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‘REEL’ GREEK NATIONALISM:  
Perceptions of Greece in New Greek Cinema (1970-2005)

Greek cinema has been instrumental in producing narratives on ethnic distinctiveness, often in opposition to foreign imports (cultural imperialism). Greek film-directors often draw on ‘Hellenic Hellenism,’ a discourse that drew from European modernism and Greek cultural particularity to articulate Greece’s uniqueness. The former, best exemplified by the work of Theo Angelopoulos, produced a narrative on Greek identity based on “quoting” fragments from various cultural layers of Greece’s heritage. Michael Cacoyannis draws from a different model, that of exotic primitivism, in search of authentic Greekness. This bifurcation between the modernist and the indigenous representations of Greekness were key ingredients of an outward-directed Greek cinema, designed to export Greek culture to international markets. We will try an approach, outside of Herzfeld’s binary thinking, but in terms of cultural syncretism. In this line of interpretation, the older dualistic/separatist vision of Greek ethnicity is succeeded by a pluralistic conception of ‘Neo’-Hellenism. This ‘Neo’-Hellenism encompasses all different cultural traditions, negotiating the inherent tensions in a cultural dialogue, though at the same time maintaining their separation rather than suppressing, concealing or denying them.

In the second part, I shall discuss the position of contemporary Greek cinema vis-à-vis Europe and the Balkans. Post-Soviet political transformations, along with the spread of global capitalism brought about a historical reconfiguration in the manner Greece situates itself in relation to the Balkans. In a historical irony, a thread of popular discourse in Greece, the aboriginal European state of nineteenth and twentieth century Euro-centrism, now constructs its neighbors in colonialist terms: as inferior, and less civilized, a process amply documented by the sociology and anthropology of the Balkan immigrants in Greece. In Greek cinema since the early 1990s, Neo-Hellenism is dialogized in a negotiation of a new self-image for domestic and international projection. Contemporary Greek cinema turns its attention to the region so as to redirect our attention to a number of cultural cross-fertilizations and human flows that do not easily fit into the (colonialist) dualist framework of self and other. In these representations of cultural flows we are far away from the (imagined) insular world of a Greek village or the uniform blue of the Aegean. As people cross boundaries, insularity and homogeneity cannot any longer sustain national myths equating a culture and a space. In this respect, Greek cinema is attuned with the global fascination with cultural flows and circulations, syncretism and migrancy, engaging in the postcolonial discourses of multi-layered identities and deterritorialization, and deconstructing dominant national discourses. For example, proverbial Greek philoxenia (hospitality) is shown up as hollow in films which expose the biased treatment of immigrants. Now that Greece constructs its identity vis-à-vis its Balkan neighbors whom it increasingly encounters on an everyday basis (as domestics, economic partners, or spouses), it is productive to turn to cinematic constructions of Greek identity in relation to the Balkans and to trace the fault-lines in the Greek conscience. Does Greek cinema appropriate the new power relations in the region to challenge past narratives of Greek identity in relation to the dominant West that portrayed her as the internal other so much as with respect to classical Greece, as with respect to the rest of Europe? How does Greece negotiate new borders, conceptual and fiscal, in the time of globalization?

Bibliography:

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