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**Dreaming the Unthinkable: the cinema of Yorgos Lanthimos**

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‘The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that accords with this insight’. (Walter Benjamin, (1940), 2003: 392)

‘…psychoanalysis makes its most important discoveries through the analysis of dreams, and to this day, the cinema remains a dream factory, a form of public dreaming’. (Todd McGowan, 2018: 1)

Todd McGowan’s understanding of cinema as a form of ‘public dreaming’, together with Walter Benjamin’s observation about the threat to modern political-juridical life,  provide the point of departure for this chapter’s consideration of the cinema of Yorgos Lanthimos (b. 1973), the most prominent of the so-called ‘Greek Weird Wave’ directors.[[1]](#endnote-1) This chapter proposes that Lanthimos’ cinema shares similar modes of representation to that of dreams, and that it can be understood in terms of the psychoanalytic notion of a wish, developed as a force of desire to lift an apparently enduring sense of repression; furthermore, it is suggested that the particular oneiric forms by means of which Lanthimos’ films enact this wish reveal nothing less than the stakes of modern political-juridical life in so far as it is determined by what Benjamin describes as ‘the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live.’ In pursuing these propositions, this chapter takes a retrospective view of Lanthimos’ film work, analyzing his early films made in Greece – *Kinetta* (1995), *Dogtooth* (2009) and *Alps* (2011) – in combination with those that have been produced more recently in the UK and USA: *The Lobster* (2015), *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2017), and *The Favourite* (2018).[[2]](#endnote-2) Often described as ‘weird’ and ‘surreal’, it can be said that the use of these labels in connection with Lanthimos’ cinema reveals a certain bafflement, and even a lack of comprehension, on the part of critics as to how to understand and interpret it, as if there is something unthinkable and, hence, impossible to articulate, about his cinema. Taking this bewilderment seriously,[[3]](#endnote-3) this chapter asserts that, as some critics inadvertently acknowledge, Lanthimos’ cinema revolves around that which is unthinkable although, as will be argued, such unthinkability is traversed by a recurring set of phantasies, the enacting of which disclose a series of conflicts in the Subject’s imaginary.

By using the term ‘surreal’, it can be assumed that the original intention of critics of these films was not to bring Lanthimos’ work into association with the historical movement of European Surrealist filmmaking from the 1920’s and 1930’s. The characteristic Surrealist style of this period, which consisted of incongruous elements assembled adjacently in an aesthetic of spatial and temporal discontinuity,[[4]](#endnote-4) is far removed from Lanthimos’ feature length films, which subordinate montage to a linear structure of narrative filmmaking in the manner of many mainstream films. In this respect, the diegetic structure of Lanthimos’ films often, if not always, follows a classic narrative form described by Deleuze as: situation – action – modified situation (SAS').[[5]](#endnote-5) Nevertheless, despite adhering to this narrative structure, Lanthimos’ films are disturbing, combining both familiar and unfamiliar elements as in a dream with uncanny effect. While the characters often work in everyday jobs, for example, with the police force (*Kinetta*) or in a hospital (*Alps*), and several of Lanthimos’ films are family sagas (*Dogtooth* and *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*), the characters themselves exhibit perverse patterns of obsessive behaviour: in *Kinetta,* the trio of characters are bound together by a repetitive compulsion to act out murder scenes which far exceeds any motives of investigation; in *Alps*, the eponymous, arcane group adopt the personas of dead or absent loved ones; and, in *Dogtooth,* the adult children of the family, having never left their home, live in an estranged world of their own. In focusing upon oppressive institutions rather than obsessive and dysfunctional characters inhabiting an enclosed group, *The Lobster* is somewhat different to the preceding films. But, it is no less uncanny and troubling, and indeed this film, like Lanthimos’ subsequent film *The Killing of a Sacred Deer,* has an additional nightmarish quality. Thus, in *The Lobster,* the hapless David is conveyed to a dystopian establishment, known as ‘The Hotel’, where he is required, like the other residents, to find a sexual partner within a limited period or face the punishment of being transmuted into the bare life of an animal. In *The Killing of a Sacred Deer,* the nightmare commences when an apparently ‘normal’ suburban family receive a prophecy that the parent’s two children will shortly fall ill and die unless the father kills one of them. Adding to the oneiric qualities of Lanthimos’ cinema are the deadpan, undemonstrative performances of the characters, especially in the early films; they have been described as ‘soulless’ and ‘semi-autistic’ (Fisher, 2011: 22), moving ‘like puppets’ (Kaiser, 2018) and possessing at most ‘only a partial mastery of emotional literacy’ (Fisher, 2011: 22). The effect of these performances is that the characters seem to lack a sense of interiority and independent agency; dominated by forces beyond their control, it is as if they are beset by a debilitating trauma while at the same time they seem to inhabit a dream governed by its own phantasmatic means of representation.

