

## Excerpted from “Interiority and Contemporary Greek Culture: Rap, Television, and Film”

By Franklin L. Hess

In 2004, during the weeks leading up to the Athens Olympic Games, PBS aired a documentary, titled “Visions of Greece,” that featured music and commentary by the Greek-born composer Yanni. The film featured broad, sweeping aerial landscapes, filmed from a helicopter, of Greece’s most magnificent scenery: Olympia, Sounio, Santorini, Meteora, and Mount Olympus were just a few of the many gorgeous panoramas that appeared on the screen as Yanni bared his soul about the centrality of the land to his sense of himself as Greek. The land, he suggested, spoke to him through its beauty and character, serving as inspiration for his music.

Yanni’s attempt to claim an organic connection to the land struck me as odd in several ways. First, there was a certain kind of fantastic quality to the video footage. Throughout, the viewer hovers above the land, moving rapidly forward, but never alighting. The ethereal nature of this encounter with the land is augmented by its emptiness. The land was represented as pristine, untouched by human hands. It was purged, in other words, of the people who inhabit it. Occasionally it features a flock of sheep scattering at the approach of the helicopter, but the human presence was, by and large, nowhere to be seen. There was also a type of time-space compression that occurred as a result of the relentless movement of the helicopter forward. The shots, though long in duration, cut rapidly through the landscape as the helicopter moved relentlessly toward destination after destination.

Second, I thought it was odd that a New Age artist, who has made a name by transcending borders and has marketed himself as a kind of supranational super-ethnic and his music as a mystical transcultural communication system, would identify himself so closely with the land and landscape of the country of his birth. Mostly, however, I found myself puzzled about the curiously anachronistic character of the film. It seemed like a relic from a different era. I found myself thinking: “This could never have been made by a Greek person who is currently living in Greece.” This is because the type of unexamined relationship between the people and the land, the *laos* and the *topos*, that is present in the film has largely lost its currency within Greek culture. The past 20 years of contemporary Greek cultural production are characterized by a dramatic reconceptualization of the spatial context of Greek identity. For much of the twentieth century, Greek literature and film posited an organic relationship between Greek people and the varied landscapes that they traditionally inhabited. The landscape, in other words, functioned as both a vehicle for history and a crucible in which Greek character was molded and shaped. Even in the literature and films of emigration and dislocation, the landscape continued to function as a powerful force, calling wayward souls to return and reclaim the fullness of their identity.

Recently, however, this relationship has faded from prominence. Greek cultural production’s interrogation of Greek identity has shifted from questions of exteriority—how Greek identity relates to the Greek world around it—to questions of interiority—how Greek identity relates to the Greek world within. As the tentacles of globalization have wrapped themselves ever more firmly around Greece’s economy and society, culture has taken an inward turn, away from the supposedly organic relationship to the landscape toward more introspective formulations of

identity that manifest themselves through innovative approaches to language, meditations on the psychology of Greekness, and new approaches to representational space in television and film. This does not mean, however, that Greek culture has become insular or unconcerned with the outside world. Quite the contrary, Greek popular culture remains engaged with various global popular culture forms and, even, in some instances, shows evidence of a desire to exert a shaping influence over the evolution of these forms. Instead, what it means is that the “terrain” of popular culture communication has shifted. It is my contention that the shift toward insularity, which I might add is not an exclusively Greek phenomenon, emerges from a confluence of two factors: 1) globalization and the accompanying rise of a new, experimental federative economic and political bodies such as the European Union and 2) changes in the Greek mediascape that include the widespread availability of inexpensive sound production and reproduction technologies and the rise of private, market-share-driven television stations.

