



Filmmaker keeps his lens on the marginalized

Constantine Giannaris lived in London for 24 years following studies in economics and history, learning to make films by watching films. His first Greek feature-length film was the incisive "From the Edge of the City," which drew the curtains on the 1990s following his English-language drama "Three Steps to Heaven," which was selected for the Directors' Fortnight at the Cannes Film Festival in 1995.

In "From the Edge of the City," a group of ethnic Greeks from the Black Sea region of Kazakhstan descend on the rough western Athenian suburb of Menidi, working as male prostitutes as their "Greek dream" proves nothing more than a chimera.

Giannaris's fourth feature, "Man at Sea," which ends a limited run at theaters on Thursday, sees a group of undocumented migrant stowaways left to their own devices and the crew on a tanker sailing in international waters, where their humanity is tested in a multitude of ways both on deck and below.

How would you preface "Man at Sea"?

An adventure at sea that is also about the center of Athens. It is a metaphor about Greece, about Europe and about the "Other" that invades your space and you can't push him out. It is a study on the meaning of individual responsibility, on what it means to be progressive and anti-racist.

In your opinion, what makes a film?

The screenplay and all the serendipitous things that happen along the way, casting you into a new adventure; most of the time a good one, sometimes not so much.

Were you lucky or unlucky this time?

I was lucky in the sense that right now you can't find the funding to embark on such a production. I was unlucky in my obsessive

desire to film an entire movie on a tanker.

Did you feel like a fish out of water, shooting away from Athens?

No, quite the opposite. I wanted to convey a sense of claustrophobia. But, it is very difficult and dangerous to shoot on a tanker. It's like being on the construction site for a large metal building. You have to make a lot of compromises.

The main theme in your films seems to be social marginalization. Do you believe that there is a lot of creative scope left for you in this area?

It is teeming with opportunity for new narratives, new films, new works of art, and especially now, because of the marginalization of Greek society and Southern Europe.

Is a melting-pot culture developing in Athens?

Yes, and I hope it is one that will resist a more dominant narrative.

What do you mean by dominant?

Two things. First, what I call the political economy of pain, which is expressed by a part of the European elite and dictates how we will come out of the crisis and how we will respond to the historical demise of Europe in relation to the East. This is what today's crisis is about. Spoilt for the past few years and still retaining its colonialist mentality, Europe is being globally marginalized. But there is another side to the dominant narrative, which is shortsighted and old-fashioned, which I can't understand and which is expressed in Greece mostly by the left.

How do you imagine the exit to the crisis?

Certainly without a return to the age of extremes. Without a Nazi party getting 10 or 15 percent at the polls in a country that

INFO

"A tale of the transnational now in which characters rarely speak in their native tongues and everybody's an alien in one way or another. An ocean tanker picks up a boatload of refugees in the Mediterranean, much to the displeasure of the crew's employers, only to find itself unable to locate a country willing to take them in. Alex (Antonis Karistinos), the ship's captain, meets with hostility wherever he calls, and meanwhile his crew are becoming increasingly discontented. In this visually gorgeous film, with its bold color, striking spatial geometry, and almost tangible light, everything looks sculpted, stylized and theatrical. Director Constantine Giannaris transforms the ship into a massive, multi-tiered stage: a setting fit for a tragedy." —Olaf Möller, Film Comment,

brags about being anti-racist and anti-fascist. I would also like to see labor unions adopt a different stance; they are, after all, supposed to be representing workers in the private sector and not just in the corrupt public sector. I would like a different political elite that is not so predatory, so shortsighted, so dated and money-grubbing. Obviously it is a different country that I yearn.

You lived in the UK during the early Thatcher years. Do you see any similarities in Greece today?

There are similarities as far as the collapse of an economic and social model is concerned, but also in the failure of the working-class left to offer an alternative. The differences, though, are terrifying and they have to do with the social and political maturity of the people. Even in the most intense examples of resistance, like the huge coal miners' strike, you did not see the kind of extreme and primitive political behavior you see almost every day in Athens. I don't understand why

we need to tear our city down in order to build a new society. At the end of the day I don't care what someone preaches, but whether the preaching turns into action. The political behavior in this country is utterly primitive, introverted and conservative, and it is restricted within the framework of the individual and the family. In terms of making films, this is what is interesting here. Unfortunately.

You have often spoken out against family. Do you think family is a bad thing?

No, it is a beautiful thing to have a family. But family is not the be-all and end-all as it is in the Greek sense, meaning that you trust no one outside of it. There is no civil society in this country, independent of the state and political parties.

How do you define ugliness?

The complete hypocrisy of the elite that has created an informal state of apartheid in the city. The defilement of the urban landscape. And also that so many people do not see that social solidarity lies in everyday things like paying taxes, not dropping litter on the street, not parking anywhere you like. Ugliness is bashing foreigners while leaving them out on the streets in a state of wretchedness.

What is beauty?

A beautiful plot of land, which is, unfortunately, how most Greeks see our very beautiful country. The light in Greece is also stunning.

Fear?

I feel an enormous amount for people who are very close to me and aren't Greek. I am also afraid that a society such as ours may just go nuts suddenly. It is the weak link in a Europe that does not know where it is headed.