

HYPERREAL SPACE AND URBAN EXPERIENCE IN CONTEMPORARY GREEK CINEMA

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Introduction

During the past two decades, a growing interest in the study of space and geography has become prominent in numerous academic fields. In film studies, an increasing number of publications explore the different connections between film and architecture: from the construction of space in particular films, to the representation of public/private places, to the different modes of structuring the look.¹ In order to investigate the different urban experiences that diverse social groups have in contemporary Athens, this paper will focus on some examples found in contemporary Greek cinema. By comparing and contrasting three quite dissimilar films, I will bring to the surface their similarities and oppositions, as well as highlight their various allegories and the cognitive mapping that they create. Moreover, borrowing Pallasmaa's concept of "lived space" and Abbas' typology of "urban space," I will examine the different modes of representing the characters' lived space and their ways of looking at the city. As Athens constitutes a discursive space with a wide range of possibly volatile meanings within the cinematic discourse,² my paper aims to investigate these meanings and reconstruct the contemporary image of Athens in recent Greek cinema.

From the Edge of the City (1998)

Directed by Konstantinos Yannaris, a young Greek filmmaker, and screened at numerous film festivals around the world, *From the Edge of the City* portrays the story of a group of young immigrants from the former Russian Republics³ who live with their parents in Menidi, a poor suburb at the edge of Athens. Omonoia Square becomes their base at night where they engage in various petty crimes, such as stealing cars, taking drugs and gambling. The central character, Sasia, leads us into the world of these young delinquents who are struggling to establish their lives and identities in the Greek environment. Sasia gives up his job at a construction site and takes up a career both as a pimp and as a male prostitute for gay men. Similarly, all his friends earn their living from prostitution and have the chance to ride inexpensive cars and receive free doses of cocaine. The bleak reality of their lives progresses from bad to worse leading to deaths, murders and arrests by the police. Despite the obviousness of the theme, however, the filmmaker manages to treat his subject with respect and a significant amount of humour. Sasia opens and closes the film by looking at the camera

and introducing himself: “My name is Pont, Rosopont.” Furthermore, an interview with the filmmaker, whose voice we hear without ever seeing him, runs parallel to the stories that are depicted to simultaneously act as punctuation and commentary. In terms of narration and style, Giannaris borrows heavily from the neorealist agenda: the use of non-actors and location shooting, combined with the explicit social concerns, are some of the key distinctive features of the film. At the same time, he juxtaposes these neorealist elements with numerous art-cinema stylistic conventions such as discontinuity editing, fast and slow-motion, multiple protagonists and episodic structures, subjective realism, flashbacks and flash-forwards.⁴ The employment of this art-cinema vocabulary, however, should not be considered as a belated manifestation of a Greek art-cinema, the so-called New Greek Cinema.⁵ While the international art film of the 1960s and 1970s sought to express a new national consciousness and was identified with new forms of national identification, as in the case of the New Polish Cinema or the New Hungarian Cinema, Giannaris creates a cognitive map of contemporary geopolitical life and seeks to adapt the old formula to new social experiences.⁶ The representation of contemporary urban space is one of his central sites in which he pursues this project.

The city of Athens plays a significant part in the story, as if it were an additional character in the script, affecting and shaping the lives of the protagonists. The references to the city are everywhere, from the title of the film to the smallest discussions among the young immigrants. For them, the city is a constant point of fascination and living in the heart of it, at Omonoia Square at night, makes them feel superior to their parents who live more or less excluded in a suburb at the city’s edge. They take pride in knowing all parts of the city well, as if this is enough to be considered cosmopolitan.

Most of the film is shot on location and the exterior night-time scenes seem to dominate the story. The interior spaces are therefore almost invariably depictions meetings with the upper-middle class Athenians who use the immigrants for sex and also friendly company. While the mainstream social life of the natives takes place in bars and clubs, the immigrants develop social activities in the open public space such as skating in the streets, dancing and hanging out in an open theatre or getting stoned by the beach. In addition, mobility is a typical aspect of the protagonists’ lives as they move from one place to another, from the edge of the city, to the centre and back. Although they usually walk or take the bus, they occasionally indulge in free car rides when they manage to borrow their customers’ expensive cars.

