

Counter-narratives of World War II in Greek Cinema¹

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ABSTRACT

This article examines three Greek films of the mid-1960s which countered the heroic narrative of World War II: Manousakis's *Betrayal*, the story of the love affair between a German officer and a Greek Jewish girl; Kyrou's *The Blockade*, dramatizing the resistance and the collaboration under the German occupation; and Glykofrydis's *With a Sparkle in the Eyes*, depicting a father's heartbreaking dilemma. The article explicates the war memories that the films proposed, the artistic and ideological filters through which these memories took shape, and the responses of Greek reviewers. Representing World War II in Greek cinema, the article shows, proved a parlous undertaking as filmmakers and critics were simultaneously confronted with national traumas and sensitive political and diplomatic subjects.

Keywords: Greek cinema, World War II in film, cinema of the 1960s, Jews in film, Resistance in film, film reviewing.

Contra-narrativas de la Segunda Guerra Mundial en el cine griego

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina tres películas griegas de mediados de los años 1960 que desmontaban la narrativa heroica de la Segunda Guerra Mundial: *Betrayal* de Manousaki, la historia de amor entre un oficial alemán y una judía griega; *The Blockade* de Kyrou, que dramatiza la resistencia y la colaboración bajo la ocupación alemana; y *With a Sparkle in the Eyes* de Glykonfrydis, que trata del desgarrador dilema de un padre. Este artículo explica las memorias de la guerra que las películas proponen, los filtros artísticos e ideológicos a través de los cuales toman forma estas memorias, y la recepción de los críticos griegos. El artículo muestra que la representación de la Segunda Guerra Mundial en el cine griego demostró ser un proyecto complicado, ya que tanto los directores como los críticos tenían que afrontar traumas nacionales y temas de sensibilidad política y diplomática.

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Palabras clave: cine griego, cine de la Segunda Guerra Mundial, cine de 1960, judíos en el cine, resistencia en el cine, crítica de cine.

From 1945 until the collapse of the Greek junta in 1974, most Greek films depicted World War II conventionally.² They placed the emphasis on heroism, romance and a unified Greek nation. However, in the mid-1960s, during a progressive interlude under the Center Union government (Sotiropoulou 1989: 95-96), a few filmmakers offered alternative depictions of the war, which downplayed heroism, highlighted people's emotions, and enriched Greek cinema with new techniques (Mini 2008:73-76; Mini 2015:274-276). This article examines the three films that best demonstrate this trend: *Prodosia/Betrayal* (Kostas Manousakis, 1964); *To bloko/The Blockade* (Ado Kyrou, 1965); and *Me ti lampsi sta matia/With a Sparkle in the Eyes* (Panos Glykofrydis, 1966).³ It explains the war memories that the films proposed and the social and cultural filters through which these memories took shape. Representing World War II in Greek cinema, the article shows, proved difficult as the filmmakers and the critics were simultaneously confronted with national traumas and sensitive political and diplomatic subjects.

Before the mid-1960s only a couple of dramatic films offered counter narratives of World War II: Gregg Tallas's *The Barefoot Battalion* (1954), which followed the practices of Italian neorealism, and Takis Kanellopoulos's *The Sky* (1962), an art film which depicted the Greco-Italian war of 1940-1941 in an antiheroic way, reminiscent of the post-Stalinist antiwar production of East European and Soviet cinemas (Mini 2011:242-247). *Betrayal*, *The Blockade* and *With the Sparkle in the Eyes* were also to an extent influenced by East European and Soviet cinemas. Still, each of these films handled World War II in a different way and elicited a variety of critical responses. We therefore need to examine each film separately.