In connection with the notion of trauma, this chapter follows Freud’s definition of the traumatic condition as resulting from ‘an increase of stimulus too powerful to be dealt with or worked off in the normal way’. It can be inferred that Freud’s conception ‘of a normal way’ (1981, vol. XVI: 275), to which he refers here, is the process of transference; that is, a process of remembering and working through accompanied by analytic interpretation, a process which additionally may include forms of repetition. However, the Subject who suffers from trauma is powerless to escape its implosive affect, thus preventing the aforementioned psychic processes from becoming operative

The symptomatic picture presented by traumatic neurosis approaches that of hysteria in the wealth of its similar motor symptoms, but surpasses it as a rule in its strongly marked signs of subjective ailment (in which it resembles hypochondria or melancholia) as well as in the evidence it gives of a far more comprehensive general enfeeblement and disturbance of the mental capacities. (1981, vol. XVIII: 12)

Beset very often by uncontrollable, somatic forms of displacement and, in many cases, recurring nightmares and hallucinations, the traumatic patient, Freud observed, is ‘fixated to his trauma’ (*Ibid.*:) and, since the trauma is unthinkable, is unable to work through it. Symptomatic of this inability is that dreams, far from serving as a site for working through the trauma, often provide no respite from it.[[6]](#endnote-6)

As will be argued, the sense of estrangement in Lanthimos’ cinema reflects in part this foregoing understanding of trauma as a fixation that originates in a catastrophe, singular or cumulative, to which the Subject is in thrall. However, it will also be seen that Lanthimos’ work evidences a representational process which is analogous to that of the dream-work as analysed by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899).[[7]](#endnote-7) This chapter explores these apparently contradictory tendencies in Lanthimos’ cinema concerning, on the one hand, the condition of a debilitating and unending trauma and, on the other hand, a force of desire that resists the ideological causes of this trauma and its perpetuation. In this latter respect, what will be of use for the purpose of discussion are Freud’s insights into the representational processes involved in dreams and other psychic productions – namely the processes of condensation, displacement, considerations of representability, and secondary revision. In studying Lanthimos’ films together, a key analytic method of this chapter will follow Freud’s method in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in which he stressed the importance of understanding dreams, not just singly, but collectively in a sequence or series, the analogy being in his words like

the painter who, in a picture of the School of Athens or of Parnassus, gathers into one group all the philosophers or all the poets. It is true that they were never in fact assembled in a single hall or on a single mountaintop, but they certainly form a group in the conceptual sense. (1981, vol. IV: 314)

For Freud, dreams are compromises and constitute ‘riddles’ (*Rätsel*) that require interpretation (1981, vol. XIII: 211).[[8]](#endnote-8) Principally, for Freud, the challenge posed by dreams owes to the fact that the wishes embedded within them are mediated through so-called ‘secondary’ processes of representation (1981, vol. IV: 261-264). Freud discusses many kinds of wishes in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, but this chapter is concerned with a manifest wish in Lanthimos’ cinema to resist and, by implication, challenge a perceived sense of violence that threatens to render the Subject virtually lifeless and without agency*.* It can be seen that in Lanthimos’ films such resistance is conducted in opposition to a repressive paternal or sovereign authority. Cast in Oedipal terms this wish can be seen as a murderous wish and can help explain the ambivalence evidenced in a sense of futility that recurs through much of Lanthimos’ cinema; however, the analogy between Lanthimos’ cinema and Freud’s conception of Oedipal conflicts, while helpful in one sense, may tend, in another sense, to obscure the socio-political and historical context in which his cinema is embedded.

**Masters and Subjects/Subjects and Masters**

The nightmarish subject that frequently recurs throughout Lanthimos’ cinema, and upon which it is fixated, is that of power as a violent and exploitative force of subjection; in his early cinema, such power is exercised by domineering men upon their family (*Dogtooth*) or the arcane group which they control (*Kinetta*, *Alps*), and a similar figure surfaces again in Lanthimos’ later film *The Killing of a Sacred Deer.* In *Kinetta*, the threat of violence is never made actual in a physical sense, but it is clear that the detective-cum-film director who dominates the trio of actants in the film has a hold over them that is psychologically abusive – as exemplified in a scene mid-way through the film, in which the detective commands one of the other members of the trio, a hotel maid, to strip before him while instructing her exactly how she should carry this out

…You grab your little shirt, you lift it to your face till it reaches your eyes…As you lift your shirt you raise your head, revealing your eyes, looking straight at me. You now remove your shirt entirely and drop it on top of the jacket….

If in *Kinetta* violence is never made physically blatant, then in both *Dogtooth* and *Alps* it explodes onto the surface with vicious effect. In the opening scene of *Alps*, the gym coach threatens his disenchanted pupil with a club ‘to crack your head open…and break your arms and legs’. Later in the film, Alps, the leader of the eponymous group, carries out this threat, this time upon Monte Rosa, for failing to distance herself professionally from the group’s work. The force with which the father in *Dogtooth* is prepared to resort in order to impose his authority upon his family is no less violent than that of the men in *Alps*. When the father discovers that his eldest daughter has been watching videos of Hollywood films that give her ideas about other worlds beyond her own, he fastens one of the VHS cassettes to his hand and then repeatedly beats her over the head with it until she is nearly unconscious. Afterwards, he visits the house of Christina, the woman who lent his daughter the cassettes, and smashes her to the ground with a video player, cursing both her and her future progeny.

