

DIY FILM MAKING IN GREECE, IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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Abstract

The advent of new technologies in the last two decades has facilitated filmmakers to an extraordinary degree. Digital technology offers artists the ability to shoot, edit, distribute and advertise their films in an unprecedented manner. All this is done by the filmmakers themselves, in the spirit of DIY – Do It Yourself. This paper aims to present how these developments have helped filmmakers in Greece, especially in the genres of horror, sci-fi, and fantasy. The methodology of the paper will be based on the relevant literature concerning filmmaking, digital technologies and the film industry. Moreover, it will draw on examples of films such as *Evil* (2005), *Evil II* (2009), *Kamme Koumando* (2012) and others.

Keywords: *Digital Filmmaking, DIY, Internet, Horror*

Introduction

Between my submitting the proposal for the 1st DCAC Conference and the writing of this paper, a Greek film was released by the title of *Too Much Info Clouding Over My Head* (Christofilakis, 2018). When I was preparing my proposal I was not aware of the existence and imminent release of said film, but I believe that it falls into the subject(s) that I want to speak of, even in a slightly indirect manner.

The protagonist is a man in his thirties who has made only one film thus far, entitled *Gay Nazi Cyborg Zombies In Love*. He is currently struggling to find the financing and the cast for his second film, a more conventional love story set at the start of the 20th century. While he basically lives off his girlfriend and his big-time lawyer mother, the financing for this upcoming film is supposed to come from some of his own occasional acting, stage directing or even photographic jobs that he eventually fails miserably albeit hilariously at.

It could be argued that *Too Much Info Clouding Over My Head* (Christofilakis, 2018) is the third film in an unofficial, unintentional line of Greek, black and white, low budget –or even no budget- films that offer an equal number of variations on the story of the struggling, underground director who goes to great pains to finish his first/ next filmic project or just to find the financing for it. *Too much info Clouding Over My Head* (Christofilakis, 2018) tells the tale from the perspective of a bourgeois Woody Allenesque character, whereas Dimitri Athanitis' *Goodbye Berlin* (Athanitis, 1994) is an Aki Kaurismaki-influenced tale of the absurd. *No Budget Story* (Haralambides, 1997), falls

somewhere between the two, both chronologically and in terms of content, presenting a basically realistic story, set in a specific sociological context, but with nuances of, as I mentioned earlier, the absurd. The absurd is defined by the Merriam- Webster Online Dictionary as “the state or condition in which human beings exist in an irrational and meaningless universe and in which human life has no ultimate meaning” (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary). To quote from Camus: “This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world. For the moment it is all that links them together. It binds them one to the other as only hatred can weld two creatures together” (Camus 1965: 15). In business terms, *Too Much Info Clouding Over My Head* (Christofilakis, 2018) was probably the most expensive to make out of all three, costing, by the director’s own admission in a recent interview, roughly 16,000 Euros (Bakatselos 2018).

It is worth noting that the connection between the three films was actually acknowledged by the director of *Goodbye Berlin* in a recent Facebook post. In all of these three films, the actual, real-life film maker is burdened with a variety of responsibilities, apart from just directing. Athanitis also served as producer and played a small part. Haralambides also served as music supervisor, co-producer, writer and star. Christofilakis also served as co-producer, writer and star. On the other hand, as is often the case in indie cinema, the process of filming is also a matter of solidarity and a spirit of selfless collaboration, meaning that the film makers have received a significant amount of help from their friends and relatives, as relevant interviews by these three filmmakers will reveal.

Homo Universalis / The Writer as Producer / The D.I.Y. Approach

It is of course common knowledge that a film maker is supposed to acquire a variety of skills apart from directing, such as writing, editing, shooting, acting and even producing/ finding the financing for each project. If at older times, the actual combination of all these skills in one project was to be admired but also to be avoided, nowadays it can be viewed both as a necessity and as an easier process, thanks in part to the financial recession and in part to the advent of new technologies. In fact a whole film can now be shot and edited using just one device: one’s own smart phone. So much so that Nikos Kolovos’ phrase “in an extreme scenario, filmmaking can be an absolutely individual, solitary process” (Kolovos 1988: 115) becomes a palpable reality.

An indicative list of apps for editing video on one’s smart phone includes the following: iSuper8, Vyclone, VidTrim Pro, Lapse It Pro, AndroMedia HD, CinemaFX, iMovie, Viddy, Videolicious (Price 2012). Instances of films that have been entirely or partially shot on a smart phone include Sally Potter’s *Rage* (Potter, 2009) shot in 2009 and made available for download in seven parts; *Uneasy Lives The Mind* (Fosheim, 2014), shot on an iPhone with a total budget of 10,000 dollars; *Tangerine* (Baker, 2015); *I Play With The Phrase Each Other* (Jay Alvarez, 2013); Steven Soderbergh’s *Unsane* (Soderbergh, 2018), also a horror film.