### **Greek Culture and the Its Traditions of Exteriority**

It wasn't always this way. For most of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the landscape was at the center of Greek cultural production. Professor Artemis Leontis has examined this process at length in her book *Topographies of Hellenism*. Arguing that “literature and geography are interdependent,” she examines the process by which literary topographies—a word that literally means “writing” the “land” or “landscape” when distilled down to its Greek roots—write Hellas as a “homeland.” This process has been tightly tied to the development of a national identity and a national culture. She argues that “literary topographies give *logos* to a place and so deliver that place, in the modern era at least, to the logic of a national culture.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, the *topos*—the land or landscape—has figured prominently in the literature of this period, animating the work of authors such as Papadiamantis (the Sporades islands), Katanzakis (Crete), and Seferis (the relation of antiquities to the Greek landscape and psyche). In particular, the landscape has served within literature as a way of naturalizing the connection of the people to ancient land that they inhabit as well as exploring the problems created by the resulting burden of this history. There was also the hope that literature, through the process of translation, could play a similar role internationally, legitimizing Greek autonomy and portraying an image of Greece as an organic whole, a thoroughly contemporary nation, intimately tied to its landscape and culturally distinct but nonetheless partaking fully in the spirit of modernity.

In this last regard, however, literature required delayed gratification. The process of defining a book as being worthy of translation, finding a publisher, and completing the translation often takes decades. The medium of film, however, offered far more immediate satisfaction and was rapidly co-opted for this purpose. Almost from its arrival in Greece, film was seen as a vehicle for conveying to foreign audiences the power of the Greek landscape, and by extension, the spirit of the Greek people. In the process, the landscape became part of the filmic imaginary, animating, in equal measure, the construction of filmic space in products that were aimed at exclusively Greek audiences.

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<sup>1</sup> Artemis Leontis, *Topographies of Hellenism: Mapping the Homeland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 5, 3.

This process reached its apogee in the film musical during the 1960s. The landscape was central to films such as *Sea-Blue Beads* (*Οι θαλασσιές οι χάντρες*), *Mermaids and Manges* (*Γοργόνες και Μάγκες*), *Some Like It Scorching* (*Κάτι να καίει*), *A Lady in the Bouzoukia* (*Μια κυρία στα μπουζούκια*), and *Girls for Kissing* (*Κορίτσια για φίλημα*), playing an essentially conservative role—not necessarily in a political sense, but in a cultural sense. The plot and dialogue, as Lydia Papadimitriou has suggested, featured a Greek society that was rapidly changing as a result of the increased pace of modernization. The tourism industry was experiencing dramatic expansion. Segments of society were becoming upwardly mobile and being invited to participate in the tourist experience themselves. Additionally, economically successful emigrants were returning to the homeland for vacations and retirement, and a transnational consumer culture was rapidly taking hold and introducing new ideas about dress, appearance, gender roles, economic mobility, romance, and marriage. As a result of these changes, the boundaries that had traditionally separated the classes were becoming murkier and more tenuous. In short, the nature of Greek society—and its customs and principles—was undergoing rapid and irrevocable change.<sup>2</sup> The landscape, however, remained static, a stable, reassuring backdrop for the unfolding social drama. Antiquities endure. Plaka remains picturesque. The islands retain their beauty, charm, and cultural distinctness, and the sea remains open and unconquered. Throughout these films, the landscape thus serves to alleviate worries about the rapid pace of change by suggesting that the social, cultural, and economic revolutions that the country was experiencing were ultimately superficial and unable to touch the core of Greekness.

### **The Inward Turn in Contemporary Greek Culture**

One of the most salient indicators that contemporary Greek culture has taken an inward turn is the place accorded to these film musicals. These films—along with numerous non-musical comedies—have remained extremely popular and are routinely televised on weekday evenings and Saturday and Sunday afternoons and early evenings. In the pantheon of Greek popular culture, they occupy perhaps the most exalted position. The stars of these films remain household names and objects of adoration. Younger children are often encouraged to watch these films, and parents frequently define them as being acceptable viewing where contemporary sit-coms and dramas are not. They are part of the collective memory and constitute necessary cultural knowledge. At the same time, however, they are objects of nostalgia; they encapsulate a longing for a simpler, more naïve time and place where the relation of culture to the land and landscape remained organic, untainted in spite of the encroachment of the first tentacles of globalization. This feeling of nostalgia is always accompanied by a somber realization: it can never be this way again. The relationship of the people to the land they inhabit has been severely, perhaps irrevocably compromised.

