

Soft Fantasies, Hardcore Realities: Greekness and the Death Drive in Dennis Iliades's *Hardcore*

Marios Psarras

Queen Mary University of London

ABSTRACT

This article offers a reading of Dennis Iliades's Hardcore (2004) as an aesthetic embodiment of the perennial dialectic between desire and the drive, drawing on post-Lacanian psychoanalysis as well as on contemporary queer theory, particularly Lee Edelman's conceptualization of queerness as a non-teleological negativity associated with the death drive and his notion of sinthomosexuality. The article suggests that the fundamental psychoanalytic pendulum is staged in Hardcore both thematically, through its nuanced treatment of such notions as identity, family, home and the nation, as well as formally, through an ambivalent construction of cinematic space and time. The latter involves a complicated representation of queer spatiality that, on the one hand, imagines it as constructive, productive and thus political, while, on the other, exposes it as destructive, wasteful and caught up in a relentless negativity associated with the death drive. Blurring fantasy with reality, desire with the drive, the film ultimately renegotiates any linear conceptions of temporality, any normative modes of subjectivity and relationality, while at the same time dismantles the nation's favourite narratives as well as Greekness itself.

KEYWORDS

death drive

family

Greekness

Hardcore

Iliades

sinthomosexuality

An imposing shot of the Parthenon (**Fig 1**). The camera slowly dollies out and the image of the glorious monument is revealed to be nothing but a picture hanging on the wall. The film's two protagonists, Martha (Katerina Tsavalou) and Nandia (Danae Skiadi), enter the frame from each of its two sides looking off-screen at an undisclosed spectacle (**Fig 2**). Its atrocious nature is nonetheless evident in the splatters of blood that cover Nandia's face and clothes as well as in Martha's enigmatic gaze. Low-key lighting and suspenseful non-diegetic music accentuate the scene's overarching feeling of agitation. This is how Dennis Iliades introduces the viewers to his relentless cartography of Athens' underground spaces, a journey that is mastered and directed not only by (queer) desire but also by the inescapably deadly trajectory of the drive. Martha's suggestive look grows darker as the camera dollies in and frames her in a medium shot – the Parthenon always in the background. The story begins with Martha's voice-over: "Usually fairy tales are crystal clear. It's impossible to both love and not love someone. You need to take a position." The film abruptly cuts to a series of spotlights that turn on simultaneously for the camera, which in turn quickly tilts down to reveal Martha among the shadows of a theatrical audience, whose suggestive gaze is fixed on the stage. A shot of the stage then shows in slow-motion a burning ancient Greek warrior crossing the frame in cyclical movements right in front of Nandia, who is standing motionless wearing a short grey toga against a black backdrop that features a Corinthian column (**Fig 3**). As the warrior vanishes into the black abyss the film cuts back to Martha's close-up and her voice-over continues: "However, I know it's possible. I felt this way with Nandia. I felt it every day. It was much stronger than me. Perhaps, our own fairy tale had expired."



Fig 1: The Parthenon



Fig 2: Enigmatic Gaze



Fig 3: The Burning Warrior

In less than three minutes, the viewer is introduced, through a fast-paced montage of fascinating cinematic eloquence, into the main thematic axes and formal structure of *Hardcore* (Dennis Iliades, 2004). It is by now clear that the film is much about the mythical narrative of desire, which here takes a queer twist, as it is about a mythical national past that both haunts the queer subject and is haunted by it. The destructive force of queerness and the drive that must always remain stronger than the power of human consciousness stand still against the collapse of the narratives that used to hold together the stitches of the subject's and the nation's identity and historicity. The mythical past falls burning into the black abyss and the drive, which finds its embodiment in the cold-blooded face and hands of the queer child, aligns historicity – both the individual as well as the collective/national – with fiction, theatrical and textual, and ultimately renders it as always already expired.

This article reads *Hardcore* as an aesthetic polemic against Greece's familiar and highly valorised familial and national narratives through the conceptual lenses offered by contemporary queer theorisations of time and space, as well as by

post-Lacanian psychoanalysis. Investigating the way the film's form and narrative stage the fundamental psychoanalytic dialectic between desire and the drive, and the way this dialectic is reflected on, and/or appropriated in contemporary theorizations of queer spatiotemporality, I wish to offer not simply a queer reading of Iliades's film, but most importantly a reading of the film *as queer*, precisely in the way it ultimately targets and deconstructs normative and hegemonic conceptualisations of familial and national space and time.

Based on the eponymous novel by Aleka Laskou¹, *Hardcore* is the first feature film by director Dennis Iliades. Released in 2004, the year that perhaps marks the peak of what in hindsight are now called 'the years of the bubble' in Greece, Iliades's film constitutes an ideological incongruence with the predominant feeling of "spontaneous Hellenomania" (Gourgouris 2004) of its time, which was underpinned by the successful, yet outrageously over-budget, Athens 2004 Olympic Games and the Greek victory of the football EURO Cup in the same year. As Gourgouris observes, this overwhelming feeling was not so much an instance of nationalist paroxysm, but rather a purely mythological "adoration of all things Greek", that was "utterly explosive and all embracing, unorganized and unguided by any political force, unreflective of any grand image or 'Great Idea'" (ibid.).

