangalos. 2018. (Documentary).
134. *Ellinikon*. Konstantinos Prepis. 2018. (Short film).

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