As the tentacles of globalization have wrapped themselves ever more firmly around Greece's economy and society, culture has taken an inward turn, away from the supposedly organic relationship to the landscape toward more introspective formulations of identity that manifest themselves through innovative approaches to language, meditations on the psychology of Greekness, and new approaches to representational space in television and film. In other words,

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<sup>2</sup> Lydia Papdimitriou, "Traveling on Screen: Tourism and the Greek Film Musical," *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 18(2000): 95-104.

Greek culture's interrogation of Greek identity has shifted from questions of exteriority—how Greek identity relates to the Greek world around it—to questions of interiority—how Greek identity relates to the Greek world within. This shift, I would like to argue, is a response to two sets of circumstances. The first, and most important, can be seen as a major milepost in the long process of Greece's globalization: the country's participation in a novel form of federative governance, the European Union. The second is a shift that was simultaneously technological and economic. The availability of lower cost video and recording technologies has allowed production in these areas—particularly smaller scale production—to thrive. In the 1990s, following the legalization of private television in the late 1980s, Greek stations began producing more television programs than ever before. A similar sudden upsurge can be seen in film production as high quality digital video cameras made new forms of low-budget filmmaking possible. Likewise, the recording industry saw rapid growth in production and niche marketing as it became profitable to begin recording Greek artists who were specializing, not only in the traditional and more widely popular genres, but also in genres like heavy metal, indie rock, and hip hop. In the context of the resulting cultural fragmentation, interiority can be seen as the breakdown of the belief in a unified dialogue about Greek identity. It constitutes the various techniques of self-examination—personal and social—by which artists and audiences attempt to define the emerging political reality and adapt their culture to it.

### *Agelastos Petra*

Since I've been spending a lot of time with film, I'd like to examine contemporary Greek culture by looking at a recent film, Phillipos Koutsafis' *The Mourning Stone* (*Αγέλαστος πέτρα*). *The Mourning Stone* articulates a radically different relationship to the land and landscape, one marked by alienation, destruction, loss, and sorrow. The film, a surprise hit of 2000/1 film season, is a low-budget documentary, an ethnographic film focusing on the community of Eleusina, which is located approximately 10 miles outside of Athens on the Saronic Gulf. During antiquity, Eleusina or Eleusis was an influential city, the seat of the Eleusinian mysteries, which honored Demeter, the goddess of agriculture and the fertility of the land, and her daughter Persephone, who was abducted by Hades to be his wife in the underworld. Today, however, the city has become an industrial wasteland—whose working-class denizens, many of whom are the children of the Asia Minor refugees—labor in the petroleum refineries that supply the Attic peninsula with gasoline and heating oil. From the opening sequence, Koutsafis proposes a radically altered relationship with the land. As the film begins, the landscape is shrouded in darkness. A flame appears, evoking the mysteries of yore. On closer examination, however, it sits atop a giant chimney, burning off the waste products of the refining process. We see the outlines of people, at first they seem to be people trudging off to work, but it soon becomes evident that they are tourists who are visiting the archaeological site at the crack of dawn. On the soundtrack, we hear a low-grade industrial hum, which accompanies exterior shots throughout the film, a constant reminder of the alien beast that lurks in the background. The impression that is created is of a faceless, soulless mass, alienated from the place they inhabit, struggling to reconcile the past and present and to synthesize it into a coherent identity.

For Koutsafis, the disjunction between ancient Eleusis and modern Eleusina is a constant source of fascination and a further symptom of the alienation of contemporary Eleusina. From the

drudgery of the initial shot, he cuts to an archaeological dig, populated by archeologists, most likely from Athens. The townspeople are largely absent, unconcerned with the treasures that are being dug up in their midst. For them the ruins of the ancient city are a parallel place, a silent city within a city. In fact, their vision of antiquity is a slightly garish statue of Aeschylus, that was given to the town for the anniversary of his birth. Even then, however, they can't decide where to locate it. First they try the town square, but for reasons unbeknown, it is moved. Eventually, it winds up near a busy street corner near the entrance to the town, tucked into the rear of a small piece of green, a little park in which no one every sets foot, virtually invisible to the cars that roar by.