A number of commentators on the pervasive sense of violence and abuse in Lanthimos’ films have proposed that they reflect a breakdown in the communal fabric of Greek society, particularly at the constituent level of the family unit, that was exacerbated by the financial crisis that beset Greece in 2007-08 and which contributed to the country’s impoverishment. Thus, Maria Chalkou proposes that the filmmakers associated with Greek weird wave cinema

are focusing on the present and examining the traumas of their own generation. Their work is a direct, bitter and often darkly humorous attack on the values of contemporary Greek society and a ‘constant reminder of a missing societal bond, [and] a lost togetherness.’[[9]](#endnote-9)… Focusing on the family unit as a microcosm of Greek society, they uncover the hidden brutality in domestic relations and deal with the over-protective and over-abusing parental authority. (2012: 258-9)

Similarly, Mark Fisher argues that *Dogtooth* reveals how the family unit in contemporary society has become a site of implosive violence (2011: 22-27). Watching this film and its depiction of adult children brutalised by their despotic father and kept in an environment of incestuous relations, Fisher notes that it was impossible not to think of the notorious case of Josef Fritzl, even though the screenplay for the film was written before the Fritzl story became known to the world. (In 2008 Josef Fritzl’s daughter, Elizabeth, revealed that she had been held captive by her father for the past twenty-four years, since she was aged eighteen, at their home where he assaulted, sexually abused and raped her numerous times.)

Tyrannical fathers and men who exert power with selfish calculation and, in the subsequent films *The Lobster* and *The Favourite,* forms of totalitarianism that exploit the most vulnerable sides of humankind: these have been the perennial subjects and themes of Lanthimos’ work to date. Akin to the process of condensation in the dream-work, these subjects seem to reflect multiple associations which in this case include, but also would seem to exceed, the traumas underlying the financial, socio-political and familial circumstances in Greece in the 2000s. Arguably, informing their recurrence are traces emergent from other repressed recesses, stretching back feasibly to the historical legacy of the trauma of the Second World War – when, between 1943 and 1944, and with the tacit agreement of the Greek government, some 80,000 Jews were deported and exterminated in Auschwitz[[10]](#endnote-10) – and, more recently, the trauma inflicted by the ruthless far-right military dictatorship that controlled Greece between 1967 and 1974.[[11]](#endnote-11) Understood in this context it can be seen that Lanthimos’ films not only figure the repressed traumas of Greek history reaching back in modern memory to the Holocaust but they also enact the imminent threat of a recurrence of the events that engendered such traumas. Following David Rousset, a former inmate of the camps, Griselda Pollock and Max Silverman describe how subsequent politico-ethical history after the Holocaust is circumscribed by that of ‘the concentrationary universe’ (‘*L’Univers concentrationnaire’*) to the extent that it obtains an ontological status. As Pollock and Silverman observe, the system underlying this universe

‘as… a realized experiment under the Third Reich, will always be with us now that it has been unleashed on the world. While the fully realized actualization of such terror had been unprecedented in this form until the 1930’s, now that it has happened, become real, made into fact, it is a precedent and hence a constant menace.’[[12]](#endnote-12)

While the camp, ‘functions…as the heart of the totalitarian society…as a ‘world apart,’’[[13]](#endnote-13) Giorgio Agamben’s analysis of the totalitarian state inaugurated by the Nazis emphasises the fact that the camp owed its existence as a ‘world apart’ to the establishment of an anti-democratic ‘state of exception, or emergency’ that enabled the regime to revoke all jurisdiction over the rights of Jewish citizens and other minority groups and their lives. Like Benjamin, Agamben proposes that it was the advent of this totalitarian power under the Nazis claiming the authority to suspend the law governing ‘living life’, ‘that marks in a decisive way the political space itself of modernity.’[[14]](#endnote-14) Violent excess of the rule of law is a perennial subject of Lanthimos’ cinema, forming its own fable of ‘the concentrationary universe’: the incarceration of the adult children in *Dogtooth* and their coercion into incestuous relations by the father; the prohibition of individual choice in *Alps*; the sentencing of inturnees to the bare life of a vulnerable animal in *The Lobster* andthe forced slaughter of the Loners by the Hotel inmates in the same film; the father’s murder of his young son in *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* - all of these scenarios dramatize an absurd and terrifying universe bereft of a politico-ethical compass in which ‘anything is possible.’[[15]](#endnote-15)

It has been noted that historically-based forms of trauma often make themselves felt trans-generationally as an unworked-through and, sometimes hidden or concealed, heritage that is passed down in the form of a predetermined destiny from parent to child, and from the perpetrators to the families of their victims. This sense of a fate from which there is no escape is especially applicable to Lanthimos’ cinema which frequently confirms that power is abusive and beyond all law, where even the victims cannot help but be complicit in its perpetuation. *Kinetta*, *Alps* and *The Favourite* each end by confirming the authority of the tyrannical power with which they commenced; as a consequence, the diegetic structure of these films is not so much that of situation – action – modified situation (SAS'), but rather: situation – action – repeated situation (SAS).[[16]](#endnote-16) Thus, the tragic fates of Monte Rosa in *Alps* and Queen Anne’s inner circle of women courtiers in *The Favourite* are sealed by a power that both binds and exceeds them.