Despite the fact that the city occupies a central position in the film, the portrayal of the actual urban space is carried out in a fragmented way: the director avoids filming the famous monuments and spots that make Athens famous around the world. To a certain extent, it could be any big city, even Los Angeles, according to a Los Angeles Times reviewer.⁷ Giannaris tried meticulously to circumvent all the stereotypical images of the Greek capital in order to convey various urban experiences with a global undercurrent. His editing style tries to capture the experience of the city, not by means of classical, realistic conventions, but through fragmented shots, lack of establishing shots, de-centred compositions, fast and slow motion, step-printing photography and abrupt changes in the rhythm. In a way, this strategy effaces the real city and replaces it with fleeting glimpses that create a hyper-real cityscape. Before going deeper into this issue, however, I would like to bring two other films into the discussion.

The Mating Game (1998) and *Risotto* (2000)

These two films were directed by a young female director, Olga Malea, who has been quite popular with Greek audiences. *The Mating Game* depicts the story of three sisters playing the mating game, each with different rules. They conspire among themselves to change each other's lives with dubious yet amusing results. The other film, *Risotto*, deals with the issue of female emancipation in Greek society. It questions whether women in Greece have really made progress since they achieved the right to work outside the home and whether it has led to their subsequent economic independence and sexual liberation. *Risotto's* leading characters are Eugenia and Vicky, two colleagues in a fashion magazine who become allies in the war against their husbands. In contrast to *From the Edge of the City*, these films comply faithfully to all the principal characteristics of classical narration, such as linear and clear development of the story, goal-oriented characters, montage sequences and continuity editing.

In addition, due to the different social status of the protagonists, the presence of the city in Malea's films changes considerably. The very urban milieu is indicated by the various settings in which the action takes place: expensive restaurants, office buildings, ultra-modern houses, clubs, gyms and hospitals, for example. Moreover, that the characters live in Athens is signified by the way that their behaviour is coded by class. Yet, the city is not overtly part of the stories' *mise-en-scène*. Consequently, most of the scenes are shot indoors. The peculiarity of both films, therefore, lies in the construction of the public space in the few exterior shots that are included. When the characters are in their cars or when they enter buildings, the spectator realises that the open space is dominated by construction sites in *The Mating Game* and by huge advertising billboards in *Risotto*. The blatant artificiality of these public places creates a surreal landscape and invites certain interpretations, as I will demonstrate further down.

Inside-Outside Dichotomies

By closely examining the three films, we realise that we are not dealing with the classical opposition of "city vs. countryside", a dichotomy deeply grounded in Hollywood and other cinematic traditions. Instead, we quickly remark we are dealing with oppositions from within the city itself and with the different social groups that inhabit it. A film like *From the Edge of the City* demonstrates that Greek cinema can no longer fictionalise its metropolis, Athens, without the marginal, oblique gaze of its "immigrant" populations, to paraphrase Homi Bhabha.⁸

From a comparison between the films, it becomes evident that the city, as a public space, is the territory of the immigrants; they are free to explore the streets day and night, walk under the hot sun, skate and dance in the open. On the other hand, the upper-middle-class Athenians spend all their time indoors and never seem to find an opportunity to be out in the city streets. For them, Athens is merely a conjunction of "places" that they can visit for specific purposes. This is the case in all three films: in Giannaris' film, for example, Nikos is a rich native who works in a big record company and owns an expensive apartment in Glyfada with a view to the sea. We always

see him in this space, in the club where he goes at night, or in his car, waiting to pick up Sasia or other Russian Pontian kids. It is striking that even during his sexual encounters in the apartment, the young boys prefer to look at the view, to stand in the balcony and look at the sea, whereas Nikos is in the background in the kitchen or the living room. Furthermore, it is worth noticing that the young immigrants occasionally borrow an expensive convertible car in which they may relish the fresh air as they drive through the empty streets at night, whereas the Athenians who only use their big cars as a substitute for their home or office. For instance, the characters in *Risotto* are often seen in their cars, talking on their mobiles and arranging their busy schedule.

