

## HELLENIC CURRENT: GREEK CINEMA PERSISTS AGAINST ALL ODDS

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It started early 2008, when an unusual Greek thriller, TALE 52, was announced in official competition at the Rotterdam International Film Festival, the essential hub in Holland for discovering film talent from around the globe. The film, written and directed by young filmmaker Alexis Alexiou with the support of the government-funded Greek Film Centre (GFC), was well received and soon was acquired by a European distribution label. TALE 52 moved on to Sitges – the Catalan International Film Festival in Spain - where it won best Screenplay. And then, there was Light!

An awakening! Every filmmaker went through a revelation “why can’t I?” That’s not to imply that in the past, Greek films were not recognized by major European film events and international audiences. Visual storytellers like Michael Cacoyannis, Costa Gavras, Pantelis Voulgaris, the late Theo Angelopoulos, Greece’s exceptional film poet, and others, have been embraced by Cannes, Berlin and Venice respectively. But, in my view, all these worthy distinctions through such a long passage of time loomed more like rare flashes of clarity in a storyteller’s mind that has been in a coma for the last 37 years.

Three Greek films lit sunbeams in major European festivals in 2009 and the Greek film community could not believe the stroke of good luck. In Berlinale’s Panorama, STRELLA, A WOMAN’S WAY, by director/writer/producer Panos H. Koutras, intrigued audiences with a drama that transcends its genre boundaries. In Cannes, Giorgos Lanthimos’ DOGTOOTH snagged the “Un Certain Regard” award leaving international critics and film professionals aghast at the audacity of its weird but ingenious story. Two months later, at the International Locarno Film Festival, in Switzerland, Antoni Kafetzopoulos won the best actor “Silver Leopard” award for his performance in PLATO’S ACADEMY by writer/director Filippos Tsitos.

The above four Greek films, by putting Greece on the map, started a revolution within the Greek film community. Realizing that politicians and bureaucrats along with the archaic laws needed to go, led to the creation of a protest movement called Filmmakers in the Mist (in English “FoG”, standing for Filmmakers of Greece), consisting of more than 200 directors, writers and producers demanding a new film legislation in order to put the standards more in line with the rest of the European / International film community. Mist also gave birth to the Hellenic Film Academy, a non-governmental organization styled after the Academy Awards. The battle lines were formed.

2010 rolled in - the revolution marched on. The first Hellenic Academy Awards occurred, where DOGTOOTH won best film, which led to becoming Greece’s entry to the US Academy Awards and, consequently, the pinnacle of all recent Greek films, by being nominated for a foreign language Academy Award.

More films arrived in the same free-spirited style of “guerilla” filmmaking. Three titles rode the wave to Venice: HOMELAND by Syllas Tzoumerkas, CASUS BELLI, a creative short by Giorgos Zois, and the boldly conceived film of Athina Rachel Tsangari, ATTENBERG, which won the best actress “Coppa Volpi” award for Ariane Labeled’s magical performance. ATTENBERG landed a prestigious distributor and went on with screenings in Europe and the USA, including Sundance. BLACK FIELD by Vardis Marinakis and THE BUILDING MANAGER by Periklis Hoursoglou, invited by the Chicago International Film Festival, hit the Windy City by storm. Largely credited to the National Hellenic Museum’s promotion, brought the Greeks out in droves.

Meanwhile, the war continued. The Filmmakers in the Mist eventually prevailed. The new bill - while not perfect - came in to being in December 2010, allowing filmmakers to believe that the Greek cinema can survive in the modern world. Alas, just in time with Greek crisis Act Two!

With minimal funding, works of distinction continued to be made supported faintly by the GFC and by the emergence of new creative all-round producers, something that was extremely hard to find just five years ago. Dedicated creative producers such as Yorgos Tsourgiannis, Amanda Livanou, Alexandra Boussiou, Eleni Kossyfidou, Maria Drandaki, Maria Tsiga, Fenia Kosovitsa, Maria Hatzikou, Giorgos Karnavas, to mention a few.

WASTED YOUTH by Argyris Papadimitropoulos and Jan Vogel was chosen to open Rotterdam International Film Festival, while MAN AT SEA by Konstantinos Giannaris, and AMNESTY by Bujar Alimani were selected for the Berlinale 2011. By the end of that year, well designed and much anticipated ALPS by writer/director Giorgos Lanthimos with co-writer Efthymis Philippou grabbed the best screenplay award in Venice. J.A.C.E. by Menelaos Karamaghiolis journeyed to Tokyo. UNFAIR WORLD, by Filippos Tsitos received the best direction and best actor for Antoni Kafetzopoulos award at the San Sebastian International Film Festival in Spain, respectively.

The unattainable economic climate in Greece may have brought everything to a halt, but Greek filmmakers keep creating with almost \*zero\* funding. It is THIS cinema that is getting recognized in the top European and International film festivals today! New film projects are constantly emerging seeking partners and foreign funding in prestigious co-production fora in International film festivals, which are demonstrating confidence in the Greek filmmakers. Thus, the crisis has helped in this development.

For 2012, the horizon so far includes, the atmospheric and enigmatic “L” by Babis Makridis telling the story of a man who lives in his car, an original story that has been invited in the official competition program of Sundance and Rotterdam festivals. UNFAIR WORLD will open the festival in Gothenburg, one of the most up-and-coming emerging festivals this time in the film planet. Also, Greek diaspora filmmaker Spiros Stathoulopoulos is presenting his monastic METEORA story in the Berlin International Film Festival in a few days. Plenty more coming!

How shall one call it? Greek film miracle? Greek film renaissance? New Greek wave? Time will show. For sure, it is an alive, refreshing, passionate and moving Hellenic Current.

Last but not least, in January 2011, a Greek diplomat, a University Professor of Greek descent, and a Greek filmmaker, over a quiet meal in down town Chicago, decided that it's time for the third largest US city to "ride the wave." A few weeks later the same three people met with a few selected more becoming a Committee with the Mission of identifying, promoting and celebrating Hellenic storytelling. FilmHellenes were born. Their core event became Greek Film Fest Chicago!, held in the fall, featuring a juried selection of the finest contemporary Greek films.

Does Greece matter? You bet!

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