A further strain of traumatic material, besides that which is engrained in Greece’s national history, can be seen to shape the process of condensation in relation to the perennial subject of power in Lanthimos’ cinema, and this is established from the beginning of his directorial work with the film *Kinetta*. The three protagonists in this film form a circle of self-obsessed, thwarted desire. In one scene in the film the detective-cum-director attempts to introduce the hotel maid to his hobby of go-karting. Sitting at the wheel of the go-kart and wearing a helmet that has the literal and metaphorical effect of insulating the maid from the world, she sets off **–** only to drive the vehicle into a nearby wall. If this scene can be taken as a metaphor for cinema’s status and condition today, in which the actants literally go nowhere and seem to be rendered practically immobile, then it would seem to suggest that the once cherished dream propagated by many great twentieth century cinéastes of cinema’s power to transform ideology, has expired. As Hito Steyerl has argued recently, cinema was envisaged in the twentieth century to be ‘an active catalyst of events’, its images acting as ceaseless

nodes of energy and matter [migrating] across different supports, shaping and affecting people, landscapes, politics and social systems…[with] an uncanny ability to proliferate, transform and activate.[[17]](#endnote-17) (2019: 143-4)

But, for Steyerl, writing in 2017, cinema is no longer such a catalyst, instead it has become ‘rather lifeless…[cinema] was killed, or at least it fell into a permanent coma’ (*Ibid*.: 145-6). With ideology dominant, not just in cinema, but globally, Jean Baudrillard observed wryly at the end of the twentieth century that liberty as a progressive force becomes identical with the march of capital: ‘Liberty is nowhere but in capital, it is what produced it, it is what deepens it…The demand of ‘liberty’ is never anything but going further than the system, but in the same direction’ (1994: n3, 92). Baudrillard’s analysis of liberty’s simulated movement provides an accurate analogy with the scene of the go-cart in *Kinetta,* a scene that seems to promise some form of motility, but which, as it turns out, is merely a further synecdoche of the film’s sense of thwarted power. And, at the core of this there are the repeated performances by the three actants of what was once a prime signifier associated with twentieth century cinema: a murder.[[18]](#endnote-18) It is almost as if, in *Kinetta,* this signifier has come to murder cinema itself, such that both signifier and cinema implode into the spectral meaninglessness of a living death. Perhaps there is no more stark reflection in recent films of cinema’s traumatic loss of its former affective power as ‘an active catalyst of events’.

**Cruel Liberation**

Taken together, Lanthimos’ films can be read according to Freud’s aforementioned recommendation in *The Interpretation of Dreams* and elsewhere in his work to focus methodologically not just upon a single dream in isolation, but upon a successive series of dreams, often those that had occurred across the entire night. The initial dreams in the night, Freud observed, were frequently distorted in terms of the wish they represented, while the following dreams became bolder and more distinct expressions of this wish. Alternatively, and in the opposite direction, such a sequence of dreams could represent initially a wish but, subsequently, its denial: ‘Often, two dreams that follow each other in succession produce together, in two stages, the fulfillment of a wish, while the other represents its punishment.’ (1988: 86)[[19]](#endnote-19) In adopting this method of interpretation with respect to Lanthimos’ cinema, it becomes possible to read even those films which embody a profound sense of stasis (especially *Kinetta* and *Alps*) somewhat differently and more like counterpoints to his other films so that, following Freud, they can be seen as alternate sides in the acting out of a wish, however anxiously. On the one side, then, there are a series of vulnerable characters in Lanthimos’ films who, not unlike Shakespeare’s Hamlet, seem to be cursed by a destiny that was activated before them, but which inevitably shapes their own fate. The maid in *Kinetta* and Monte Rosa in *Alps* cannot escape the arcane regulations governing their conduct and behaviour, while Abigail Hill in *The Favourite,* despite her attempts to secure a degree of autonomy for herself, ends up being subject to the power of the insecure and needy sovereign, Queen Anne. On the other side, not all of Lanthimos’ actants reflect the archetypal Hamlet figure trapped by a fate that is apparently beyond his control.[[20]](#endnote-20) A number of Lanthimos’ films – *Dogtooth*, *The Lobster* and *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* – end in ways which are manifestly different to the films’ openings (SAS'). Stasis, repression and punishment: these elements are one side of Lanthimos’ cinema but there is another side to it as demonstrated by the altered situations (S') of these films. How these two apparently incompatible sides to Lanthimos’ cinema with their very different kinds of endings can be thought in relation to each other will be considered in the following.