Betrayal was scripted by its director Kostas Manousakis and well-known left-wing novelist Aris Alexandrou (from an idea by another author—and actor—, Notis Pergialis). The film tells a love story during the German Occupation between a German officer, Carl von Stein (Petros Fissoun), and a Greek Jewish girl, Lisa (Elli Fotiou). Carl, who describes Jews as «the defect of humanity,» is unaware that Lisa is Jewish. When he proposes to her and she reveals her Jewish identity, Carl turns

² For overviews on World War II, specifically the German Occupation, in Greek cinema, see Andritsos (2004) and Mini (2015). For useful analyses of certain traditional films see Delveroudi (2002), Papadimitriou (2004), Karakatsane/Berbeniote (2004) and Delveroudi (2009). I am referring here to film dramas. Due to the subversive possibilities in comedy or satire, a few Greek film comedies also featured antiheroic depictions of the war (see Stassinopoulou 2006).

³ Among these films, an article has been devoted only to *Betrayal* (Thanouli 2015), with an approach from which my historically-grounded discussion differs. Other films, of a more traditional kind, in this trend are *Diogmos/Expulsion* (Grigoris Grigoriou, 1964) and *Epistrofi/Return* (Errikos Andreou, 1965).

Lisa into the Gestapo and asks to be transferred to the Eastern Front, where he sees the extent of Nazi cruelty. After Germany's defeat, Carl is shattered to learn the truth about the Nazis' crimes and returns to Greece. Up to this point, the film brings to life Carl's story as this had been told to (and recorded on tape by) a German psychiatrist in Greece. From that moment on, the psychiatrist explains to the police that in Athens Carl learned that Lisa had been sent to a concentration camp and describes Carl's last moments and death. As the psychiatrist provides the police with a falsified version of what had transpired, we see the truth about the psychiatrist's Nazi sympathies, Carl's breakdown and the way in which Carl put an end to his life.

Betrayal differed from Greece's conventional films in its focus on Nazi anti-Semitism and the Holocaust (an earlier exception had been Dinos Dimopoulos's *Amok*, 1963; see also Karalis 2012:108-109). In addition, *Betrayal* centered on the emotions of its protagonists, particularly Carl. Like Konrad Wolf's *Звезду/Stars* (*Sterne*, East Germany/Bulgaria 1959), it depicted the antithesis between love (and sex) on the one hand and religious and national differences on the other (Mini 2015:275) (fig. 1). Moreover, the film paid special attention to Carl's ideology, which was ascribed to Nazi brain-washing.



FIG. 1 Lisa (a Greek Jewish girl) and Carl (a German officer) make love in Manousakis's *Betrayal*

As some film reviewers of the time noted, *Betrayal* relied to an extent upon traditional techniques (Mitropoulou 1964b; Ploritis 1964) and was reminiscent of Vercors' *Le silence de la mer* (1942) and its 1949 film adaptation by Jean-Pierre Melville (Ploritis 1964; see also Thanouli 2015:69). At the same time, Manousakis used an expressive soundtrack and camerawork to create psychological tension and borrowed Soviet film methods from both the silent montage school and the Soviet New Wave of the 1950s. By following Lev Kuleshov's techniques, Manousakis brought together shots of Carl and newsreel footage depicting Nazi rallies and the Eastern Front, thus creating the illusion that the protagonist had been present in the actual events.⁴ Manousakis also created intellectual associations by juxtaposing images with sounds as well as shots of nature with newsreel footage and by using shots of a peacock to comment on Carl's character—most likely, a borrowing from Sergei Eisenstein's *Октябрь/October* (1928). Finally, Manousakis illuminated Carl's inner

⁴ For a somewhat different understanding of Manousakis's indebtedness to Soviet montage see Thanouli 2015:70.

world (visions, memories, and nightmares) in a manner reminiscent of the Soviet New Wave (e.g. Mikhail Kalatozov's *Летят журавли/The Cranes are Flying*, 1957).⁵