For the native residents of the Greek capital, Marc Augé's concept of "non-places" would be quite apt to describe the world they inhabit. According to Augé, "if a place can be defined as relational, historical, and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place."⁹ In non-places, people, like the characters in the films, are always in transit as passengers and not as travelers.

They have specific destinations and specific needs to serve, such as transport, commerce or leisure. Athens, therefore, is no longer a historical place with a particular identity but an enormous non-place where images prevail and solitary contractuality is the essential framework for social relations. Augé also claims that "perhaps the reason why immigrants worry settled people so much is that they expose the relative nature of certainties inscribed in the soil."¹⁰

This pertinent statement explains why the young immigrants – in contrast to the natives who occupy a non-place world – are constantly pre-occupied with their relation to space in both the city and their homelands, as well as acknowledge the uncertainties and effects that space has on people's lives.

Overall, the inside-outside dichotomy that characterises the relation the different social groups have to their urban space also functions as an allegory in the characters' cognitive mapping. Fredric Jameson uses allegory as a conceptual tool for understanding how people make sense of their urban surroundings, their social realities and, by extension, their position in the world.¹¹ Therefore, if we look at the spatial dichotomies in an allegorical way, we will realize that the immigrant populations are bound to remain outside and to maintain their status as outsiders in the Athenian society. In all three films, the immigrants can come inside only if their wealthy customers/employers invite them to do so. In *The Mating Game*, for instance, the rich mothers use women from the Philippines as housemaids, as companions and as subjects for their paintings.

In *From the Edge of the City*, one of the young boys becomes emotionally attached to Nikos and tries to get into his apartment in Glyfada while he is away. As he jumps from the roof onto the balcony, he falls down and is killed. This incident demonstrates plainly that the violation of the rule "you need permission to come in" can only result in heavy punishment. With the help of Jameson's cognitive mapping, these individual actions and trajectories can be easily related to the more general social processes that try to exclude and exploit at will the immigrant populations. The individual stories become thus indispensable for representing the collective politics of our times.

Lived Space and Hyperreal Experience

Lived space is space that is inseparably integrated
with the subject's concurrent life situation.
We do not live separately in material and mental worlds;
these experiential dimensions are fully intertwined.
Neither do we live in an objective world.
We live in mental worlds, in which the experienced,
remembered and imagined, as well as the past,
present and future are inseparably intermixed.
Juhani Pallasmaa

The concept of "lived space," as Pallasmaa defines it,¹² plays an important role in all three films while various technical means are employed in order to capture the characters' sense of their lived space on film. On the one hand, Malea's films construct the urban landscape as a continuous, homogeneous space, which either consists of ubiquitous construction sites or advertising billboards. This constitutes a metaphorical representation of the characters' lived space since they do not have the time to really see what is around them, therefore experience an imagined combination of the external space and their concomitant life situation. According to Ackbar Abbas,

As people in metropolitan centres tend to avoid eye contact with one another, so they now tend also to avoid eye contact with the city. When the visual becomes problematic because it is too complex, too conflicting, too unfamiliar, or too manipulative, then different ways of seeing the city – different scopic regimes – have to be brought into play.¹³

Abbas' typology of scopic regimes includes: a. "real" cities, which have preserved a historical context and encourage a regime of the visible or seen; b. "surreal" cities, where urban elements are mixed up without regard for historical context, thus encourage a regime of the subliminal and uncanny, or half-seen; and c. "hyperreal" cities, which are devoid of context and based on fiction or artifice, therefore encouraging a regime of the televisual, or quickly seen.¹⁴ Although all three regimes can exist simultaneously and may offer various choices, it seems that the characters in Malea's films experience the public space as hyperreal, certainly devoid of context and populated with artificial and fictional elements. Both *The Mating Game* and *Risotto* try to represent this scopic regime of quick visibility, where the unfamiliarity of the construction sites or the billboards is no longer a provocative dimension of the familiar, but becomes itself, through instant replays, all too familiar.