Even in *Kinetta*, where the sense of libidinal motility seems almost entirely obstructed, there emerges, if only momentarily, the figure of a desiring subject. In a variation upon the fairy story of Goldilocks, the hotel maid goes to sleep clandestinely in one of the hotel’s rooms. She is seen next running rapidly through the hotel’s corridors, followed by a camera that is barely able to catch up with her. It is as if this scene is the hotel maid’s dream, her wish to create ‘a line of flight’, to borrow Deleuze’s and Guattari’s phrase from *A Thousand Plateaux[[21]](#endnote-21)* and break away from both the drudgery of her working life as well as the obsessional patriarchs to whom she is attached in her waking life.

In *Dogtooth,* the dream of the eldest daughter is similar to that of the maid in *Kinetta*, although, this time, it is represented in a more brutal form laden, it might be said, with traces of self-punishment. In the film, the adult children are told by their father that they will be ready to leave home only when one of their front dental incisors (known as dogteeth) falls out. Of course, the catch is that this could hardly happen, but it is this impasse which the eldest daughter confronts using a stratagem similar to Alexander’s legendary solving of the problem of the Gordian knot. As the film develops (A), the daughter’s behaviour grows increasingly insubordinate and, then, late one night she goes into the bathroom and violently knocks out her right dogtooth with a dumb-bell. After grinning triumphantly at herself in the blood-spattered mirror as she observes the gap in her teeth, she leaves the house, crosses the garden and hides in the boot of her father’s car so that she can escape the confines of his property (S').

This extraordinary scene of the daughter knocking out her tooth bears comparison with the scene in David Fincher’s *Fight Club* (1999), when the Narrator angrily confronts his exploitative boss and, instead of attacking him, beats *himself* up as the astonished boss looks on. The motivation behind this dramatic scene of self-inflicted violence is part of the Narrator’s journey towards liberating himself from the Capitalist, materialist ideologies that chain him to his corporate job. Reading this scene from *Fight Club*, Slavoj Žižek says

This is a much more painful, violent scene than if he were to attack the boss. If you want to get rid of ideology, if you want to get free, first you have to beat yourself…Far from standing for some kind of perverted masochism or reactionary fantasy of violence this scene is deeply liberating. I’m here on the side of the fist. I think this is what liberation means: in order to attack the enemy, you first have to beat the shit out of yourself, to get rid in yourself to that in yourself that attaches you to the leader, to the conditions of slavery… (2006)

Being ‘on the side of the fist’ aligns the Subject with the autonomous force of the fist, a force of unconscious desire which, as Žižek says, ‘is deeply liberating’. Such liberation is accomplished by the Subject’s recognition that the authority of the boss, and by analogy that of the father in *Dogtooth*, does not emanate from their person, as such, but from the empty symbolic place that they occupy and fill in the Subject’s super ego. This, in turn, has radical implications for the status of the Subject *qua* Subject, in so far as it is this gap between the boss/father in the immediacy of their personalities and the symbolic place they occupy that the Subject ignores, precisely in order to remain a Subject to power and of misrecognition (*méconnaissance*). Thus, the intention behind this act of the daughter’s self-inflicted violence is to expunge the nightmarish power of the father as exercised by the super-ego[[22]](#endnote-22) *in herself*, after which she can leave her former life of subjugation behind, although perhaps not without some sense of guilt or anxiety as indicated by the violence of the bathroom scene. Significantly enough for this chapter’s reading of the oscillating, albeit phantasmatic, conflict in Lanthimos’ films between the act of killing the repressive father-figure of totalitarian excess and its punishment, the same actor, Angeliki Papoulia, plays the castigated Monte Rosa in *Alps* and the eldest daughter in *Dogtooth* seeking liberty. A similar actor of an analogous age, Evangelia Randou, also plays the hotel maid in *Kinetta*. This maid embodies a sense of perversity and repression but also in one scene dreams of liberty and, in a further scene, mimics her own ‘death’ – which, like the elder daughter’s action at the end of *Dogtooth,* demonstrates her attemptto liberate herself from the paternal authority governing her group.

Thus, in Lanthimos’ cinema it is often the figure of a young woman who embodies the conflicts between repression and liberation, although in *The Lobster* they are represented by a male character, David. Following again an SAS' structure, this filmtells of a romantic relationship between David and a woman (with no given name), both of whom have escaped at different times from The Hotel before joining the Loners in the woods (S). As couples are forbidden by the Loners, the leader of the group cruelly punishes the woman by having her eyesight surgically removed. Nevertheless, David remains undeterred in his devotion for the now blind woman and eventually escapes with her to the city where couples with shared physical traits are permitted (A). There, David resolves to make a remarkable, final sacrifice for the sake of his love. Prior to this, sitting in a diner opposite his blind partner, David requests her to allow him to inspect parts of her body; finally, he requests her to smile. Viewed in retrospect, from the point of view of the ending of the film, this scene is not as ‘weird’ as might be first thought; in fact, it is a scene of extreme poignancy and tenderness. What, subsequently, David intends to do is blind himself so as to pair himself with his partner, thereby enabling them to survive together as a legitimate couple in the city. David’s requests in the diner to gaze at parts of his partner’s body are a way of memorizing her, a means of catching a last sight of her appearance before he loses his own eyesight (S'). With this idea in mind, David’s intended enucleation in *The Lobster* can be read as the sacrifice of his own subjectivity as a way to open his desire towards the Other; thus, the development of the film and its conclusion (A - S') reveals the Subject’s wish to lift repression, albeit through violent means, by overthrowing the authority of his own super-ego and his attachment to its authority as represented by the nightmarish vison of The Hotel and the outlying Loners group.