The war memory that *Betrayal* proposed was shaped by several factors. First, since 1957 the notorious case of Max Merten, the architect of the extermination of the Jews of Thessaloniki, had brought the Nazi persecution of Greek Jews back to public attention (Kralova 2012:214-250). Second, some West German films had already depicted German soldiers as victims of Nazi propaganda (Wolfenden 2007). Third, after the normalization of the German-Greek diplomatic relations in the early 1950s, the financial cooperation of the two countries, and the massive immigration of Greek laborers to the Federal Republic of Germany in the early 1960s, Greek cinema occasionally depicted German soldiers with some sympathy (Stassinopoulou 2000:46-47). Moreover, *Betrayal*'s producer, Klearchos Konitiotis, was eager to use the newsreel footage which he had just acquired to make an appeal to an international audience (Georgiadou 1964; Ploritis 1964). These factors combined to produce a representation of World War II with obvious references to foreign practices: a German officer as victim of his ideology; a plot reminiscent of foreign works, imported film techniques, and German dialogue for about half of the film.

As a result, one of the few Greek films of the 1960s that presented World War II in an original way had a German as its protagonist and his drama as its main topic. In any case, most Greek reviewers hailed the film, particularly the depiction of Carl's psychology. For example, one reviewer drew a parallel between Carl's suffering and the grief of humankind (Sokou 1964). Another argued that the film presented the way in which Nazism had corrupted an entire nation, especially its youth (Moschovakis 1964). In addition, most reviewers welcomed Manousakis's use of international techniques (e.g. Kiriakopoulos 1964; Moschovakis 1964; Sam. 1964; Stamatou 1964a; Sokou 1964).

However, two established female critics, Aglaia Mitropoulou and Irini Kalkani, condemned *Betrayal*. They objected to the use of already-known newsreels, which «forced the spectators» to watch Hitler's speeches and the Germans' intoxication with him. They found Lisa's attraction to an anti-Semitic German officer implausible; argued that the German dialogue «irritate[d] and alienate[d]» the audience; and considered the repentance of a Nazi soldier commonplace in postwar German and world cinema (Mitropoulou 1964a; 1964b; Kalkani 1964). The harsher of the two critics, Kalkani, termed the love affair between Carl and Lisa a «disgrace» and Carl's ignorance of the Nazi crimes a «sacriligious absurdity» that even the Germans had not dared to depict. Lastly, she denounced the filmmakers' «noble feelings» for «the war criminals» (Kalkani 1964).

To understand these reactions we need to keep in mind that the Greek daily press of 1964 regularly reported on a revival of Nazism in Europe. In addition, the Greek people were deeply worried about the prospect of the legal suspension of trials of

⁵ Stamatou (1964b) has also commented on the influence of the Soviet New Wave on Manousakis.

Germans accused of having committed war crimes on Greek soil (Kralova ch.3). In the final analysis, *Betrayal* revealed Greek cinema's difficulty in depicting Germans, in balancing forgiveness for a former enemy, the denouncement of atrocities against humanity, national diplomatic needs, and the creation of films that could compete in the international market.

One year after *Betrayal*, Kyrou's *The Blockade* also showed the difficulties in making a film about World War II. *The Blockade*, on a screenplay by Gerasimos Stavrour, dramatized one of the most tragic events of the war in Kokkinia, a working-class suburb of Piraeus. The people of Kokkinia were prominent in the left-wing resistance organization EAM (National Liberation Front). In August 1944, aided by the Greek Security Battalions, the Germans ordered all men in Kokkinia between 14 and 60 years of age (around 20,000 men) to assemble in the main square. Greek informers, some masked, pointed out Resistance fighters. As a result, about three hundred of the men were summarily executed, and thousands were sent to prisons and concentration camps.

This tragedy could have been told as a heroic confrontation story between courageous Greeks and villainous Germans. However, Kyrou concentrated on the turmoil of one man: Kosmas (Kostas Kazakos). At the film's beginning, Kosmas, a former smuggler, is newly married and ready to mend his ways. The film opens with a modest wedding celebration, right before the German blockade, where the guests sing a song by Mikis Theodorakis (the composer of the film's soundtrack). Within the next few hours, a collaborator of the Germans, who was a former friend of Kosmas, forces Kosmas to identify Resistance fighters to the Germans. After an inner struggle, Kosmas agrees, only to change his mind the last moment, kill his former friend and be executed along with other Greeks.