Having a wide number of skills pertaining to the same art form or discipline is not such a rare thing: it’s not so unusual for a musician to be able to play more than one

instrument, to sing and also be able to record himself or herself, or even to be able to set up the PA system during a gig and so on. It is having skills in a variety of disciplines or art forms that is regarded with disbelief by some, as it is supposed to be reserved only for geni, such as Andy Warhol, Jean Cocteau, David Bowie or, during the Renaissance, Leonardo Da Vinci. Da Vinci was of course a man of his time, perhaps the absolute, ideal personification of the Homo Universalis. The Homo Universalis is “the iconic man of Renaissance humanism”, someone who is “able to span all the fields of knowledge with his mind force” and thus “gains access to universality” (Sorin 2011: 63).

Centuries after the Renaissance, in his essay *The Author as Producer* Benjamin urged writers of literature to become accustomed with other art forms and other crafts, such as photography and typography (Benjamin, 1970). This urgency was not expressed as a need to revive the Renaissance ideal of the Homo Universalis, but rather as a call for artists to seize the means of production, in keeping with Benjamin’s Marxist worldview (Benjamin, 1970). In this way, writers can finally gain true, essential control of their own art (Benjamin, 1970). Benjamin’s opinions are also echoed in Ellen Lupton’s similarly titled *The Designer As Producer* (Lupton 1997).

Somehow in accordance with the Renaissance ideal of universality and with theories proponed by Benjamin and Lupton, Yannis N. Kolovos mentions in his Ph.D. thesis, which is an account of the Athens Punk Scene, that many members of said scene, former or current, new ones or “veterans”, acquired a number of skills in the Athenian punk movement, skills that varied from actual musicianship to printing, to editing images, to organizing gigs, to recording, releasing and distributing records (Kolovos 2015). These skills helped them within the punk context and beyond it, and also both within an amateur and within a professional context (Kolovos 2015).

Of course, DIY is a notion that is closely associated with the punk movement. It is both a practical concept, one that has to do with familiarizing oneself with certain techniques, artistic or otherwise, but it is also one that has to do with economical/financial/political aspects of the creation and distribution of art. In terms of music, indie or independent can be viewed as a continuation of the DIY/punk spirit. Indie or independent also pertains to economical/financial/political terms, but as years have gone by, it has become a description of a certain technical and aesthetic style. This is applicable in the film world too. Of course, there are exceptions in both cases.

Independent Filmmaking and the Horror Genre

Independent filmmaking contains the concepts of low budget, micro budget and no budget films. These are terms that are very familiar and also pretty much self-explanatory. Of course, from country to country, from economy to economy, from industry to industry, there is a different scale regarding the estimation and definition of these terms. One industry’s big production might be another one’s low budget film.

One of the most famous independent films of all time also happens to be one of the most important ones in the horror genre: George A. Romero’s *Night of The Living Dead* (Romero, 1968). The film had an initial budget of 6000 dollars, but was completed with a budget of 114,000 dollars, which is still small change by the American film industry’s standards. Of course, it grossed 18 million dollars worldwide during its initial theatrical release, as well as launching Romero’s career and rejuvenating the zombie and the

horror genre in the process. The film was made as response to the film industry's "thirst for the bizarre", according to a George A. Romero interview (Hardman and Eastman, 1997). Romero also performed the editing and co-wrote the screenplay.

Romero's movie never mentions the word zombie, but it is one of the most important ones in the whole relevant filmography, influencing a wide variety of directors worldwide and across the decades. Three of these filmmakers were the brothers Nousias and their collaborator, Claudio Bolivar. This team also chose to make a zombie film out of love for genre (horror) cinema and because it would be cheaper for them to pull it through (Papageorgiou and Ioannides 2009). Contrary to Romero's team, though, Nousias and his collaborators had no hope of actually satisfying the Greek film industry's thirst for the bizarre, or its thirst for genre cinema or its thirst for horror in particular.

Genre films and horror films in particular are still not respected in Greece: not only are they considered contrary to the notion of "Greekness" but they are also not perceived as "serious" or even "commercial" cinema (Kagios 2010). Nousias' film, *Evil (To Kako)* (Nousias, 2005) was the first Greek zombie film to get an actual theatrical release and to be played in international festivals (Papageorgiou and Ioannides 2009). He even got to shoot a sequel, *Evil In The Time of Heroes* (Nousias, 2009), his last feature film to date. Other filmmakers have been less fortunate in that respect.

D.I.Y. Filmmaking In The Digital Age

What, then, could be the solution for someone who wants to make genre cinema in Greece, for someone who wants to realize his or her artistic vision, no matter how immature, silly, gorey, campy, or, simply, of limited interest and commercial potential it might seem to mainstream producers, distributors and media? The digital age offers a variety of tools for overcoming at least some of the practical, technical and financial difficulties.

