

## Celebrating independence

*54th Thessaloniki International Film Festival*

Lydia Papadimitriou

In its fourth year under the leadership of Dimitris Eipides the 54<sup>th</sup> Thessaloniki International Film Festival (TIFF) affirmed its vision as a festival of independent cinema: (relatively) low-budget, (often) politically motivated, (at times) formally experimental films from around the world were showcased and celebrated. Eipides' concept of independence is fluid and broad as indeed befits such a chameleon of a term. Alongside some of the latest offerings by auteurs like Roman Polanski, Ulrich Seidl, Mohammad Rasoulof, or Hirokazu Kore-eda, the six cinemas of the festival were filled with films by newcomers and young directors. In these media-saturated times TIFF is shaping a particular kind of cinephilia in Greece's second largest city that offers hope for the survival of alternative, smaller cinematic visions and voices, and for the country's emotional and moral resilience during times of adversity.

This year the festival was bookended by the Greek premieres of the films of two 'stars' of American independent cinema: Jim Jarmusch and Alexander Payne. Jarmusch's Greek co-financed vampire film *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013) opened the festival while the filmmaker's first visit to the country attracted significant media attention. Alexander Payne's low-key octogenarian road movie *Nebraska* (2013) formally concluded the event, following an uneventful awards ceremony in the presence of the filmmaker who headed the jury for the international competition and whose part-Greek parentage did not fail to be noted by the festival director in his closing speech.



## A national showcase

Originally offering a platform for showcasing and awarding national film production the Thessaloniki festival became international in 1992 under the leadership of Michel Demopoulos. The 1990s were a period of transformation in Greek society and cinema, as the certainties of the Cold War collapsed and the first wave of immigration into Greece began. This was also the time when Greek cinema started looking outwards, opening up to co-productions and increasingly embracing a European identity. Alongside the main international competition other outward-looking sections began to flourish such as the Balkan Survey and the Open Horizons, which have increasingly become central to the festival's identity.<sup>1</sup>

The internationalisation of the festival gradually changed its role for Greek cinema. While it remained the site where the Greek State Awards were given out until 2009, the festival's role in nurturing and promoting Greek filmmakers was increasingly questioned. This culminated in the boycotting of the State Awards by the dissenting group Filmmakers of Greece (FOG)<sup>2</sup> on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the festival in 2009, which led to the establishment of the Hellenic Film Academy<sup>3</sup> and its awards.<sup>4</sup> Arguably, the removal of the competitive element has weakened the festival's identity as a champion of Greek cinema. However, Greek cinema remains a distinctive presence in the programme, offering a platform for national premieres of films that have not yet hit the cinema screens.

This year the Greek strand of the festival consisted of eight features and a programme of award-winning shorts from the 2013 Drama International Short Film Festival. Among the features was Alexandros Avranas' *Miss Violence* (2013), the Silver Lion and Colpa Volpi winner at the Venice Film Festival, another tale of a repressive and controlling Greek family with deadly consequences that both follows and departs from the 'weird' wave of Greek cinema that started with Lanthimos' *Dogtooth* in 2009.<sup>5</sup> Stylistically akin to this distancing and visually self-conscious trend but breaking away from thematic considerations of the Greek family was Elina Psychou's *The Eternal Return of Andonis Paraskevas* (2013), which won a FIPRECSI award from a jury led by Romanian critic Magda Michailescu. A film of few words, it follows the television presenter Andonis Paraskevas whose waning popularity leads him to stage his disappearance in a desperate effort to increase his ratings. Failing to reach the desired result, Paraskevas descends into desperate acts of violence and self-mutilation. This is a film that offers a comment about our media-obsessed society and its effects on identity formation. The audience award in the Greek strand went to a low-budget self-financed production by a high school teacher, Vassilis Raisis. *One Last Joke* (2013) adopts a lightness of touch and avoids the controlled stylisation of other previously-mentioned Greek films. The audience award will hopefully increase its chances to find distribution and thus affirm the festival's role as a valuable interface between (national) audiences and films.



The Eternal Return of Andonis Paraskevas (2013)

Since the advent of the financial crisis in 2009 the heretofore predominantly state and television-funded Greek cinema has been exceptionally cash-strapped. This has not only intensified the search for European co-productions but has also led to the adoption of hitherto unprecedented 'labour exchanges' among filmmakers.<sup>6</sup> Independence and subversion – the festival director's two main keywords – have been well represented by recent Greek films both in terms of their means of financing and their adopted cinematic styles. In Eipides' words,

[d]isproving expectations but confirming all predictions, Greek cinema, independent through and through, has charted an amazing course .... Subversion requires bravery and Greek film directors have proven that they never rest in their creative struggle.<sup>7</sup>