In the film, the Germans, often filmed in groups from a distance or with their faces covered by helmets, emerge not as a specific enemy but as any enemy. *The Blockade*'s protagonists are the Greeks, those who oppose the Occupation and those who collaborate with the enemy as Security Battalion officers, informers and finger men. *The Blockade* does not present a Greece that stands unified against the Germans. Kokkinia becomes the stage for a tragic play of a divided nation and of one's personal responsibility for his or her choices.

To accomplish his tasks, Kyrou de-dramatizes most of the events, so we can hardly develop emotions for the fighters. In addition, up to the scene at the square, the film resembles a documentary or a neorealist movie. When the action moves to the square, the film's style acquires an almost surrealist quality, suggesting people's murderous instincts.⁶ Kyrou follows the figures with a hand-held, often shaky camera, conveying a sense of suppressed fear. Kosmas's voice, heard under his black hood, seems to be coming from the innermost part of his psyche. The black hoods and clothes of the finger men create a bleak contrast with the sunny August day. Kyrou films the finger men from below, showing them as ima-

⁶ It should be noted that Kyrou is the author of *Le Surréalisme au cinéma* (1953). See also Soldatos 1990: 194.



FIG. 2 A finger man in Kyrou's *The Blockade*.

ges of death (fig. 2). After the executions, the finger men's plundering of the corpses reveal their most bestial instincts. At the end, survivors are herded to the prisons as if to a slaughterhouse, heartbroken women bend over the dead, and the film concludes with a close up of a boy who looks straight into the camera, challenging us to reflect on human responsibility (Mini 2008:75).

Kyrou's powerful style in the square scene underscores the theme of the Greeks' stance (collaboration or resistance) because

this bore a great significance in the mid-1960s. In the early 1960s, the Greek Left, primarily the United Democratic Left Party (EDA), equated the wartime Resistance with left-wing activism and Collaborationism with right-wing politics, represented in the 1960s by Constantine Karamanlis's National Radical Union Party (ERE). In 1963, EDA made extensive use of this rhetoric following the assassination of the pacifist Grigoris Lambakis, an EDA member of the parliament. EDA attacked ERE for not only protecting wartime collaborators but also using them to staff the paras-tatal organizations, which were responsible for Lambakis's murder (Paschaloudi 2010:261-266). Against this political background, Kosmas's dilemma in the film appears as that of any Greek of the 1960s before two different ideologies, the Left and the Right — the successor of the Resistance and the successor of Collaborationism. That *The Blockade* concerns primarily the Greeks themselves was also evident in the film's promotional ads, which declared: «*The Blockade*: Patriotism and betrayal in a gigantic confrontation».

Interestingly enough, at the 'Week of Greek Film Festival' in Thessaloniki (the Thessaloniki Greek Film Festival after 1966), where *The Blockade* premiered, most reviewers did not comment on its theme of collaboration. As Security Battalions and collaborators had indeed played a crucial role in Kokkinia, the critics could have discussed their presence in the film at least as an allusion to reality. However, they did not. They described the event as one of pure heroism and tragedy and castigated the film's lack of pathos and Kyrou's distanciation techniques (Kalkani 1965; Papadopoulou 1965; Parlas 1965; Pilichos 1965; Sokou 1965). Moreover, one critic accused Kyrou of associating the Resistance solely with one political side (implying the Left) (Pilichos 1965). Soon the State intervened. While *The Blockade* was in commercial release, the state censorship apparatus banned the film and demanded that some scenes be cut (Soldatos 2004:527). Only a few left-leaning critics hailed Kyrou's work. The reviewer of the newspaper *I Avgi*, for example, characterized *The Blockade* as the first real Greek film about the Resistance. He argued that the film accurately depicted «the barbarism» of the occupants and «the villainy of their colla-

borators» and interpreted the last shot with the child as suggesting the formation of a poignant memory for the Greeks in years to come (Moschovakis 1965).