Following *The Lobster*, Lanthimos continued his interest in the subject of sacrifice with his next film, *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*, the title of which refers to the Greek myth of Agamemnon who, for the crime of killing a deer belonging to the goddess Artemis, was forced to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia. Whereas Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter for the crime of killing Artemis’ deer, Steven sacrifices his son (A) for the apparent crime of killing a patient while performing surgery under the influence of alcohol (S). Ostensibly, the film would seem to be about Steven’s overriding sense of guilt which results in him killing his son. Nevertheless, there is a further reading of this film which bears comparison with the Oedipal dramas of Lanthimos’s cinema that have been discussed above. The fatal violence of the myth of killing a sacred deer (in this case, the son) re-works the nightmarish theme in *Dogtooth* of brutal patriarchal repression enacted upon the younger generation. Like *Dogtooth*, the film seems to tell of a punishment that is fated to befall the next generation, from which there can be no hiding place. In this respect, it is fitting that Martin, the son of the murdered patient, who announces that Steven must kill one of his children, is characterized as a coarse youth who lives ‘across the tracks’ from a place beyond Steven’s comfortable suburban life. In the manner of an unconscious drive, Martin is single-mindedly compelled by an unbreakable fixation - in this case, to demand sacrifice and punishment - the fatal necessity of which binds together both generations of Steven’s family. And yet, in a development from *Dogtooth* as well as *Alps,* by recognising what lies behind the father’s repression of others, *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* can be seen to open up the repressive father figure to our interpretation in a manner akin to the dream-work’s process of working-through. Bearing in mind Freud’s comments about the contradictory nature of dreams concerning the expression but also disavowal of wishes, it is significant in this respect that the same actor, Colin Farrell, plays the repressive father Steven in *The Killing of a Sacred Deer,* whereas he plays Davidthe dissident character who subverts the law in *The Lobster*. In *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* it is notable that several of the scenes in this filmconcern the growing maturation of Steven’s children: Bob is still only a boy but he is fascinated by the body hair on Martin’s adolescent body, while Kim is awakening sexually and is attracted to Martin. In this context, Martin’s demand that Steven should make reparations for the death of his father by means of sacrifice can be understood as the jealous promptings of Steven’s own unconscious in relation to the threat of loss that he faces from his maturing children. Steven’s anxiety concerning loss is a further thematic variation upon Lanthimos’ earlier films, *Kinetta* and *Alps*, both of which are concerned with obsessive characters whose violence is derived from their intention to repress the experience of loss (indeed, the work of the arcane group Alps involves taking the place of deceased or departed loved ones as though they remained alive and still present). Martin’s role in *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* is not only to manifest Steven’s guilt for the death of his father, but for Steven to enact his Oedipal anxiety concerning the eventual transfer of agency and power to his children that results in him killing Bob, his son (A). Nevertheless, as in many of Lanthimos’ films, the final scene of the film is telling. In this scene, Steven and his remaining family, Anna and Kim, are seated at a diner displaying apparently no sign of the preceding tragic events. (Although the copious amounts of tomato ketchup that Kim squeezes on her plate may say otherwise). Martin enters the diner and sits a little distance away at the counter gazing at them. As the family leave the diner, Kim exchanges a long glance with Martin, a faint smile on her face. It is as if their relationship is not finished yet: these children will outgrow their parents (S').

**Lanthimos’ cinema of ‘public dreaming’**

The films by Lanthimos that are structured in the diegetic form of situation – action – repeated situation (SAS), especially *Kinetta*, *Alps*, and *The Favourite*, in which oppression and abuse always (re-)assert themselves, can be understood to be shaped by a cumulative series of traumas that occurred in Greece’s historical past but which remain very much present since, following Agamben’s argument, the ‘state of emergency’ that is the root cause of such collective traumas continues to haunt Greece’s democracy, as with all western liberal democracies. Additionally, the post-cinematic condition emergent in the 2000’s in which cinema was no longer seen by its proponents as a mass medium capable of effecting social change, as had been the case in the heyday of the modern period, was a further factor that contributed to the sense of nihilism in Lanthimos’ cinema *qua* cinema. If, according to Freud, the traumatised patient suffers from ‘an increase of stimulus too powerful to be dealt with or worked off in the normal way’, then Lanthimos’ cinema has also enacted an agony of subjective fixation and powerlessness. However, unlike the traumatised Subject destined never to find the means to represent the causes of their suffering, some of Lanthimos’ films display contradictory tendencies to those that insist upon a prevailing force of powerlessness, by expressing a manifest wish for liberation. In this respect the maid’s dream in *Kinetta* is significant and so, too, the way in which both *Dogtooth* and *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* finally end (SAS'). Taken together, this set of films represent a markedly different attitude to that of Shakespeare’s Hamlet, who can do little to change the Oedipal fidelity that he feels towards his father; in contrast, this trio of films represent a wish to break free from abusive forms of power and totalitarian authority and, in turn, challenge the ontological status of the ‘concentrationary universe’ as a seeming fundamental determinant of contemporary western experience, including that of unconscious experience.[[23]](#endnote-23) In this respect, it is significant that the beginning of Lanthimos’ career in cinema opens with *Kinetta*, a film that revolves around the actants’ phantasmatic obsession with murders and death but also a desire for liberation – which is eventually acted upon in certain subsequent films.