Hyperbolic though this statement may sound, it is a fact that recent Greek films have achieved unprecedented international visibility and that they managed to do so despite conditions of adversity. While the role of TIFF in this latest success may be open to question, especially in the light of the fact that many young Greek directors – including Yorgos Lanthimos, Athena Tsangari, Philipos Tsitos, and Alexandros Avranas – chose to premiere their films in more prestigious international festivals (Cannes, Venice, Locarno), the festival's role in fostering Greek cinema more widely should not be underestimated.<sup>8</sup>

### International competition

Of the Greek films screened in the festival only two are eligible to participate in the International Competition, which is a selection of first or second films by new directors. Psychou's *The Eternal Return of Andonis Paraskevas* and Yannis Sakaridis'

contemplative thriller *Wild Duck* (2013) were included in that category, alongside films from Mexico, Venezuela, Chile, Cuba, the United States, South Korea, Egypt, Sweden, France, and the Slovak and Czech Republics. Diego Quemada-Díez's *The Golden Cage* (*La Jaula de Oro*, 2013) was the big award winner, receiving the festival's main prize (the Golden Alexander) as well as the best director, audience, and human values awards. Having previously been awarded at Cannes (*Un Certain Talent*), this tragic Loachian tale of three Guatemalan teenagers and a non-Spanish speaking Indian boy, all in search of a better fate in 'el norte', impresses with the strength of the young non-professionals' acting and by the novelty of its cinematography and narrative development. The subtle interactions between Sara-dressed-as-Oswaldo and Chauk, the outsider in this group of outcasts, as well as the jealous gaze of the contender Juan, contrast powerfully with the violently hostile external world of *la migra*, of human traffickers, and of the dehumanising realities encountered in the land of destination.

Mariana Rondon's second feature, *Bad Hair* (*Pele Malo*, 2013), received the Bronze Alexander as well as the FIPRESCI prize for a film in the International Competition. This was a powerful and engaging story of a nine-year-old boy whose obsession with wanting to straighten his afro-curls is interpreted by his widowed mother as an early sign of homosexuality. The film effectively balances the tensions between the boy's desire to escape the drabness of his Caracas neighbourhood and his mother's fearful attempts to contain what she sees as her son's abnormal behaviour. Shifting narrative perspective between mother and son, *Bad Hair* manages to create empathy for both characters. The film's final confrontation between the two over the banal but highly charged topic of hair results in the boy's capitulation to his mother's wishes. This conclusion is very moving, as it conveys both her misplaced despair and the boy's conflicting emotions.

In both these South American films the socially-deprived context interacts with and blocks the characters' wishes. In Mani Maserrat's *Us* (*Vi*, 2013) context is at the margins of the story. The film is a close study of a young couple's relationship and the power imbalance between the two, with the man manipulating and ultimately abusing the young wife. Potentially read as misogynistic the film nonetheless has a liberating ending that restores confidence in the power of awareness. Led predominantly by dialogue and filmed mostly in enclosed spaces, the film is gripping in its intimate demonstration of this dysfunctional relationship. A young heterosexual couple is also at the centre of Sean H.A. Gallagher's *Goodnight* (2013), whose focus is not their relationship but the encounter with illness, the prospect of death, and their impact upon friends and family. This is a film about euthanasia that does not present it as a moral dilemma but as a rightful choice – a significant intervention in light of America's legislation on the issue. Watching it, the film almost feels like a home movie with a twist.

Varied in style, the films of the international competition share a focus on intimate depictions of character and/or human interaction. *Mouton* (Marianne Pistone and Gilles Deroo, 2013) is a decentred study of character and environment that frustrates with its narrative unpredictability but surprises with the richness of texture it offers. *Coming Forth by Day* (*Al-khoroug lel-nahar*, Hala Lotfy, 2012) is an exploration of family and aging through the eyes of a self-denying young woman. A labour of love, Lotfy's debut film was financed by her personal savings and a small grant. In many ways this film encapsulates the independent and low-budget ethos of the festival. The award for best cinematography will hopefully open up more audiences and funding opportunities for its makers.

### **An audience and business festival too**

TIFF is a festival for the city and for film professionals. Its five separate, colour-coded strands (International Competition, Open Horizons, Greek Films, Balkan Survey, and Open Horizons – Tributes) are all open to the public. These strands tend to be mixed among the six cinemas, while the ticket price is the same for all screenings. This year the strand with the strongest identity was the Balkan Survey – not the least for being the only one with a dedicated cinema. Programmed by Dimitris Kerkinos, the Balkan Survey celebrated twenty years (1994-2013) with a rich programme of older and recent films from the region – i.e. all countries of Southeastern Europe including Turkey.<sup>9</sup> Classics such as Lucian Pintilie's *The Oak* (1992), Vinko Bresan's *How the War Started on My Island* (1996), Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *The Small Town* (1998), and Cristi Puiu's *The Death of Mr Lazarescu* (2005) were shown alongside less well-known older films such as Lyudmil Todorov's *Emilia's Friends* (1996) or Svetozar Rostovski's *Mirage* (2004), also an excellent selection of new films including Reha Erdem's *Jin* (2013) and Corneliu Porumboiu's *When Evening Falls on Bucharest or Metabolism* (2013).