Arguably, this eudaemonistic atmosphere was cinematically registered, and to some extent even enhanced through a kind of cultural sanctification, by such high-profile, high-budget productions, co-funded by the Greek Film Centre alongside international funds, *Politiki Kouzina/A Touch of Spice* (Boulmetis, 2003), *Nifes/Brides* (Voulgaris, 2004), and *El Greco* (Smaragdis, 2007). All three films are set in the past, featuring elaborate sets and costumes and crowning long-established national narratives of emigration, expatriation and repatriation with the eulogising laurels of widely propagated past and present discourses of the nation's outstanding cultural uniqueness and of its high-esteemed values of family, religion and homeland. As Dimitris Eleftheriotis remarks with specific regard to *A Touch of Spice*, "the film initiated a pleasurable and reaffirming historical and geographical journey that addressed past and present national anxieties, fantasies and aspirations" (2012: 21). In addition, the extensive and excessive deployment of cutting-edge technology, special effects and market-wise distribution practices both in Greece and abroad that have made the three films commercially – if not critically – successful, have simultaneously elevated them into "source[s] of national pleasure and pride," (ibid.) and "a promise of a

¹ Aleka Laskou is in fact the pen name of a pair of female authors working in collaboration.

bright future where Greek creativity and imagination find their secure place in the emerging and ruthless global circuit of cultural commodities" (ibid.: 34).²

Nevertheless, unlike the above 'blockbusters' that were eventually capitalised as cultural evidence for the legitimisation of such exceptionalist discourses, such as the aforementioned "Hellenomania", "an innovative gaze full of curiosity, ingenuity, and contradiction was crystallizing" at the same time, as Vrasidas Karalis observes; one whose "roaming camera, insatiable and curious, [was] discovering elements of a new cinematic language in the most trivial and insignificant details of everyday life" (2012: 265). Mapping these details away from the historical and the monumental, or rather in contradistinction to it, *Hardcore* is such an example of both innovation and subversion. Corrosively disturbing the collective imaginary at that exact moment of national delirium, Iliades's film in many ways anticipated the so-called Greek weird wave of the 'crisis years' in its formal and thematic negotiations of, and experimentations with the nation's favourite narratives, as well as with Greekness itself.³

Hardcore tells the story of teenage runaways Martha and Nandia, who meet at a brothel, where they both work as prostitutes. Rivals at first, for Nandia attracts the attention of Martha's object of desire, the handsome rent-boy Argyris, they, however, soon develop a close relationship, which exceeds the boundaries of friendship, supporting each other against the adversities of the street life. Drawn in a vicious circle of drugs, prostitution and violence, killing whoever gets in their way, romantic Martha and opportunistic Nandia manage to escape the police presenting themselves as victims rather than perpetrators, yet fail to achieve prosperity. When Nandia's vanity condemns them into the flashy yet corrupted world of show business, jealous and neglected Martha suffocates her to death and escapes to an unknown destination, away from the city.

Despite the enthusiastic welcoming of Iliades's "flashy directorial style" (Raffel 2004) by both audience and critics, confusion or and frustration dominated the reception of the film with regard to its 'playful' approach to an otherwise sensitive thematics. Film critic Irene Nedelkopoulou (2004) writes:

² On the basis of the films' lavish production values, their methods of distribution/promotion in the market and, of course, their massive box office success Michalis Kokonis even goes to dub them "blockbusters" (2012: 40).

³ Initiated by such films as *Dogtooth/Kynodontas* (Lanthimos, 2009), *Strella/A Woman's Way* (Koutras, 2009) and *Attenberg* (Tsangari, 2010), the Greek 'weird wave' pertains to a group of independent and "inexplicably strange", as Guardian critic Steve Rose suggestively notes (2011), Greek films that have been released in the last five years and are characterised by highly subversive content and form.

Iliades does not seem to be ignorant of *Hardcore*'s naive perspective against the reality that it deals with. So what is his goal here? Clearly not some kind of moralising. Hence, the director prefers to focus on the film form, thus putting aside the problematic subject matter of the script.

However, also film critic Iak Jane (2005) verbalises the film's oscillation between light and darkness, dream and reality, as attuned to characterisation and with it to the film's overall preoccupation with the perils and fantasies of queer life. Jane notices:

Na[n]dia's got ambition, drive and energy – she wants to be remembered and be a somebody, she loves the attention and she loves to have people want her. Martha on the other hand is the quiet type who yearns for something resembling a normal family, if there is such a thing.

Interestingly, Jane's wording invokes some of the central concepts which guide this article's reading of *Hardcore* as a narrative and formal embodiment of the perennial dialectic between desire and the drive: namely, drive, yearning, family, 'normality.' However, unlike Jane's observation, I would suggest that the oscillation between desire and the drive is not represented in *Hardcore* through some clearly delineated characterisation that incarnates respectively each of the two, say Martha as an embodiment of fantasy and desire and Nandia as an embodiment of the drive. The pivotal psychoanalytic pendulum is rather staged here through an ambivalent construction of cinematic space and time, a complicated treatment of queer spatiotemporality that, on the one hand, imagines it as constructive, productive and thus political, while, on the other, exposes it as destructive, wasteful and caught up in a relentless negativity associated with the death drive.

