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Performativity, Austerity, and Allegory; Athina Rachel Tsangari's film, 'Attenberg'

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ABSTRACT

In 2010 the film Attenberg, written and directed by Athina Rachel Tsangari (b. 1966, Greece) was released at the 67th Venice International Film Festival. As her second feature film Attenberg is an example of the contemporary genre of film known as Greek Weird Wave, characterized by unconventional storytelling and an exploration of political and cultural issues through alienated protagonists, absurdist dialogue and haunting aesthetics. More broadly, "it's a cinema that reflects on how systems of power manage groups of people (from a family to a population) and the bodies of individuals, and a cinema equally sensitive to forms of response, to noise, unease, and subversion."¹ What makes Tsangari stand out among her mostly male peers is her personalized, experimental, and movement-based modes of storytelling. Through her use of performativity, allegory and austerity, Attenberg blurs conventional ideas of sexuality, strength, simplicity, and dance. I aim to examine Tsangari's storytelling techniques, which draw from genres such as dance film, experimental film, performance, punk rock, and feminism, focusing on her emphasis on physical theater—a type of performance art that has origins in Greek tragedy,

but has contemporary artistic centers in Europe and New York respectively.

PAROLE CHIAVE: *Tsangari, performativity, austerity, allegory*

¹ Papanikolaou, D. "Greek Weird Wave; Or, on How to Do a Cinema of Biopolitics" *Languages*

of Resistance, Transformation, and Futurity in Mediterranean Crisis-Scapes, (2020): 209–230

AUTORE

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Context

Attenberg is the fictional name of a small industrial seaside village in Greece where three characters live, Marina (23), her father Spyros (late fifties), and Bella (Marina's age or a few years older). The time depicted is the mid 2000s. Following the global financial crisis of 2007, Greece plunged into its own financial crisis and austerity measures were put into effect. This led to social unrest and protests opposing the measures. Social, religious, and civic structures collapsed, and a real atmosphere of stasis and hopelessness occurred. Although no explicit mention of these current events appears in *Attenberg*, they are undeniable and translated through allegory and artistic choices.

The story weaves together three types of relationships—friendship, familial, and romantic. As the narrative goes, the main character Marina spends her time with her father Spyros who is dying of an unnamed illness.² Marina tends to him and often accompanies him through monotonous medical errands. She spends time with her friend Bella who is a sister-like companion, and she has her first sexual relationship with a visiting engineer who comes to town for work. Though spoken communication between the characters is minimal, the story is a layered anatomization of these different types of relationships, mostly expressed through physical movement and Tsangari's art direction. Throughout the film Marina and the other supporting characters interact in playful animalistic mimicry linked to Marina's fascination with the zoological documentaries by the British broadcaster and biologist David Attenborough, whose last name is the reference for the title.

Performativity

Attenberg is not a straightforward film where actors are directed to portray characters through the execution of dialogue as the main method of storytelling. Tsangari directs her actors using physical theater to reveal depths in their character and to, in a certain sense, disrupt the viewer's expectation.

Tsangari earned an MA in performance studies from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, and her deep understanding of physical movement and modes of theatrical workshopping is employed as choreography and playful movement. This type of directing can be attributed to New York-based directors like Ann Bogart who developed the Viewpoints method.³ Though the inclusion of choreography and other types of performance in this way could seem out of place in the traditional, formal sense, its inclusion brings needed catharsis to the bleak world

² In fact, none of the character's back stories are given, with the exception of Spyros' career as an architect.

³ Anne Bogart. *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre*. London, 2001

established in the film. Through the use of performance, the characters in *Attenberg* show the most intimate and alienating edges of their relationships with each other and with their surroundings.

Marina and Bella

There are two major ways that Marina and Bella engage with each other, through dialogue and corporal movement. Their movement-based interactions can be further broken down into three categories: non-romantic sensual touch; choreographed dance; and improvisational animal mimicry.

The film opens with a still shot of a white wall. Marina steps into the frame, she is standing profile, looking at someone off camera. Bella steps into the frame facing Marina and positions herself so that they stand a few feet apart. They extend their mouths toward one another and kiss with an awkward, jarring physicality, mouths agape, their tongues stiff and muscular. Bella instructs Marina to close her mouth partially. Marina tells Bella that it feels weird. They resemble birds feeding. After a long shot they drop to the ground and become cat-like, hissing and growling at each other and eventually crawl out of the frame.

In another scene Marina tells Bella how she admires other women's breasts. Bella asks her if she wants to feel her chest. They stand apart. Marina reaches her arms out and places her hands on Bella's breasts for a few seconds.