With a Sparkle in the Eyes also used World War II to stage an inner conflict, but of a different kind. The story unfolds in a Greek village where the Germans capture thirty young men in order to execute them as retaliation for the murder of a German soldier. The story covers a few hours, during which a father of three arrested men is allowed to choose one son to be set free. After a long night, the father dies from a heart attack before uttering his decision (unknown to us- if we ever made it), and all three sons are killed.

With a Sparkle in the Eyes perpetuates the conventional distinction between noble Greeks and evil Germans (embodied in the German commander). Still, this distinction is used only in the background. The film lacks heroism; we don't see any battles. Glykofrydis focuses on the father's anguish and the memories and visions the situation evokes in himself and his sons, which the director presents through art-cinema methods, bringing ambiguously and poetically together the past and present (Mini 2008: 76. Karalis 2012 112-113) (fig. 3).

Unlike the critics of *The Blockade*, the reviewers of *With a Sparkle in the Eyes* did not disapprove of the director's putting the war conflicts aside in favor of depicting an inner drama. In contrast, they praised Glykofrydis's sober treatment of his theme, rendering of a father's emotional turmoil, and experimentation with memories and visions. Most critics endorsed his work because it met the widely accepted stylistic and political criteria of the time. The film's tight structure and subjective scenes satisfied the reviewers' demands for both a well-crafted work, which could attract a wide audience, and artistic modernism (Kallioris 1966:425-427; Marketaki 1966; Mitropoulou 1966; Pilichos 1966). Moreover, the reviewers were pleased by the film's anti-violent, anti-war message. As one reviewer wrote, the film forces the viewer to realize what a «monstrous and awful thing» war is (Pilichos 1966). Presented at the Thessaloniki Greek Film Festival in late September 1966, at the dawn of the trial for the murder of Labrakis, *With a Sparkle in the Eyes* proposed a noble memory, which was acceptable to the film community.

Although this film did not cause a friction among the critics, it caused a friction on a different level. In Thessaloniki, this and other alternative films (e.g. Kanellopoulos's *Ekdromi/Excursion* and Alexis Damianos's *Mechri to ploio/To the Ship*) competed with Nikos Gardelis's *Ksechasmenoi iroes/Forgotten Heroes*, a conventional drama that presented World War II as a site of heroism for a Greek military



FIG. 3 A poetic vision in Glykofrydis's *With a Sparkle in the Eyes*

officer, aided by some Christian Orthodox monks. *Forgotten Heroes* was awarded the best prize against all odds. In the midst of heated debates over corruption in the Greek army, the likelihood of a military dictatorship, and the dubious role of the Greek Palace and the United States in Greece's political life, the critics protested *Forgotten Heroes* winning the award instead of a film such as *With a Sparkle in the Eyes*, which some critics had singled out as the top candidate. They characterized this award a «murderous attack» and as a victory of a country of the king's toadies. To understand their reaction, we should keep in mind that *Forgotten Heroes* did not simply pay tribute to the army; it had been produced by James Paris, a Greek-American who promoted his film at the festival with a real tank, soldiers and gifts, reminding one of the American relief.⁷

When the Greek junta was imposed in April 1967, the counter narratives of World War II in Greek cinema were silenced. Under the pressure of censorship and self-censorship, Greek filmmakers resorted to making conventional war films, spectacular, color productions, which in reconstructing the past perpetuated the dictators' nationalistic ideology (Papadimitriou 2004; Mini 2015:276-278). Thus, the films of the mid-1960s appeared during a brief interlude, during which Greek cinema turned to the past to reflect on people's dilemmas. Nevertheless, as we saw, the approach of each filmmaker and the reactions of the reviewers differed since the kind of the dilemma presented in each film and the identity of the man who struggled with that dilemma were still painful topics in the Greece of the 1960s.

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⁷ For details on the film's promotion and critical reception see Mini 2012: 231-234.

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