In *Looking Awry* (1995), Slavoj Žižek elucidates that the dialectic between desire and drive underlies the fundamental process of subjectivation, which is essentially nothing more than the "gradual change from pure incarnated drive to a being of desire" (ibid.: 22). In Lacanian psychoanalysis the process of subjectivation is achieved through the acquisition of Language, the ultimate process of symbolisation. The acquisition of Language marks the child's entrance into the Law of the Father and the Symbolic Order, the quintessential agent of prohibition that regulates the subject's pleasures and structures the fundamental kin positions through the incest taboo. It is important to understand, however, that if desire is directed towards the substitution of the impossibility of the sexual relationship with the mother, and thus the fantasmatic overcoming of the fundamental lack in the Other, then desire has to be continuously deferred so as to ensure the concealment of this lack in the Other, and with it the Symbolic Order's inconsistency. For the Symbolic Order's consistency relies precisely on

this fantasy that supports desire. Hence, desire, “as such already a certain yielding, a kind of compromise formation, a metonymic displacement, retreat, a defense against intractable drive, is ultimately what defines the subject” (ibid.: 172). In this way, as Žižek explains, the psychoanalytic opposition

between desire and drive consists precisely in the fact that desire is by definition caught in a certain dialectic, it can always turn into its opposite or slide from one object to another, it never aims at what appears to be its object, but always ‘wants something else’. (1995: 134)

On the other hand, “a drive is precisely a demand that is not caught up in the dialectic of desire, that resists dialecticization” (ibid.: 21). Unconditional demand is that which defines the pure drive, which is inert and constantly circulating “around its object, fixed upon the point around which it pulsates”, which is none other than *jouissance* (ibid.: 134). And *jouissance* in Lacan is that ever-elusive, impossible enjoyment, beyond the pleasure principle and bordering on pain, which is rendered impossible precisely because it threatens the Symbolic Order, by exposing the subject’s vulnerability to the partial and self-destructive drives, namely the sex drive and the death drive.

Before bringing psychoanalysis to bear on queer spatiality it is important to clarify that the invocation of queer space does not necessarily entail any particular locality with or a community of queers, organised around clearly delimited physical or virtual spaces. In a collective volume on queer spatiality entitled *Queers in Space*, Gordon Brent Ingram envisions queerscape as “a landscape of erotic alien(n)ations, ones that shift with demographics, social development, political economies, interventions of the ‘state’, aesthetics, and – yes – desire” (1997: 31). Ingram’s notion of “queerscapes” encompasses a dynamic between “marginality” and “erotic alienation” as the immanent forces that both create and transform them. If marginality is the condition that results from the domination of heterosexuality, namely a marginalisation of queer desires, acts and communalities, then alienation is produced “in the people who do not experience sufficient benefits from [this domination]” and, thus, form alternative social networks that, in turn, “can produce more marginalisation – especially in times of more organised homophobic repression” (ibid.: 29). Accordingly, Ingram’s “queerscape” emerges, as always already, a space of social and political confrontation, a questioning of the “heterosexist” dichotomies of public and private space, a queer reclaiming of the public space. In his words, “the thorough queering of the landscape will mean that the existing poorly recognised barriers to equitable use of public space will be removed” (ibid.). Ingram’s optimistic invocation of a kind of linear and teleological narrative of queer futurity in this delineation of queer spatiality as one that ultimately

encloses productive social and political forces clearly evokes the temporalisation of desire that frames (queer) politics.

On the other hand, however, architecture critic Aaron Betsky's account of queer space as "a useless, amoral, and sensual space that lives only in and for experience" constitutes a poignant spatial demarcation of queerness as an embodiment of the drive (1997: 5). As he argues, queer space "is a space of spectacle, consumption, dance and obscenity. It is a misuse or deformation of a place, an appropriation of the buildings and codes of the city for perverse purposes" (ibid.). Betsky's account arguably anticipates the so-called anti-social thesis in contemporary queer theory that reads queerness as a non-teleological negativity associated with the death drive, for its adherence to sexuality and the pleasure principle obliterates any political aspirations (De Lauretis 2011; Edelman 2004). As this article depicts in the textual analysis that follows, Iliades's camera effectively stages queer spatiality as haunted by the perennial psychoanalytic oscillation between desire and the drive, thus ironically evoking both Betsky's and Ingram's conflicting accounts.

After the aforementioned prelude, Iliades introduces the viewers to the brothel, though a series of sequences that underscore it as both a place of violence, excess and abuse, namely an incarnation of the drive, as well as a place where alternative bonds can emerge and fantasies be generated, arguably a potential locus of desire. The first of these sequences begins with a low-angle shot of Nandia struggling to balance her body with her hands pushing against the wall, while she gets slammed from behind by an abusive client. Even though her face is not clearly visible, her crying and quiet sobbing at the end of the intercourse provide evidence of both physical and emotional pain. The bleak and murky hues of the scene's lighting give the impression more of a prison cell rather than a prostitute's room. When the client exits the static frame with an array of foreign words, the sound of which infers vituperation, the film cuts to a medium shot of Nandia from the side as she makes an effort to compose herself. The audience is then introduced to the brothel with a tracking shot of Nandia as she walks through the building's corridors to the reception area. Martha's voice-over continues: "Nandia appeared all of a sudden in a place we considered our own. It wasn't a plain cafeteria. It was our home." Playful youngsters then appear in the margins of the moving frame, as well as video game and vending machines and a bar. "Our boss had gathered us here from newspapers ads, but he was so much more than just an employer..." Martha continues, while a few minutes later into the film, the guided tour of the brothel is completed with a left to right pan across an array of young male and female prostitutes who wait for the boss to give them one of the colourful post-its with which he manages the house's clientele.



