

Dimitris Papanikolaou, *Greek Weird Wave: A Cinema of Biopolitics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 2021. Pp. xvi + 268. 27 illustrations., Hardback and Ebook £90.00, Paperback £19.99

Towards the end of his introduction, Dimitris Papanikolaou writes: ‘This is a very personal, very idiosyncratic, very weird history of the Weird Wave’ (24). The book is indeed ‘personal’: the author explicitly places (his own) affect center stage, writes about how the films ‘touch’ him, and positions ‘biopolitical realism’ – the key concept that structures the book – as a ‘survival tactic’ (23). It is idiosyncratic for the very same reasons, as well as for the ways in which he inflects, adjusts, and expands otherwise familiar concepts such as allegory, towards new directions – most crucially, here, by introducing the notion of *metonymic* allegory. And it is weird in so far as it combines a certain degree of playfulness (evident at a glance in some of its subheadings) with intense theoretical engagement, while also – just as the Greek Weird Wave filmmakers have done through their films – implicitly acknowledging the ‘unease’ of articulating fixed and authoritative interpretations, opting instead to ‘reclaim [...] weirdness, [...] as an analytical position’ (11).

None of the above make the book problematic; rather – if anything – they signal its methodological and heuristic strengths. Far from being a formalist genre study, *Greek Weird Wave: A Cinema of Biopolitics*, seeks to find connections between form, content, context, and affect within the otherwise rather disparate group of Greek films that emerged in the late 2000s and thrived in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This was a period overdetermined by the Greek (financial) crisis, which affected not only the conditions of the films’ production (if not at the start, certainly so after the term was coined by British journalist Steve Rose in

2011), but also the interpretative frames projected on to them - frames that encouraged traditional (read: metaphor-based) allegorical readings of the nation in crisis.

Triggered by his own emotive and bodily response to the films, Papanikolaou's analysis goes beyond such approaches. He argues that the films' potency lies in their ability to convey 'weirdness' as a 'structure of feeling' (12) for the conditions of life in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, as experienced with particular intensity in Greece - but not only. Borrowing Foucault's notion of biopolitics, understood as the 'social and political practices that focus on "disciplining the living being" '[...]' and ultimately subjugating ' "corporeal life into systems of efficient and economic controls." '(15), he coins the term *biopolitical realism*. Of the two words that constitute this neologism<sup>1</sup>, it is arguably 'realism' that is the most contentious. The biopolitical dimension of the films is far more evident, and in some instances (such as in Yorgos Lanthimos' *Dogtooth* [2009]) it is very much on the surface. However, even for those familiar with the intricacies of the inexhaustible topic of cinematic realism, this is not a concept that immediately springs to mind in connection to the Weird Wave.

Aware of the apparent incongruity (perhaps even weirdness) of associating 'realism' to these films, Papanikolaou dedicates his fourth chapter to explaining his version of it. He points out that the Weird Wave films knowingly undermine familiar understandings of cinematic realism, while seeking 'to engage with "the world we live in" on different terms' (113). The realism we should be looking for therefore here is a *conceptual* rather than a cinematic one. Given that it does not depend on external characteristics, but on a redefinition of possible ways to represent reality, such conceptualization is not straightforward. Fundamental is the changing nature of this reality and its increasing – if not total – subjugation into biopolitical structures of power. Papanikolaou here refers to Mark Fisher's notion of 'capitalist realism' –

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<sup>1</sup> Technically, 'biopolitical realism' is not a neologism, but its previous use was very different (see pp.130-2).

the idea that neo-liberal capitalism is so pervasive that everything is so subsumed into it as to determine all perceptions of reality - as a precursor to his own (126-131). 'Biopolitical realism is exactly that type of capitalist realism that ponders, remains, and rests on the biopolitical structures that produce the contemporary moment, *as* they produce it' (130). Not exactly the most straightforward of formulations, but effectively it points to a kind of knowingness, futile though it may be, expressed in and through the films in their 'weird' guise. Or, as per its more playful version: 'We are all in it; we are all in biopolitical realism. You may not be able to do much about this, but you may as well start barking from within' (130).

Another fundamental concept that permeates the book, which is also constitutive of 'biopolitical realism', is metonymy. In contrast to the rhetorical trope of metaphor, which is based on analogy, whereby something (word, image, concept) stands *for* something else, metonymy is "based on contiguity and seriality; something stands *next to* something else in a signifying chain on the basis of some sort of proximity" (19). This is familiar territory. The reason it becomes important is because Papanikolaou argues that Weird Wave films should not be understood as allegories, i.e. extended metaphors, but rather *metonymic* allegories. For Papanikolaou, traditional allegory is detached, cerebral, un-loved (and un-lovable) – the kinds of things that he argues these films are not. Metonymic allegory, on the other hand, uses contingency, contiguity, and the emotionally charged fragment, to communicate its connection to reality – and thus not only to 'touch' us, but potentially to open the path for 'a radical historical and political possibility' (19).

Employing and sharpening this set of conceptual tools, as well as notions of 'family', 'archive' and 'assemblage', the book offers close readings of key Weird Wave films, such as *Dogtooth*, *Strella* (Panos Koutras, 2009), *Homeland* (Syllas Tzoumerkas, 2010), *Attenberg* (Athena Rachel Tsangari, 2011), *Alps* (Lanthimos, 2011), *Miss Violence* (Alexandros

Avranas, 2013), *The Lobster* (Lanthimos, 2016), *Oiktos* (Babis Makridis, 2018), as well as shorts or medium-length films, such as *Casus Belli* (Yorgos Zois, 2010) or *Washingtonia* (Konstantina Kotzamani, 2014). But as ‘biopolitical realism’ is not only ‘something that the films *do*, but [...] the climate in which these films are watched, circulated, and debated’ (134), the chapters blend film analyses – sometimes beyond the Weird Wave canon, such as the YouTube-circulated *Mum, I’m Back* (Dimitris Katsimiris, 2017) – with key references to events (such as the killing of Zak Kostopoulos – see chapter 7), interviews with the directors, contexts of film viewing, anecdotes, and the author’s own responses to events, films and situations.

Personal, idiosyncratic, playful, and thought provoking – the book is certainly a celebration of the ‘weird’ as an analytical tool, as well as a political and ethical stance. As such, while mobilised, motivated, and moved by the so-called Weird Wave films, the book and its author go beyond them by proposing a new way of seeing, being, writing. And what about the films? Is Alexandros Voulgaris 2019 feature film *Winona* – the film that is so ingeniously used in the book’s epilogue, meant to signify a closure, an end for this cycle of films that captured the ‘intense biopolitical present’ (65) so distinctively? Or do the recent festival awards for a film such as Sophia Exarchou’s second feature *Animal* (2023) suggest resilience and/or possible further shapeshifting for the Greek Weird Wave? The answer goes beyond the scope of this review – but Papanikolaou’s book gives us the tools to further pursue it.

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