While the film does not focus on or explicitly highlight homosexual or queer relationships, physical intimacy between the two female characters is present through various interactions that can be viewed as both stylized and withdrawn. The question of the character's sexuality is not clear in their performativity. Rather, Marina's sexuality is revealed through dialogue in a conversation she has with Spyros when she tells him that she does not *desire* women [emphasis added]. This does not hinder her admiration of women however. Her relationship with Bella allows her to gain knowledge of the female body, and of a same sex relationship, an interesting note as there is no trace of a mother figure. Sexual identity in the film is not an issue. An appreciation for sex, touch, and for the human body is present, however.

These interactions are desexualized by their preadolescent manner. In these scenes the girls are positioned far apart so that their touch requires them to reach, a gesture that establishes the distance between them. This distance is an important directorial and aesthetic choice which serves multiple purposes which will be elaborated on in the next section. What this physicality serves in these particular scenes is that it underscores the intention of curiosity that motivates the touches and takes the emotion out of it. As viewers we are not led to believe the girls have a romantic attraction to each other, rather they seem to be living as platonic companions in a world where the expression of curiosity in this way is normalized.

Silly Walks

Marina and Bella engage in playful, choreographed dances which Tsangari calls “Silly Walks.” These walks are placed throughout the film, acting as interludes that tell of a world within a world, subverting any realism the film displays. The Silly Walks are actually dances. There is repetition, corporal extension, balance, sound, pace, and costume.

Silly Walk #1–They walk with their arms linked, stepping in time with one another. Bella recounts a dream of trees with penis fruits. She brings her arm up and moves her hand to show what a penis branch looks like. Belle mispronounces David Attenborough’s last name, calling him Attenberg, Marina corrects her.

Silly Walk #2–They move away from the camera, picking up their feet as if wearing flippers, then walk across the frame from right to left like ducks.

Silly Walk #3–They walk slowly down a street at night in the rain, while young men loiter on the sidewalk on the left side of the frame. There is no interaction between them and the young men.

Silly Walk #4–They hold hands and shuffle their feet, waltz, pas de bourrée, while the sun sets in the background.

Silly Walk #5–They walk briskly, mimicking birds with their arms outstretched behind them, their hands flailing, until they run into the wall at the back of the frame with the front of their bodies.

Silly Walk #6–They walk, stepping in sync, away from the camera, first lifting one leg and shaking it, then the other. They resemble dogs urinating.

Silly Walk #7–Each girl grabs their own crotch with both hands, one arm reaching around from behind and the other from the front. They take large steps. They release their grasps, and each step becomes a big, grotesque growl with claw-like hands while their tongues protrude out of their mouths.

Marina and Spyros

Marina and Spyros are mostly depicted sitting near each other in silence, grooming, reading, or watching the documentaries of David Attenborough. When they do speak to each other the dialogue is sparse and angular. Occasionally they play word games, audibly bouncing a single word back and forth or finding words that rhyme—a trope of Greek Weird Wave. In the last scene before Spyros dies, they repeat the words “Marina” and “dad” back and forth to each other. Like a Meisner technique acting exercise inserted right into the film, their repeated words become a conversation that distorts the words’ meanings.

Looking closely at the performance of their father/daughter relationship we see the most tender moments occurring between Marina and Spyros with gestures that

involve their hands and face. Near the end of the film Marina touches Spyros' forehead and draws her fingers down the bridge of his nose. After he has died, Marina is pictured outdoors hanging clothes on a clothesline. She handles a sweater, seemingly belonging to Spyros. She pauses, then buries her face in the sweater. Fibers of textiles are similar to skin, and in this way, she is remembering and connecting to her father through the materiality of his sweater.

Marina, Spyros, and Bella

In a rare scene with all three of the main actors, one which shows a true tenderness between Marina and Spyros, attention is drawn to the importance of their relationship entirely through physical performance. Marina and Spyros lay on the rocks by the sea. Bella is standing and takes to massaging Spyros' back with her feet, pressing the weight of her body into his back, arms, and hands. Marina, who is lying next to Spyros and seeing this interaction, takes Spyros' hand and holds the back of it against her face. There is no dialogue, only the sounds of lapping waves. Again, the hand to face gesture is so subtle yet so powerful in showing the profundity of their relationship.