Fig 4: Washing together



Fig 5: Childhood Memories



Fig 6: Innocent Past

Shortly after this, Martha and Miltos, a rent-boy in the same brothel, are shown sharing some “liquid lady” (cocaine dissolved in water) poured on a biscuit by Sfiriktras, the brothel’s drug dealer. Soft piano notes start filling the soundtrack signaling the beginning of Martha’s hallucinatory journey. The camera zooms in to an extreme close-up of her eye and then dissolves to another zoom shot of a washing machine drum whose faded colouring help it masquerade as an eye itself (**Fig 4**); but a spinning eye that washes together random images from memories, dreams and nightmares. A black and white clip shows a father playing with his young daughter (**Fig 5**); an old blue frame features a barely discernible figure of a young girl sleeping (**Fig 6**); a close-up of a humongous black vibrator

in the hands of a naked man (**Fig 7**); an animated shot foregrounds a red heart growing bigger and bigger (**Fig 8**); an unsteady shot of a Catholic statue of Mother Mary (**Fig 9**); a poorly lit long shot of Martha sitting naked on a bed in an empty deserted room (**Fig 10**); a clip from cartoons (**Fig 11**); and, finally, another zoom shot of Martha lying amongst a gang of naked tattooed men (**Fig 12**). With this montage of video, animation and photography, Iliades manages to create a highly evocative juxtaposition between happy childhood memories and traumatic images from both the past and the present, all of which inhabit the tragic psyche of the young prostitute. Hopes and dreams emerge as remnants of a lost soul. A nostalgic will to return to a fantasmatic age of innocence is precisely highlighted as a fantasy, underpinned by mythical religious and familial narratives that prove to be no more real than fairy tales themselves. The destructive force of the drive incarnated in Martha's promiscuous and perverse sexual activity, which is here highlighted as indeed a 'painful enjoyment', subverts any fantasy and undermines any dream.



Fig 7: Guilty Present



Fig 8: A Growing Heart



Fig 9: Mother Mary



Fig 10: Naked and Alone



Fig 11: Children Cartoons



Fig 12: Tribal Bang

But it is not only drug use that gives *Iliades* the excuse to throw dreamlike and fantasy sequences in the narrative. On many occasions dream and fantasy interject in their own right and the only narrative element that seems to vaguely hold them together is Martha's voice-over. After witnessing Nandia and Argyris making out in the toilets, Martha finds stoned Miltos and starts kissing and caressing him. On the soundtrack her voice-over returns, "...our job is misunderstood. It's either shown on the news with strings playing on the soundtrack or perceived as the easiest thing on earth. But fucking three or four people every day is killing you. And everybody looks down on you. It is impossible to date a stranger. He wouldn't understand. Therefore, we started dating each other. Just like in 'Beverly Hills'." The youths' close-ups suddenly give way to an unexpected musical number, which features the four young protagonists of the film playing, dancing and posing for the camera against a white backdrop, strongly reminiscent of the title sequence of the famous 1990s American TV show (**Fig 13**). An abrupt change of set and costumes reveals the four characters as burlesque dancers, sporting flashy costumes and heavy makeup and dancing in strictly choreographed moves against a black backdrop. The camera slowly zooms out and the stage is revealed to rest on giant glowing multi-coloured letters of the word 'Happy' (**Fig 14**). *Iliades* offers some loving close-ups of his actors, which show them smiling and enjoying the number. But Martha soon loses her smile for she realises in the fantasy, the presence of their boss, Manos, who is performing his own show at the bottom of the stage, in front of the big letters.



Fig 13: Beverly Hills



Fig 14: Fantasy Turned Nightmare

In the above sequences, the brothel is clearly foregrounded as a place of abuse and oppression, a strictly controlled community, which is governed by the paternalistic figure of the pimp, who ensures the maintenance of his improvised social order by means of violence and intoxication. Most of the prostitutes, as Martha states in one of her numerous voice-overs, are runaway teenagers who sought not a better life, but a life away "from their boring/oppressive parents," but who are eventually entangled in a relentless game of sex, violence, and drugs, which is often hard to escape. In the shadow of this vicious circle, an alternative community, however, surfaces among the young prostitutes; indeed, a marginalised community with its own rules, alliances, aspirations and fantasies.

The brothel, thus, emerges as a contradictory space: not only the unproductive locus of abuse, violence and sexual insatiability, a “useless, amoral and sensual place”, to invoke Betsky’s words, but also a productive space where the processes of marginalisation and alienation that frame the everyday reality of queerness and prostitution provide a platform for the formation of alternative relationships, framed within an economy of desire. These same processes, however, are the ones underlying the ignition and perpetuation of fantasy, which filmically blurs with the characters’ reality, thus preserving the coherence of their imaginary identifications; in Martha’s case as ‘family material.’



Fig 15: The Elusive World of Intoxication

Indeed, ‘family’ gradually emerges as one of the film’s pivotal preoccupations; a notion, whose ambivalent treatment in the film, further exemplifies *Hardcore*’s nuanced representation of queer spatiality. Unsurprisingly, it is again the brothel that originally lends itself, as already noted, as an equivocal alternative familial choice. Indeed, where Martha’s (im)passive personality in the beginning of the film seems to pretty much invest in the possibility of replacing the parental home with the brothel, assertive Nandia refuses to consider it as other than a stepping stone in her adventurous walk of fame and seeks ‘home’ in more intimate spaces that she can share with Martha. However, as the film unfolds, conventional notions of familial, space and time appear to pervade Martha’s desires and compete with her inherent lack of agency as well as the invincible force of her queer drives. The film’s staging of this impossible wavering between queer longing and queer living is utterly fascinating. After Manos offers Martha and Nandia a ‘mauve appointment’ – the highest in his twisted post-it hierarchy – Martha flees to her own ‘cuckoo’s nest’, seeking the illusive relief of Sfiriktras’s pills. Iliades then takes the opportunity to offer another dark view into the

elusive world of intoxication, this time not with a montage of hallucinating images but with Martha's subtle verbalisation of her inmost fantasy. Between a series of murky, heavily shadowed, red-colour-infused shots framing Martha and Miltos taking drugs under the inconspicuous, yet enigmatic gaze of Sfiriktras, Martha confesses to Miltos her wish to have a proper relationship with him "just like the rest of the world does" (**Fig 15**). "We are not like the rest of the world", Miltos replies and Martha immediately responds, "Don't you want to make a family?" She then quickly turns her head to Sfiriktras who purses his mouth in a sardonic smirk. Miltos gives her a quick kiss and lies on her shoulder wishing her good luck at her mauve appointment. Martha exits the frame.