As Hito Steyerl and many others have observed, cinema’s historic moment as mass art has come to an end but, amidst cinema’s ruins, Lanthimos’ wish is to rediscover its role in the social imaginary as a means of ‘public dreaming’. In Lanthimos’ cinema, such ‘dreaming’ involves acting out conflictual feelings mediated through oneiric fabulations and phantasies[[24]](#endnote-24) within which the principal characters in their recurring and interchangeable roles as masters and subjects of power serve as nodal points of condensation. As the ‘truth’ of the dream-work is given only in distortion, Freud suggests that this helps ‘*prevent the generation of anxiety or other forms of distressing affect*’[[25]](#endnote-25) that may arise from the perceived consequences of transgressive wishes. Freud’s implication here is that, while the wishes underlying the dream’s manifest content are seemingly based in transgressive impulses, in actual fact, they are always already mediatedthrough secondary processes of representation: in many of Lanthimos’ films these take the form of Oedipal narratives of inter-generational conflict. However, in this connection the important insight to be derived from the maid’s mimicry of her own death in *Kinetta,* as well as the acts of self-harm carried out by the daughter in *Dogtooth* and planned by David at the end of *The Lobster,* is that the site for challenging the reproduction of power relations of subjugation lies not in the Subject’s relationship with the actual father, but with the patriarchal authority invested in the super-ego by the Subject. Considered as a ‘dream-work’, Lanthimos’ cinema stages the repressed, nightmarish spectre of the totalitarian, inhuman past and its imminent potential to recur without end. Nevertheless, it also challenges the ideological constitution of the Subject under totalitarian domination and ideology by representing the sacrifice of the injunction to obey that is required in such circumstances if freedom is to be pursued. In this respect Lanthimos’ cinema may be thought of as a form of artistic elaboration which is analogous to the elaboration performed by the dream-work in which as Sarah Kofman remarks, *pace* Freud, ‘What is expressed in art must have undergone repression “before it is able to display such powerful effects on its return.”’ (1988: 15)[[26]](#endnote-26)