*Distanciation*⁴

Made apparent by its root word, distanciation refers to distance, and is an umbrella term for multiple meanings. I am using the general term as the title for this section and will unpack its meanings here, as they are all relevant to the performativity described above. Distanciation refers to aesthetic distance; a synonym for the Brechtian alienation effect and sociologically it is a concept with both spatial and emotional dimensions, in which for individuals in modern society there is increasingly less connection between psychological distance or closeness and physical distance or proximity in regular social relations. This is in part related to the affordances of modern media of interpersonal communication, which can help to sustain what might otherwise be weak ties.⁵

As previously described in the scenes where Marina and Bella engage in non-romantic sexual touch and Marina is essentially learning about things that are considered erotic, the two girls are physically positioned far enough away from each other so that their touch must happen through the act of reaching. To reach is to extend, to strain. There is effort in reaching. The negative space created by the angles

⁴ Aesthetic distance. A more in-depth study of the term is found in "The Influence of Bertolt Brecht's Theory of Distanciation On Contemporary Cinema, Particularly on Jean-Luc Godard" by Jan Uhde in the *Journal of the University Film Association*, Vol. 26 No. 3 (1974): 28-30, 44. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20687247>

⁵ Oxford Reference Dictionary, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095722350>

of two reaching bodies which find a point of contact is just as important visually and symbolically as is the point of contact itself. We can confer that these bodies are not in love, they are separate, whole and have a sense of agency in their active motion to connect. In this way aesthetic distance is established and their interactions become similar to the animals featured in David Attenborough's documentaries, in that human emotion is absent and animal nature is underscored.

Considering Bertold Brecht's alienation effect in *Attenberg*, we see it in its narrative structure. Multiple worlds are spliced together to create moments where the viewer is pushed out of the narrative and reminded that there is room for finding meaning and interpretation. An example of this alienating technique is the inclusion of the Silly Walks. If one were to remove the Silly Walks entirely, the film wouldn't lose the arc of its storyline. The Silly Walks remind us that this story isn't true, but it is still important.

Sociologically, the village of Attenberg is in a state of malaise and post-modern deterioration. Besides the very rare and occasional townspeople, our main characters are the only people that inhabit its natural and architectural spaces, especially in places that would certainly be busy (hospital, streets, factory). It is practically a ghost town. While the main characters are the only people around, they are unconcerned by their solitude. This lack of concern alienates them from real life and places them in a fantasy world, one that has all the elements of truth, but is distorted, mythologized, and austere.

Austerity

Austerity was cited as the 2010 word of the year by Merriam Webster's Dictionary. In this analysis, austerity's meaning is intentionally two-fold. Austerity as economic measures of restraint forced into policy in a country with extreme debt, and aesthetic austerity as a sort of somber plainness and stern human countenance.

The austerity measures put in place by Greece's government in the years following the financial crisis of 2007 affected Greek life and led to cultural discontent. Protests took place against the measures and a 15-year-old boy was killed by police.⁶ *Attenberg* was produced on the heels of this tragedy and reflects the fate of a culture that once reigned as the birthplace of philosophy, democracy, and architecture, but is now lost, purged by the rise and fall of industry, political and social marginalization, and dilapidation of its built space.

Contemporary Greek life in the midst of austerity measures sets the stage for the tone of the film. Compositionally *Attenberg* is, in a word, austere. There is no

⁶ Maria Margaritis, "How police shooting of a teenage boy rallied the '€700 generation.'" *The Guardian*, December 12, 2008. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/dec/13/athens-greece-riots>

musical score except for Marina occasionally listening to tapes of the band Suicide.⁷ Aside from the three main characters there's only a few other extras inhabiting the spaces of the village. In one scene Marina pushes Spyros in a wheelchair through the halls of a hospital which are vacant. In another scene Marina sits at a bar in a restaurant and eats lunch while Bella works as the server. All the tables and chairs are vacant. It feels unnatural, even for a desolate town there would still be native inhabitants. This isolation surrounds the characters and alienates them from reality. This works to create a mythological world where they hang in the liminal space between past and future.

Although, as previously noted, there are moments of tenderness through physical touch, in most of the film the actors seem unaffected by their circumstance and deliver their dialogue in a dry and monotone manner. Spyros' storyline exemplifies this. He is in the throes of death, yet he is unemotional. His hospital visits are as mundane as watching TV. Another example is Marina's storyline. She is both inexperienced, and in her sometimes brutal candor, a little intimidating.⁸ Her dry delivery of her dialogue when talking about sexual situations, sexuality, and death, frames her words with apathy, rendering her childlike at times.