A few minutes later into the film the subtleties of desire give way to the assertiveness of the drive. Nandia and Martha, dressed to the nines, enter a luxurious apartment for their mauve appointment. Iliades's ever-roaming camera traverses the corridors to find the living room, where a large group of well-dressed men and women await the girls under the subtle light of an elaborate crystal chandelier. The sequence that follows consists of a series of Martha's point-of-view shots, as she scans the room to find Nandia who is either snorting cocaine or pleasing the clients, juxtaposed with her own close-ups. The latter shots foreground her inner struggle to balance herself between the carnal masochistic pleasure produced by her sexual exploitation by the numerous lascivious aristocrats who slip into the margins of the frame, and a kind of emotional confrontation with her own desires and dreams that takes over the soundtrack in the form of the familiar by now narrative motif of her deadpan voice-over (**Fig 16**). "Nandia is right. I'm a whore and I enjoy it. I really enjoy being paid and fucked. Tonight Martha has an identity; name: whore, surname: whore, address: whore. Martha's high tonight. Martha belongs to you. She'll make you proud with a crazy orgy." However, all of a sudden the voice-over turns into a diegetic verbal attack against Nandia – or is it against herself? "Nandia, go fuck yourself! I'm not going anywhere! This is not a stepping-stone for me. I like it here. This is where I want to be. Nowhere else." Everybody freezes. The party is over. Martha's voice-over emerges here as an intrusion of the real, undermining the consistency of her fantasies. Martha unapologetically suspends her idealised dreams for family-making and pronounces her absolute submission to the painful and self-destructive "enjoyments" of prostitution, which emerge here, indeed, as an embodiment of *jouissance*, the drive's only destiny and destination. And along with Nandia they will ultimately elevate themselves into the status of what Lee Edelman has coined as the *sinthomosexuals*, attacking not only their own "soft fantasies" but most importantly the nation's most sacred ones.



Fig 16: Surrender to the Drive

Published in the same year as *Hardcore*'s release, Edelman's groundbreaking *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) introduces the *sinthomosexual* as the figure that embodies queerness's radical anti-sociality, fighting against teleological accounts of queer temporality and historicism, but most importantly against the quintessential North American homophobic discourse framed within the fantasy politics of what he terms as "reproductive futurism." For Edelman (2004: 2-3), reproductive futurism is the pivotal "ideological limit" that infuses all discourse on the contemporary Anglo-American political stage. Valorising the institution of reproduction, through which hetero-sex is sanctified, reproductive futurism establishes the figure of the Child as the "perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention" (ibid.). Evidently, such political framework not only excludes but must also dispense with those who do not reproduce, as they constitute the materialised gap in its ideological structure, one that will constantly and consistently undermine the axis of this ideology by defying the meaning with which it substantiates its "fantasy," and which is consummated, as Edelman insists, in the face of the perennial Child.

Edelman's *sinthomosexuality* is a neologism that fuses the "sterile" homosexuals with the Lacanian *sinthome*, the singular way by which "each subject manages to knot together the orders of the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real," but a singularity which is, however, untranslatable into the realm of the Symbolic (ibid.: 35). According to Edelman, the *sinthome*, in its refusal of meaning, constitutes "the template of a given subject's access to *jouissance*," this excess of pleasure that he associates with the death drive (ibid.). Hence, Edelman claims, "in a political field whose limit and horizon is reproductive futurism, queerness

embodies this death drive, this intransigent *jouissance*, by figuring sexuality's implication in the senseless pulsions of that drive" (ibid.: 27). For him, there can be no such thing as 'queer vision', for queerness cannot be associated with any sense of community, or a transformative future. Caught up in a structural repetition haunted by the death drive, queerness cannot afford, within such a non-teleological structure, but to refuse not only the consolations provided by "futurism's redemptive temporality gussied up with a rainbow flag" – this "fantasy of a viable 'alternative' to normativity's domination," as he calls any aspirations for "a queer utopia" – but also "the purposive" productive uses that would turn it into a "good" (Dinshaw 2007: 195).