I spoke earlier of the technological advantages that smart phones and other devices bring along with them. Social media, YouTube channels and official websites are also important tools for advertizing or even distributing one's film. Another benefit to be derived from the advent of the Internet is Crowdfunding. The main forms of crowdfunding (also known as participative financing) are donation crowdfunding, investment crowdfunding and presales crowdfunding. The legal framework in Europe and America has been well established. In Greece it is based on two recent acts of legislation. The first, Law 4351/2015, acknowledges the right of credit Institutions, banks and public sector institutions to run crowdfunding campaigns in order to financially support actions, institutions or persons (Law 4351/2015, in Psalidas 2017). In this case crowdfunding pertains to donations, not the financing of projects such as films. The second one, Law 4416/2016, permits the foundation of crowdfunding platforms/businesses, referred to as Investment Services Providers (Greek: ΑΕΠΠΕΥ) or Alternative Investment Management Companies (Greek: ΑΕΔΟΕΕ) (Law 4416/2016, in Psalidas 2017). These platforms are allowed to publish crowdfunding campaigns by individuals or companies which must not exceed 500,000 Euros, with donations by individual contributors not allowed to exceed 5,000 Euros (Law 4416/2016, in Psalidas 2017).

However, Greek visual artists, writers, musicians and filmmakers do in fact tend to use crowdfunding platforms. A rough research of mine in Indiegogo, Patreon and GoFundMe using keywords such as Greece, Greek, Greek Film, Athens, Salonica, Thessaloniki, brought about an interesting set of results. My May 31st research in Indiegogo brought about 82 results for the keyword “Greek”, 35 results for “Greece”, 35 results for “Greece-related”, 59 results for “Athens”, 23 results for “Salonica”, 61 results for “Thessaloniki”. My research in Patreon, on that same date, brought about 71 creators for the keyword “Greece”, 40 creators for the keyword “Greek”, 31 creators for the keyword “Athens” and 5 creators for “Thessaloniki”. My research in GoFundMe, on the abovementioned date, prompted the following figures: 94 results for “Athens Film”, 151 results for “Greece Film”, 1003 results for “Greek Film”, 5 results for “Thessaloniki Film” and zero results for “Salonica Film”.

Among the Greek projects to be found in such platforms are full-length documentaries like *O Yiorgos tou Kedrou*, or *Me and My Shadow*, about the late, great singer Nikos Papazoglou. Others are closer to the Noussias’ film, like *Legend of The Dragonphoenix V*, a self-released Conan The Barbarian-like comic book that has spawned a series of film adaptations shot by and starring the original creator of the comic.

DIY or low budget films to have come out of Greece in recent years often pertain to genre filmmaking such as horror, sci-fi, crime, fantasy and exploitation/parody. Examples include: *I epithesi tou gigantiaiou moussaka* (Koutras, 1999) a science fiction comedy in the vein of *The Blob* (Yeaworth, 1958) and *Mars Attacks* (Burton, 1996); *Super Dimitrios* (Papaioannou, 2011), a humorous take on the superhero genre, set in Thessaloniki and inspired by the peculiarities of the local community; *Kame Koumando* (Damianakis, 2012), a sci-fi film, involving a warrior from the future deciding to travel to a post-apocalyptic ‘present’; *I Epistrofi ton Katharmaton* (Bogris, 2003), *Ta Remalia* (Bogris, 2003) and *Catharsis* (Bogris, 2009), takes on the crime/revenge genres, the latter one being a film release, while the former two were released on video. Despite their dubious aesthetic or even political elements, for the most part, these films prove not only a true love of their makers for their respective genres but also an uncompromising artistic vision and an unfettered will to make this vision into a reality.

Conclusion

If you will allow me, I will end this paper on a somewhat romantic note, speaking not only as a Ph.D. Candidate but also as an artist, albeit of another kind (a published author of fiction). As with many other aspects of Greek life, arts and the cinema in particular fall victim of a hierarchical mentality, whereby a nomenclature (of publishers, producers, gallery owners, older, better-known writers/artists/filmmakers, along with the mainstream media) decides, in an absurd fashion, what constitutes art and what does not, what constitutes talent and what does not, what constitutes commercial material and what does not. The internet, the advent of new technologies, crowdfunding platforms and all the other means I have described during this presentation, offer younger, less acknowledged artists a platform to work against this mentality, not in the hope of abolishing it but at least in the hope of getting their own artistic vision through.

Or, to return to Camus and the absurd, “To work and create ‘for nothing,’ to sculpture in clay, to know that one’s creation has no future, to see one’s work destroyed in a day while being aware that fundamentally this has no more importance than building for centuries—this is the difficult wisdom that absurd thought sanctions. Performing these two tasks simultaneously, negating on the one hand and magnifying on the other, is the way open to the absurd creator. He must give the void its colors” (Camus 1965: 72-73).

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