As a non-competitive section the Balkan Survey has been invaluable in creating an audience for films from the region – initially at a time of raging ethnic conflicts – and helping to build cultural bridges among largely isolated filmmakers and communities. While the metaphor of the bridge is a well-worn cliché in discussions of the Balkans it is worth reinstating it in the context of TIFF, as the Balkan Survey has allowed for very concrete and focused interactions that have led to a number of cinematic collaborations and co-productions between countries. It should be noted that until 2010 such collaborations were also nurtured by the dedicated Balkan Fund. However, this script development fund became one of the casualties of the streamlining that followed the financial crisis in 2009.

The industry section of the festival remains prominent and strong. Since 2005 it has been organised under the label Agora Industry. This consists of three parts: the Agora Film Market, where buyers can select from a wide selection of titles from

the region and beyond; the co-production forum Crossroads, where filmmakers pitch their nascent projects in search of funds; and Agora Works in Progress, in which directors present trailers for their half-finished films and seek completion money and/or a festival premiere. The Agora Industry is a very energetic event and a crucial hub for the establishment of cinematic exchanges in a city with a very rich multicultural past.

Despite the financial hardship in Greece in the past four years the Thessaloniki International Film Festival has remained resilient. As its budget has been significantly reduced in this period its new identity has emerged more clearly. Gone are the extravagant parties and the expensive guests. Instead we have a more modest, low-key, low-budget festival that sets the tone for a democratic and inclusive independent cinema. Indeed, the long queues for the often sold-out screenings are a very optimistic and hopeful sign.

## Notes

1. The Balkan Survey presents a selection of films from the Balkans; Open Horizons showcases a wide range of films that represent a variety of styles and themes and whose 'roots' are in 'world independent cinema' (<http://tiff.filmfestival.gr/default.aspx?lang=en-US&page=1148&SectionID=225>).
2. <http://fogfilms.org/?p=257>
3. <http://hellenicfilmacademy.gr/HFA2/el/component/content/article/44-home/103-hellenic-film-academy.html>
4. For a discussion of 'Filmmakers of Greece' and its impact on the 50<sup>th</sup> TIFF, see Lee 2012 and Chalkou 2012.
5. The term is attributed to the *Guardian's* Steve Rose, but has gained extensive currency since: <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/aug/27/attenberg-dogtooth-greece-cinema>
6. For a more extensive discussion of the concept of independence in Greek cinema and of new modes of financing see Papadimitriou 2014.
7. Eipides 2013, p. 41.
8. Aside from the film screenings the Agora industry section of the festival exposes Greek films to international buyers and film professionals. In 2013, of the 230 delegates in the Agora section 148 were international ([http://www.filmfestival.gr/inst/Festival/gallery/File/Agora\\_Industry\\_Manual\\_2013.pdf](http://www.filmfestival.gr/inst/Festival/gallery/File/Agora_Industry_Manual_2013.pdf)).
9. This includes Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia (FYROM), Montenegro, Kosovo, Albania, and Turkey. Greece is excluded not because it does not belong to the Balkans but because the festival has a dedicated strand for Greek films.

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## About the author

Lydia Papadimitriou (Liverpool John Moores University)



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## Initiating regional talents

*2013 Sarajevo Film Festival*

Ivan Velisavljević

Initiated in the mid-1990s by a group of enthusiasts during the siege of Sarajevo and the war in Bosnia & Herzegovina, Sarajevo Film Festival (SFF)<sup>1</sup> has developed into one of the biggest Southeast European film festivals along with the Thessaloniki International Film Festival in Greece.<sup>2</sup> Although one could hear some of the locals complaining about how the festival has become too big and fancy for the city and how nothing much actually happens during the rest of the year, an informed and occasional visitor will know Sarajevo offers a lot of other interesting cultural initiatives, while a newcomer will certainly enjoy crowded streets, clubs, and film events during the festival week.

The 19<sup>th</sup> edition of Sarajevo Film Festival screened 214 films from 59 countries and welcomed more than 100,000 visitors.<sup>3</sup> The films competing for the Heart of Sarajevo award were organised in three sections (feature, short, and documentary) while many other films were screened in different venues all around the city and nominated for various partners' awards. Among these prizes are the CineLink awards for co-production development and work in progress, the Human Rights Award for films dealing with human rights issues, the Katrin Cartlidge Award for young filmmakers, and the Cineuropa Prize given to a film 'that besides having indisputable artistic qualities also promotes the idea of European dialogue and integration'.<sup>4</sup> Therefore it is clear that the organisers, while advancing the industry segment of the festival, still adhere to the initial aim of 'helping to reconstruct civil society and retain the cosmopolitan spirit of the city'.<sup>5</sup> By looking at the films chosen for the main programme and also at the way the industry section