Within the film's narrative, Panayiotis Farmakis, who is introduced at the end of this sequence and is a recurring figure, plays a pivotal role. He scours the local waste disposal sites, places where old building materials have been dumped as filler, for the remnants of ancient buildings, which he returns to the archaeological sites. He is the one person in the film who is truly in touch with the landscape. At the same time, however, he is nearly dysfunctional within the real world. Homeless, and in all likelihood mentally ill, he exists on the fringes of society. He comes to represent the difficulties of reconciling antiquity and the present, tradition and contemporary culture.

As I have suggested, in the past the outward relationship to the landscape has represented a kind of fullness of identity, or perhaps better, the hope for a fullness of identity, a hope that was invested in the promise of a modern symbolic order that was capable of generating representational forms that could reconcile the people with their economy and their polity, thus ushering Greece into the family of developed nations. Archeology, in this framework, was always a source of fascination and pride, not indifference. Koutsafis, though the character of Farmakis, dramatizes the inability of this vision of Greekness to be fulfilling within the contemporary world. He projects a world in which modernity has become a nightmare, and the landscape no longer corresponds with the collective hopes and aspirations of the people that inhabit it. Greece has entered the family of developed nations, but its people have been left behind; they remain unreconciled with the either the economy or the polity that globalization has created. This is particularly true of the town's younger inhabitants, who struggle to find meaning in the consumer culture and service economy that is being thrust on them. As Koutsafis demonstrates through a poignant cut that juxtaposes a highly sexualized television ad for the fast-food chain Goody's with the actual employees of Eleusina's branch, the dream life that's being promoted to young people is not the good life of the land, but a fantasy of consumption, romance, and sex. This fantasy life, he seems to be suggesting, is always bound to be filled with emptiness and disillusionment, since reality can never correspond with its ideals.

Koutsafis's rejection of the landscape is accompanied by a turn to interiority, which, in his case, constitutes his technique for distilling hope and laying the groundwork for a future that is once again fulfilling. If the foundations—symbolic, social, and economic—of the old polity have lost their resonance, Koutsafis is asking, what can be the foundation of the new polity? Over the course of the film, Koutsafis interviews a variety of the towns inhabitants, young and old. These interviews, which generally take place in interior spaces, probe what might be termed a structure of feeling of Greekness. He invites them to share about themselves: their experiences of emigration and exile, their experiences working and living in Eleusina, their daily routines, their

hopes and aspirations, their dreams for their children, and their fears about the future. Through these interviews, the film refines what for Koutsafis is the core of Greek identity: shared memory. In other words, Greek interiority—the Greek world within—is a communal world, one based on interpersonal relationships. Within the context of the film, people belong together not because they live in the same place or are members of the same political body. They belong because they are able to share their life stories, find common experiences, and develop empathetic relationships. Koutsafis, however, also recognizes the limits of this sort of an understanding of Greek identity. In fact, the film ends with a long series of shots in which show brief clips of the people he's encountered in the film, addresses them by name, and then apologizes, saying that he's sorry. He is begging for the forgiveness of those whose lives he has entered and then left abruptly. He has shared the communion of being Greek with them, but, due to the hectic pace of his life has retreated to Athens and, unthinkingly, abandoned them. His entreaties for forgiveness thus serve as a means of post facto reconciliation. This is not all they do, however. They also serve to acknowledge the difficulties that the present and future hold for Greek society.

We thus see through *The Mourning Rock* that the processes of globalization that characterize the present are radically different than the processes of globalization that accompanied Greek film in its infancy. Whereas Greek film of the modern era attempted to build unity, both within Greek society and with the rest of the world, through difference, Greek film in the contemporary, postmodern era must content itself with preserving some semblance of difference in the face of an onslaught of homogenizing forces. Whereas the exteriority of the previous period was a strategy for thriving, the interiority of today is a strategy for surviving.

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