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Under the shadow of global cinematic metropolises: the case-study of Athens

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Abstract. *It can be argued that people can have experienced cinematically famous global metropolises without ever having visited them. The various cinematic works (films) might be considered as an oscillograph for capturing, experiencing and promoting the global mosaic of various urban 'atmospheres'. World's major capital cities have been starring in films and their representations can place them among the most famous urban destinations in the world. However, during this game of urban showing, many smaller capitals are remaining under the shadow of the global cinematic metropolises. How can smaller capital cities protect their distinctiveness? The Greek capital (Athens) is going to be analysed as a case-study.*

Keywords: *global cinematic metropolises, urban cinematic ambience, cinematic elsewhere, Athens*

Introduction

There exists a global urban mosaic of various 'atmospheric auras' as well as an oscillograph for capturing and then studying cinema and the cinematic works (films). These urban auras are a result of the material urban environment and the immaterial urban lifestyle, and are detected as incentives by socially aware and creative/artistic antennas. Then, they are embossed on celluloid as unique gazes and they constitute a wide audio-visual archive ready for decoding.

The dreamy opportunities of New York, the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Rome, the bohemian air that surrounds Paris, the multicultural global openness of London and the alternative creativeness of Berlin are only some of the most famous and widely used typifications that are accompanying the sound of the world's most popular global cities ever filmed. Their cinematic representations have managed to monitor the diachronic evolution of urban atmosphere and experience, spot and promote the comparative advantages of these cities, or even supply them with new mythological elements. And despite the fact that these typifications are partly urban aspects -that seem to be partly verified by everyday life- city marketing and city branding select them in order to declare and promote the unique ambiances of these large cities.

Hence, contemporary global metropolises are doubling their reputation through their fictional cinematic representations, while simultaneously they have managed to establish themselves at a high position in the global urban hierarchy by highlighting both their specificity of recognition and their photogenic side (city branding). Thus, the experience of these cinematic cities can be offered to viewers and can be compared to the experience earned by visitors or their inhabitants. It can be stated that nowadays people can experience famous global metropolises without ever visiting them.

However, somewhere near this game of urban showing and promotion, there are many smaller capitals of the world, which are under the shadow of the previously mentioned global cinematic metropolises. These cities are trying to promote their unique identity and to be established in the collective unconscious with their distinctive characteristics, whilst, at the same time, they are trying to copy, assimilate or deny the elements with which they are bombarded by the widely recognised cities. This game can result in change, transformation or mutation of the cinematic ambience of these smaller capitals and the result cannot always be their distinct presence. Cinematic elsewhere is lurking.

Urban Hierarchy

There are many criteria according to which cities have been categorised in lists, but all are using Global/World Cities as a comparison factor. The sperms of the criteria that are used in order to classify cities could firstly be detected in Sassen's (1991) emblematic work *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*. For her, at the top of the urban hierarchy lie global cities (or world cities). Global cities act as control nodes for global economic networks, highly concentrated command points, sites of production and innovations and markets for the products and innovations produced (Sassen, 1991). Furthermore, Sassen names three cities (New York, London, Tokyo) and reasons their emergence with the decline of manufacturing and the internationalised economy. Abrahamson (2004) attempted to classify contemporary global cities in a not exclusively socio-economic way. He took into account not only global cities' economic power, but also their cultural influence and multiculturalism (his list also engaged Paris). Short (2004) did the same since he referred to globalisation as the 'crucial factor that influences the contemporary urbanisation' and stressed the importance of studying the cultural -not only the economic- globalisation. Hall (2005) suggested four criteria for classification: a) economic power (business and financial centres), b) power and influence (headquarters of global organisations and transnational corporations), c) creative and cultural industries (arts, media, fashion, design) and c) tourism (tourism infrastructure, as well as tourist attractions). Hall's criteria reflect the gradual transition of theory from merely economic to cultural understanding of globalisation and the global hierarchy of cities.

Among the numerous lists about urban hierarchy, Globalisation and World Rankings Research Institute's list (GWRRI, 2015¹) is chosen as base, in order to discover which capital cities are the current dominant players in the game of urban promotion. In accordance with the Global/World Cities Theories, GWRRI's list takes into account economic, political and cultural factors to categorise the cities of the world in Alpha,

1. Available at: <http://www.spottedbylocals.com/blog/alpha-beta-and-gamma-cities/>

Beta and Gamma classes. According to GWRRI's list, the most dominant (in economic, political and cultural terms) cities of the world are: London, New York, Hong Kong, Paris, Singapore, Tokyo, Shanghai, Dubai, Sydney and Beijing. In this paper, these cities are called global metropolises.

There is a focus on the cultural influence that derives from the global metropolises' cinematic representations as applied on the cinematic representations of other smaller capital cities (with special attention to Athens). Here, the mimic tendency of reproducing the global cinematic metropolises' atmosphere can result in change, transformation or mutation of smaller cities' cinematic ambience without promoting their distinct presence. One can say that copying images, ways of living and finally atmospheres produces cinematic elsewhere-ness. Thus, it is a matter of grave importance for a cinematic city to find its unique image – and thus position- on the world stage.