Clinical Observation as a Modality of Austerity

The title *Attenberg* is a reference to the British scientist and documentarian David Attenborough. In his documentaries Attenborough discusses mating and other elements of sex from a scientific perspective, relaying to his viewers a narration of the animal world from an observational perspective that is both informative and compelling. Attenborough has an important role in this film—his presence is like a kind uncle for Marina. We observe Marina as she watches documentaries. We see her mimic the animal behavior his documentaries—bird calls, gorilla chest punches, and feline gestures. When she does this with another character, their interactions become playful. Stylistically, the comparison between Attenborough and Marina provides a basis for the way Marina moves through the world. She explores herself, her body, and other people with both authenticity and detachment. There is a childlike curiosity and delight that both Marina and David Attenborough embody in their fascination with the world. For Marina however,

⁷ Simon Reynolds, "Infinity Punk: A Careerspanning Interview with Suicides Alan Vega" *Pitchfork*, July 19, 2016. Alan Vega and Martine Reverby named their duo Suicide stating "We were talking about today's suicide especially American society. New York City was collapsing. The Vietnam War was going on." This self imposed societal death is a reference for Greek life in the 2000s. <https://pitchfork.com/features/interview/9917-infinity-punk-a-career-spanning-interview-with-suicides-alan-vega/>

⁸ A. Scott, "Searching for Herself, She's Odd, and Familiar." Review of *Attenberg*, by Athina Rachel Tsangari. *The New York Times*, March 8, 2012. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/09/movies/attenberg-is-athina-rachel-tsangaris-debut-feature.html?searchResultPosition=1>

animal mimicry may be a way of deflecting the emotions that would otherwise be present if it were real life.

Allegory⁹

Allegory as a literary device can be traced back to the Greek poet Homer and his use of personifications. It is found in art dating back to the beginning of the Renaissance. *Attenberg* has been described as an allegorical depiction of the state of Greece after its financial crisis.¹⁰ The film frames a multi-generational family who illustrates the general sentiments of Greek society at the time of its production. Through dialogue between Spyros who represents the older generation, and Marina who represents the successive generation, they personify contemporary chapters in modern Greek history.

Spyros, in his ailing state, symbolizes the death of modernism. In a scene in the first half of the film he and Marina stand on a terrace overlooking the fictional city of *Attenberg* like two mythical gods peering over the ruins of a failed, utopian, mortal city. Spyros is an architect who had a hand in the construction of *Attenberg*, a village whose industry is in steep decline. Here he describes himself as a toxic remnant of modernism and post-enlightenment. "It's as if we were designing ruins, as if calculating their eventual collapse, with mathematical precision," he says. By dying, Spyros explains to her, he is leaving his daughter in the hands of a new century without having taught her anything useful. In response to the chaos of the last century of postmodernism, Marina responds stating that uniformity is "soothing." Her remark speaks to her sense of inertia as a backlash to the failures of her father's generation. Marina has no desire for reconciliation for this loss. The burden of what needs fixing renders her useless. The questions that remain are: What will she do once Spyros is gone? What does the future mean to her? Marina is unprepared for the responsibilities that fall on her shoulders. As it stands, she is undefined, indifferent, and alienated from her own country.

At the end of the scene the camera hovers high above them. From a bird's eye view they walk side by side from the bottom of the screen upwards and out of the frame. It's a nod to the French cinematographer Henri Alekan who shot Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire*. In this way it seems as if Spyros and Marina have

⁹ As a literary device or artistic form, an allegory is a narrative or visual representation in which a character, place, or event can be interpreted to represent a meaning with moral or political significance. Authors have used allegory throughout history in all forms of art to illustrate or convey complex ideas and concepts in ways that are comprehensible or striking to its viewers, readers, or listeners.

¹⁰ Clinton Krute writes, "The film *Attenberg* functions allegorically on several levels: the personal (as a simple coming-of-age tale), the philosophical (as a description of the confusion wrought by our dual state as animals and rational creatures) and, most remarkably, for me, the political." Review of *Attenberg*, *BOMB*, July 2011.

descended from their place in heaven down to the earth below, where their mortal bodies are small amidst the surrounding architecture.

Conclusion

Attenberg captures the zeitgeist of Greece in the early 2000's. It reflects the postmodern malaise of a nation that was once characterized by its powerful and culturally significant philosophical, democratic, and architectural achievements but now is in decline. It draws from ancient Greek tragedy in its use of allegory and characterization. But most significantly, the use of performativity, choreography, and physical theater marks it as an important link between the third and fourth waves of feminism as well as for Greek film makers in general. In an interview in 2011 Tsangari explains that she wrote the screenplay for *Attenberg* intuitively, with limited budget and limited time.¹¹ A review by Indiewire calls it a film d'auteur¹² underscoring that the personal is political and what is more political than the human body?

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¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mcu2PLjziG8> Quickflix's Simon Mirauda speaks with Athina Rachel Tsangari, the writer/director of *Attenberg*, at the 2011 Sydney Film Festival.

¹² Film d'auteur (also called cinéma d'auteur) is an expression used to describe the films of a film director or a screenwriter which reflect their artistic personality. This term seeks before all to link the work of a filmmaker to preferred themes and the coherence of an innovative and singular style. It is, however, a subjective notion of which there is no rigorous definition. Film d'auteur is frequently grouped with "Cinéma d'art et d'essai" or research cinema.

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