But what about the lived space of the young immigrants? Regardless of the inside-outside dichotomies that are established by a comparison between the lives of the upper-middle class Athenians and the young immigrants, the latter's experience of the city is equally hyperreal. Despite living outdoors and having a wider experience of the urban surroundings, the hyperreality of such contemporary space is inescapable even for the young Russian, Pontians. In contrast to Malea's filming strategy and her manipulation of the profilmic space, Yannaris tries to convey the hyperreal scopic regime of his characters by manipulating the filmic space, i.e. through editing techniques. The discontinuity editing – jump-cuts, de-centred compositions, fast motion – and the self-reflexiv-

ity of the image track transforms the city into a hyperreal space where time becomes speed, where the context is obliterated and where human experiences can only be disjointed and fragmentary.

On the whole, I would like to conclude this paper with one final observation. The three films and their representation of life in modern Athens that I have discussed here demonstrates that some contemporary Greek filmmakers have become more sophisticated and sensitive to current Greek reality and have therefore aimed to create a filmic discourse that can accommodate contemporary urban experience. Instead of displaying the historical monuments and landmarks of this undeniably historic city, the filmmakers take another direction in order to more faithfully approach not the experience of a tourist or a passer-by, but that of the local residents and their different uses of the public space in a contemporary world.

- 1 Some interesting anthologies include: David B. Clarke (ed.), *The Cinematic City* (London: Routledge, 1997); Myrto Konstantarakos (ed.), *Spaces in European Cinema* (Exeter: Intellect, 2000); Mike Shiel (ed.), *Cinema and the City. Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).
- 2 Colin McArthur, "Chinese Boxes and Russian Dolls: Tracking the Elusive Cinematic City," in D. Clarke, *op. cit.*, p. 20
- 3 They are Russian Pontians, people of Greek ancestry from the Black Sea area of Kazakhstan who returned to their ancestral homeland in 1990 only to find themselves strangers in their new country.
- 4 For a comprehensive description of the art-cinema conventions, see David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London: Routledge, 1986), pp. 205-233
- 5 The New Greek Cinema of the 1970s and 1980s, which could be loosely characterized as a type of art-cinema, was epitomized in the works of the Greek auteur, Theo Angelopoulos, who veered more towards the style of Antonioni than Godard. The discontinuous editing, the fast pace and the self-reflexivity found in Giannaris' film have been extremely underprivileged in the entire history of Greek cinema.
- 6 This observation was made by Burgoyne in relation to Manchevski's *Before the Rain* (1994). There seems to be a current trend in World Cinema, which shares these geopolitical concerns and tackles them through the art-cinema vocabulary. See Robert Burgoyne, "Before The Rain: Ethnic Nationalism And Globalization," *Rethinking History*, Vol. 4, no. 2 (Summer 2000), pp. 129-134
- 7 K. Thomas, "From the Edge of the City," *Los Angeles Times* (December 15, 2000). Online at: <http://www.calendarlive.com/movies/reviews/cl-movie001214-1.story>
- 8 Homi K. Bhabha suggests, "the historical and cultural experience of the western metropolis cannot now be fictionalized without the marginal, oblique gaze of its postcolonial migrant populations cutting across the imaginative metropolitan geography of territory and community, tradition in culture." Cited in C. McArthur, *op. cit.*, p. 35
- 9 Marc Augé, *Non-lieux* (Paris: Seuil, 1992); eng. tr.: *Non-Place. An Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. by John Howe (London: Verso, 1995), pp. 77-78
- 10 M. Augé, *op. cit.*, p. 119
- 11 Frederic Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (London: BFI, 1992), p. 3 and Colin MacCabe, "Preface," in *Ibid.*, pp. xiv-xv.

- 12 Juhani Pallasmaa, *Architecture of Image: Existential Space in Cinema* (Helsinki: Rakkenustieto, 2000).
- 13 Akbar Abbas, "Building on Disappearance: Hong Kong Architecture and Colonial Space," in Simon During (ed.), *The Cultural Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 157
- 14 Ibid.