Halfway through *Hardcore* the girls' fate takes an unpredictable turn, which arguably constitutes them as female versions of *sinthomosexuality*; each in her own manner emerges as a meaningless force of nature, subjected only to the self-destructive lures of the drive, and unapologetically violating the fantasies that safeguard the coherence of subjectivity, be it familial or national. Nandia decides to take revenge on Manos's oppressive regime by setting up a bloody raid with Argyris, in which Manos, his bodyguard and some prostitutes get killed. Managing to shift the blame of the murders onto Argyris, whom Nandia subsequently also kills, the two girls suddenly become the nation's sweethearts after spreading the word, with the help of enormous sensationalist media coverage, of a tragic tale that presents them as victims of an abusing prostitution circuit. But the image of Nandia's blood-splattered face gazing directly to the camera as she exits the room of the murders will haunt the rest of the film. The black shot that follows is nothing less than a mockery of any sense of futurity: not only of the one that pertains to the normative fantasmatic core of reproductive futurity, namely the 'family vision,' but also of what Edelman scorns as the 'queer vision.' For more than twenty seconds the film goes completely black and Martha's voice-over takes over once again in a tragic, grotesque prattle: "1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 3. The worst is the best. Nandia and I will make a family no matter what. I will stop thinking, like Nandia; I have stopped thinking. 3, 4, 5, 3, 4, 5. I don't want to know. I want somebody else to know. The worst is the best. We deserve the best. We will be just fine. Someone knows, I don't. He said that the best is yet to come. We will be just fine." Family becomes here a stubborn fairytale, the ultimate fantasy, haunted by the emptiness of the signifier, which is literally materialised in the blackened emptiness of the frame. It is explicitly addressed and ridiculed as the compulsive locus of desire that directs Martha's personal fantasmatic narrative (and, in effect, her own illusive teleological ontology); not only a kind of fantasmatic nostalgia for an un-lived past, not only the ever-returning point of her longings, but a distorted experience *of* and *in* the present. Martha emerges as a female version of the *sinthomosexual*, for her perseverance with the fantasy of reproductive futurity juxtaposed with her pathetic passivity and lack of agency, eventually result into no less than a

mockery, a parody, and, thus, an even greater exposure of the fantasy as such in itself.⁴

However, ultimately, in the face of its bloodied *sinthomosexuals*, *Hardcore* not only attacks the fantasy that sustains the coherence of the Symbolic Order, foregrounding the relentless negativity of the drive, but also aspires to penetrate a broader spectrum of fantasy; one that is not strictly delimited by the subject's and the society's imaginary negotiations between their reproductive desires and nihilistic drives, but one that traverses the fantasmatic ideological and self-representational imagery of the nation. Nandia's newfound notoriety along with her manipulative erotic attachments to high profile publishers, win her a leading part in a Christmas stage play. The Christmas show sequence begins with a series of spotlights that turn on simultaneously for the camera reminiscing the opening sequence of the film. The camera quickly tilts down to reveal Martha among the theatrical audience, and then a cut to the stage shows two rows of male dancers, extravagantly dressed as ancient Greek warriors, standing on some large white steps and extending their hands to the sky, thus giving the lead to Nandia's entrance on stage (**Fig 19**). The lights become brighter and Nandia gets on stage, however devoid of any of the glamour that characterises the rest of the play's *mise-en-scène* (**Fig 20**). Visibly worn out with messy hair and makeup, she defies the rehearsed choreography and walks clumsily down the steps amidst a rain of confetti and the confused dancers. A cut to a long shot shows her struggling to balance so as not to fall over, but also gives us a more general view of the set that features a series of Greek columns, Corinthian, Ionian and even a Caryatid in the foreground (**Fig 21**).

Nandia's frenzied behaviour is highlighted by a slow-motion pan to the right and an unsteady close-up from behind that places her face to face with the shadowed audience, both intercut with Martha's reaction shots that reveal her nervousity. Back to the stage, Nandia sets fire to the elaborate helmet of a by-standing warrior, while the audience, ironically, starts applauding her incomprehensible gesture, presumably thinking this is part of the show. A long shot of the stage

⁴ Edelman observes that *sinthomosexuality* in traditional cultural imagery is embodied by machine-like men or indeed by sexless machines, "who stand outside the 'natural' order of sexual reproduction," ascribing this prevalence of male *sinthomosexuals* in cultural representation, to a "gender bias," as he explains, "that continues to view women as 'naturally' bound more closely to sociality, reproduction and domesticating emotion" (2004: 165). Iliades arguably plays with this gender bias of conventional cultural production, through the complicated staging of the oscillation between queer longing and queer doing, especially as incarnated in Martha, who is both female and "bound to domesticating emotion." However, as it is already evident, *Hardcore* ultimately subverts this gender bias in the most triumphant way, hence, verifying Edelman's insight that "the *sinthomosexual* has [indeed] no privileged relation to any sex or sexuality" (ibid.).

reveals the entire set in all its kitsch grandeur with scattered Greek statues and columns, decorated with golden Christmas trimmings and ribbons, a row of girls dancing gauchely, a woman holding a torch and a man next to her, a sword (**Fig 22**). Suddenly the flaming warrior starts running frenetically across the stage and the film then follows a rapid cutting of long, medium and unsteady tracking shots that frame the chaotic atmosphere that Nandia has created as Santa Clauses and Greek warriors run on the stage attempting to blow out the fire with extinguishers (**Fig 23-24**). A Santa then quickly takes Nandia on his shoulders and runs off with her. In the next scene Santa and Nandia are shown having sex before Martha's eyes. When Santa leaves, Martha, visibly estranged and bewildered, suffocates her lover to death.



Fig 19: The Greek Warriors



Fig 20: The Ominous Nymph



Fig 21: Setting Fire



Fig 22: The Kitsch 'Grandeur'



Fig 23: In Flames



Fig 24: Chaotic Atmosphere

Only a few moments before the end of the film does Iliades invoke the performative nature of the fantasy that frames the national and religious imagery of contemporary Greece, while also foregrounding the destructive

threat, which the queer subject poses against it. The deployment of camp aesthetics is not accidental. Fabio Cleto draws on Susan Sontag's distinction between *naïve* and *deliberate* camp to argue that camp can be both perceived as a *failed seriousness* as well as an intentional acknowledgement of the unnatural, *inessential* and contingent "essence" of performance that privileges form and style over message or content. However, aspiring to complicate this distinction he explains that a reading of camp as always already queer might at once challenge and invoke such binary oppositions while also exposing how "both modes are indeed presided over by the artificial character of all social interaction, and by the theatricality of being, with doing as *acting*" (1999: 24). As he explains,

depth-anchored subjectivity is dissolved and replaced by the mask as paradoxical essence, or depthless foundation of subjectivity as actor (in itself, nonexistent without an audience) on the world as stage. And as an object of a camp decoding, the actor exists only through its in(de)finite performing roles, the ideal sum of which correspond to his own performative 'identity'. (ibid.: 25)