1. These directors first emerged on the film scene in Greece at the end of the first decade of the 2000’s. Various labels were coined to describe a perceived cinematic renaissance in Greece at that time; the term that gained regular usage in the English-speaking media was ‘Greek Weird Wave’ cinema, especially as this applied to the films produced by HAOS, Athina Rachel Tsangari’s film company which was behind the production of her own early films as well as those of Lanthimos. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Lanthimos has directed several short films, *Necktie* (2013) and *Nimic* (2020); however, this chapter is concerned solely with his feature films. At the time of writing there are reports in the media that Lanthimos is engaged in directing a new film. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Pierre Fédida argues that dreams should be thought of primarily as images, both spectral and haunting yet also mute. If an analogy exists here with cinema then this might help explain the critics’ difficulty in forming an articulate response to Lanthimos’ early films. Fédida goes on to say however that it is the peculiar affective quality of dreams that can ‘push or enable language to overcome its difficulty verbalising what has been seen**.’** See Nigel Saint’s discussion of Pierre Fédida’s theory of dreams as images in this volume, chapter 1, ‘Dream images, psychoanalysis and atrocity: Pierre Fédida and Georges Didi-Huberman,’ especially p. 44. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See, for instance, Michiko Oki’s discussion of Luis Buñuel’s film *The Exterminating Angel* in chapter 3 of this volume, ‘Dreams and thresholds: the violence of doors that never close in Magritte, Kafka and Buñuel.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See G. Deleuze, *Cinema I The Movement-Image* (1986), and his consideration of what he terms ‘the action-image’, pp. 141-159. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Freud’s ideas about trauma develop through his entire psychoanalytic work and he conjectures that dreams can be efficacious in helping to heal traumas. However, following his specific observations about the shell-shocked troops of World War I in his essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, this chapter equates the condition of trauma with that which is unthinkable and is, therefore, symptomized through serial repetition. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. S. Freud, *op. cit*., volumes IV and V. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Similarly, with works of art, Freud says that he has come, ‘to recognize the apparently paradoxical fact that precisely some of the grandest and most overwhelming creations of art are still unsolved riddles to our understanding.’ S. Freud, *The Moses of Michelangelo*, *op. cit*., volume XIII, p. 211. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. V. Karalis. *A History of Greek Cinema*, (New York: Continuum, 2012), p. 242. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See, for instance, Steven B. Bowman’s account of the holocaust in Greece, *The Agony of Greek Jews, 1940-1945*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University press, 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. During this period political opponents of the dictatorship mysteriously disappeared, were murdered or banished to remote islands in the Aegean Sea. Torture during imprisonment also occurred frequently. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Introduction, Griselda Pollock and Max Silverman, Pollock, Griselda and Max Silverman (eds), *Concentrationary Cinema: Aesthetics as Political Resistance in Alain Resnais’s’ Night and Fog* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2014), p. 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid, p. 18. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. See G. Agamben, What is a Camp?, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota press, 2000), p. 41. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. See also Robert Hether’s essay, ‘Condemned to Oblivion: Concentrationary Cinema and Oneiric Representation in Claire Denis’ *High Life,* in this volume, chapter 4, for a further discussion of the concentrationary universe and film. In their introduction to this volume the editors observe that the concentrationary universe is a principle condition for understanding the experience of the unconscious and of dream-life both at the time of the Holocaust and, subsequently, in the twenty-first century. This idea is taken up by both editors in their respective chapters in this volume: Emily-Rose Baker, The Third Reich of Dreams: resisting Fascism through the oneiric unconscious (chapter 5) and Diane Otosaka, Dreams, justice, and spectrality in *Rêver peut-être* (Perchance to Dream) by Jean-Claude Grumberg (chapter 8).Equally, it should be said, that the historical traumas of the Middle Passage and of the Native American genocide are further important conditions for understanding such experience in the west. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. In his consideration of ‘the action-image’ Deleuze observes that certain films of this type do not conclude in a way that modifies the original situation, *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*, *op. cit*., pp. 143-144. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. H. Steyerl, ‘Is the Internet Dead?’ *Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War* (London and New York: Verso, 2019), pp. 143-144. Steyerl’s ideas are informed here by Walter Benjamin’s concept of reproducibility in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* (1935). The second and most extensive version of the essay is published in W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, volume 3, 1935-1938, translated by Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland and Others, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, (the Belknap press of Harvard University press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, 2006), pp. 101-133. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Murders and murder mysteries have been a staple subject in Hollywood films from the silent period onwards ranging from D.W. Griffith to Marin Scorsese, and nearly every director in between. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Here, Kofman summarizes the points that Freud makes in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, op. cit., pp. 333-334, and *New Introductory Lectures On Psychoanalysis,* *op. cit.*, volume XVI, p. 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Freud sees Hamlet’s fate as being in part due to his own ambivalence and, significantly in this respect, analyses Hamlet’s character immediately after his discussion of the Oedipus legend in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, *op. cit.*, pp. 264-266. This subject of ambivalence has a bearing upon the following discussion in this chapter concerning the power that is sometimes taken up by Lanthimos’ characters, and at other times not, to liberate themselves from the over-weaning domination of the super-ego. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. G. Deleuze, and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* trans. Brian Massumi. (London: Athlone Press, 1988), see especially pp. 222-223. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. As Freud states, ‘a child’s super-ego is in fact constructed on the model not of its parents but of its parents’ super-ego; the contents which fill it are the same and it becomes the vehicle of tradition and of all the time-resisting judgments of value which have propagated themselves in this manner from generation to generation.’ *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, *op. cit*., p. 67. Similarly, Žižek writes about the fictional status of the big Other (that is, the super-ego) and its ‘authority’ over the Subject, ‘the big Other is fragile, insubstantial, properly *virtual*, in the sense that its status is that of a subjective presupposition. It exists only in so far as subjects *act as if it exists*’ (2006: 10). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. In this respect, Lanthimos’ cinema can be seen to differ from Claire Denis’ film *High Life,* discussed by Robert Hether in his essay, ‘Condemned to Oblivion: Concentrationary Cinema and Oneiric Representation in Claire Denis’ *High Life,* in this volume, chapter 4. In *High Life* the space-ship accommodating Dr Dibs and the prisoners are in the grip of an implosive black hole, a metaphor for a comprehensive death wish residing within totalitarianism, itself, that encompasses both perpetrators and victims. In contrast a number of Lanthimos’ films resist this proposed ontology through fables of self-sacrifice and becoming (*Dogtooth*, *The Lobster*) or dreams and intimations of becoming (the maid’s dream in *Kinetta* and the concluding scene in *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*), as discussed above. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. In this connection it is interesting to note that in German the word *phantasie* can mean imagination, ‘in the sense of the world of imagination, its contents and the creative activity which animates it’ (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1988: 314). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. S. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, *op. cit*., p. 267. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. In the spirit of Freud’s ideas on art, Kofman transposes what he says about religion to art, see S. Freud, ‘Moses and Monotheism’, *op. cit*., volume XXIII, 1981), p. 101.

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