By invoking quintessential markers from the Greek national and religious representational lexicon gussied up in absolute camp-ness, *Hardcore* arguably suggests that, much like camp, these sacred cores of Greekness cannot conceal their "collective, ritual and performative existence" (ibid.). The performative character of the national that is invoked here conjures up Homi Bhabha's (2000: 297) prominent distinction of the double time of the nation. According to Bhabha, "in the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative." Through its double time the nation goes through the process of perpetually being narrated and re-narrated, with the performative, as a series of acts and "rhetorical figures" (flags, salutes, racial characteristics etc.), being the force of repetitive re-enactment of the official national history and identity, established by the pedagogical. Nevertheless, invoking Benedict Anderson's famous conceptualisation of the nation as an "imagined community", marked by "temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar", Bhabha asserts that this "homogenous empty time" of the nation (Anderson qtd. in Bhabha 2000: 297) which links together diverse actors and actions on the national stage in a form of "civil contemporaneity realised in the fullness of time" is contested by the emergence of differential temporalities, marked by class, ethnicity, gender and race (ibid.) – and why not add sexuality? Arguably, *Hardcore* effectively deploys what Cleto defines as the "citational, ironic and theatrical character of camp" (1999: 25) in order to evoke the naïve character of the nation's "campiness," which can be identified in a series of performative rituals, from military parades, liturgies, and national celebrations,

to the extravagant Athens Olympic Games as well as to filmic productions, such as the aforementioned blockbusters. In this way, the film effectively demystifies the nation's "artificiality that passes for natural" by exposing its self-representation (sarcastically evoked here by the warriors, the columns, the swords, the nymphs, etc.) as precisely a fantasy in itself.

At the same time, however, *Hardcore* introduces a filmic rendition of what we could call "national *sinthomosexuality*." Indeed, Iliades's film is not limited to the exposure of the nation's 'homogenous empty time,' but goes on to foreground the queer subject as an embodiment of the meaningless intransigent drive that constantly threatens to demolish the fantasmatic national spatiotemporal structure at every turn. A few minutes before the ending, the film discloses its own surrender to meaninglessness, its abandonment of the laws of narrativity through the defiance of causality. Nandia is driven to commit the meaningless, the unjustified, the unintelligible. Unable to verbalise any explanations for her actions she finally succumbs to *jouissance* as the excess of pleasure that is associated with both *Eros* and *Thanatos*; for the bed that accommodates her indifferent penetration by the Santa (indeed, one cannot even regard it as sexual inter-course as she shows no sign of reaction or pleasure) eventually also becomes her death-bed. In this way, Iliades's *sinthomosexual* not only ruins the party/fantasy that sustains the coherence of the nation through its pedagogical and performative historicity, but also drives the film itself towards a representational void through a frenzied editing of zoom shots, slow-motion pans, unsteady shots and eclectic use of music that alternates between opera, heavy rock and sentimental melodrama, which are only faithful to the frenetic trajectory of the *sinthomosexual* rather than the production of meaning.

Indeed, *Hardcore*'s spatiotemporal structure on the whole, despite being linear is effectively non-teleological. Rather than agents of change and generators of meaning, fantasy, dream and memory emerge as nothing more than mere disruptions of the otherwise futile trajectories of the characters, which revolve around repetitive and unproductive vicious circles, spattered with gore, semen and white "stardust". Hence, *Hardcore*'s spatiotemporal structure evidently stages this ceaseless oscillation between desire and the drive, between national, heteronormative and even queer fantasies, on the one hand, and queerness's "non-teleological negativity", on the other, constantly blurring fantasy with reality, the hopeful with the scornful.

But, one should not rush to read the film's rhetoric as a staging of the absolute triumph of the anti-social. Much as the death drive is not a mere embodiment of negativity but also a possibility of creativity, so the film denies complete surrender to nihilism as its ending sequence reveals. In his astute critique of Edelman's highly controversial work, Tim Dean reminds that for Lacan the drive

is both constant and partial, and it is precisely this partiality that makes it impossible to embrace or reject. As he explains, “a drive can never become an object of consciousness, [thus] can never be embraced or deployed for political purposes” (2008: 131). However, it is the unconscious’s “limitless capacity for displacement and condensation,” its incapacity “for synthesis or any grasp of finitude,” and thus its “refusal of totalising narratives” that renders the ideology of reproductive futurity impossible as totalitarian (ibid.: 134). Following Dean, Lisa Downing clarifies that in Lacanian psychoanalysis there is a place for the future, one that is not teleological, but “infinitely driven with doubling, returns, regression and interruptions” (2010: 141). Reaching beyond the pleasure principle and towards *jouissance*, the death drive seeks absolute negation, but this does not necessarily point towards a pull against the movement of the life drive, but rather an exaggeration of it; “it does not oppose it... rather it *outstrips* it” (ibid.: 137). The death drive’s movement, Downing explains, more than a simple negation of the future, is rather a gesture “beyond – and in excess of – simple linear ideas of futurity.” On this she cites Lacan’s own clarification that what should be articulated “as a destruction drive, given that it challenges everything that exists,” should also be regarded as “a will to create from zero, a will to begin again” (ibid.: 138).



Fig 25: Life as Circle.

In the film’s last sequence, Martha escapes along with Mr. Softie, Nandia’s most faithful john, heading to the sea. A series of shots foregrounds Martha’s face, as the air blows her hair in the convertible car, sporting an enigmatic smile of redemption (bear in mind the audience has just witnessed her killing Nandia) after noticing some children in a passing car. The series of Martha’s close-ups gives way to a shot that features a young ballerina against a backdrop of the

Greek sea – this enigmatic frame appears for the third time in the film, as in two previous occasions Martha was shown staring at a photograph of Nandia as a child, posing dressed as a ballerina against the same backdrop. In the film's last shot the child in the picture comes to life, and some scattered rubbles framing her small figure and the sea behind her can clearly be discerned now (**Fig 25**). The girl looks directly to the camera for a bit and then slowly exits the frame. Fade to black.

Iliades clearly ends his film with a question mark. A question mark that re-addresses fantasy as the pivotal generator of both the narratives of the past – that is, if we take the livened picture as a representation of the nostalgia of a fantasmatic past rather than an index of a joyful past reality – as well as a generator of the narratives of the future, incarnated in the image of the child, that perennial embodiment of reproductive futurity, which not coincidentally, eventually grows to become the embodiment of its own destruction, that is a *sinthomosexual*. Downing concludes that, rather than linear, normative and reproductive, film and Lacanian psychoanalysis can help us imagine the future as “plural, disruptive and creative,” they can become “modes of resistance to, and re-imaginings of, simple conceptions of temporality and the too-simple modes of subjectivity and relationality that appear to accompany them” (ibid.: 145). Indeed, the elemental becomes temporal in *Hardcore*'s final shot, as the remnants of fantasy are pushed to the margins of the frame, outstripped by the ever-moving, ever-changing and ever-returning sea-waves that take over the frame. Water is ultimately foregrounded; this perennial incarnation of the circle of life and life *as* circle whose ceaseless circular movement asks us to re-imagine the movement of history itself as an oscillation between fantasy-driven desires (individual, collective, national) and the partially destructive, partially creative tensions of the drive.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, B. (1983), *Imagined Communities*, London & New York: Verso.
- Betsky, A. (1997), *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire*, New York: William Morrow.
- Bhabha, H. K. (2000 [1990]), ‘Dissemination: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation’, in H. K. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration*, London: Routledge, pp. 291-322.
- Cleto, F. (1999), *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject, A Reader*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

- De Lauretis, T. (2011), 'Queer Texts, Bad Habits, and the Issue of a Future', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 17, pp. 243-63.
- Dean, T. (2008), 'An Impossible Embrace: Queerness, Futurity and the Death-Drive', in J. Bono, T. Dean and E. P. Ziarek (eds), *A Time for the Humanities: Futurity and the Limits of Autonomy*, New York: Fordham University Press, pp. 112-40.
- Dinshaw, C., R. A. Ferguson, A. Jagose, & T. H. Nguyen (2007), 'Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 13, pp. 177-95.
- Downing, L. (2010), 'The Cinematic Ethics of Psychoanalysis: Futurity, death drive, desire', in L. Downing & L. Saxton, *Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters*, Oxon: Routledge, pp. 134-146.
- Edelman, L. (2004), *No Future, Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Eleftheriotis, D. (2012), 'A Touch of Spice: Mobility and Popularity', in L. Papadimitriou & Y. Tzioumakis (eds) *Greek Cinema: Texts, Histories, Identities*, Bristol: Intellect, pp. 19-36.
- Gourgouris, S. (2004), 'Euro-Soccer and Hellenomania'. Available at [http://www.lsa.umich.edu/UMICH/modgreek/Home/Window%20to%20Greek%20Culture/Culture%20and%20Media/CaM Gourgouris EuroSocce r.pdf](http://www.lsa.umich.edu/UMICH/modgreek/Home/Window%20to%20Greek%20Culture/Culture%20and%20Media/CaM%20Gourgouris%20EuroSoccer.pdf). Accessed 1 October 2013.
- Ingram, G. B. (1997) 'Marginality and the Landscapes of Erotic Alien(n)ations', in G. B. Ingram, A. Bouthillette and Y. Retter (eds), *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Spaces, Sites of Resistance*, Washington: Bay Press, pp. 27-52.
- Jane, I. (2005), *Hardcore*. Available at <http://www.dvdtalk.com/reviews/17052/hardcore/>. Accessed 1 October 2013.
- Karalis, V. (2012), *A History of Greek Cinema*, London: Continuum.
- Kokonis, M. (2012), 'Is There Such a Thing as a Greek Blockbuster? The Revival of Contemporary Greek Cinema', in L. Papadimitriou & Y. Tzioumakis (eds) *Greek Cinema: Texts, Histories, Identities*, Bristol: Intellect, pp. 39-53.

Nedelkopoulou, I. (2004), *Hardcore* (2004). Available at <http://www.cine.gr/film.asp?id=704391&page=4>. Accessed 1 October 2013.

Raffel, L. P. (2004), *Hardcore* (2004). Available at <http://www.monstersatplay.com/review/dvd/h/hardcore.php>. Accessed 1 October 2013.

Rose, S. (2011), *Attenberg, Dogtooth and the Weird Wave of the Greek Cinema*. Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/aug/27/attenberg-dogtooth-greece-cinema>. Accessed 1 October 2013.

Žižek, S. (1995 [1991]), *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press.