In the context of this paper, a case of a small cinematic capital city is going to be studied: Athens. The study is going to be structured in two parts. Firstly, a typology of world's cinematic cities will be attempted, in order to spot the position of Athens. Secondly, there will be a brief presentation of the Athenian cinematic ambience through influential cinematic works (famous auteurs' films that were acclaimed by both critics and audience and gained international acclaim). Finally, there will be a conclusion concerning: a) How special is the Athenian cinematic ambience? and b) Which are the distinctive cinematic characteristics of Athens?

Part I: Typology of Cinematic Cities

In order to set the basis for a typology of branded cinematic cities, a brief analysis to the existing lists of the most filmed – and thus famous- cities is necessary. Here, the framework is formed by the World Film Locations series by Intellect Publishing (2011-today), an extensive collection of essays about 'cities that acted as a vital character in helping to tell a story'². Among the 42 volumes, one can find a compact overview of the most well-known cinematic cities. In addition, by taking into consideration Hellmann & Weber-Hof's (2006) work, there are certain cities that are standing out (bold cities in Figure 1) as effective examples of memorable cinematic branding.

Table 1 constitutes a first attempt for the typology of world's cinematic cities based on their cinematic image/brand. There are three types of contemporary cities in cinema: a) **Global City Image**: city's representation as a global node, while the emphasis is on the Central Business District's landscape (city's body³), the yuppie way of living (city's mind) and the feeling of being at an socio-economic and cultural epicenter (city's soul), b) **Glocal City Image**: city's representation as a place of global and local elements' intersection, while the emphasis is on the romantic/artistic/historic and picturesque landscape (city's body), the bohemian way of living (city's mind) and the feeling of being part of a culturally creative epicenter

2. Available at: <http://www.intellectbooks.co.uk/books/view-Series,id=27/>

3. A methodological tool that is used by Mantas (2010) in his work "The Representation of Living Cities in Cinema: Rome & Athens" for understanding and studying cities as living beings.

(city’s soul), and c) **Local City Image**: city’s representation as a place for unique experiences, while the emphasis is on the peculiar local landscape (city’s body), the distinct way of living (city’s mind) and the feeling of being at a special tourist destination (city’s soul).

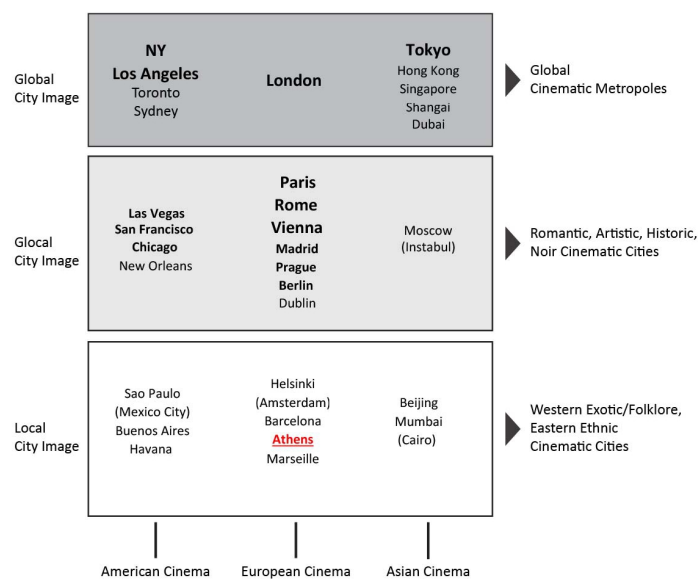


Table 1. Typology of Cinematic Cities

On one hand, the systematic promotion of a Global City Image by some cities could indicate them as Global Cinematic Metropolises. The representation of these cities is the most dominant in American, European and Asian cinema and shape the archetype of contemporary city. On the other hand, the promotion of the Glocal and Local City Image may offer an interesting differentiation of the dominant urban cinematic manniere. However, Glocal City Image can sway with ease between globalised trends and local atmospheric elements (historic sites, artistic way of life, romantic scenery), while Local City Image can be exclusively Exotic/Folklore/Ethnik.

Subsequently, the Athenian Cinematic Ambience is approached through the emblematic idiosyncratic works of famous Greek auteurs and the periods of the local artistic reflexes to the time-progressive global cinematic competition are spotted. Did ever Athens overcome its western folklore cinematic image?

Part II: Athenian Cinematic Ambiance

Greek cinema began its film production during the decade of 10’s, due to the mainly agricultural economy (lack of regulated urban markets and industrial production) and the harsh historical context (Minor-Asia Catastrophe, German Occupation, Civil War). Until the end of WWII, the Greek film production consisted basically of bucolic dramas and the places of film-shooting were the Greek villages and countryside.

Phase	Decade	Film Type	Films representing Athens
Ethographic	40	Ethographies	<i>Applause</i> (1944)
	50	First Auteurs	<i>Windfall in Athens</i> (1954), <i>Stella</i> (1955)
	60	Melodramas	<i>Never on Sunday</i> (1960)
		UrbanComedies	<i>And the Wife Shall Revere Her Husband</i> (1965)
Thematic	70	New Greek Cinema	<i>The Matchmaking of Anna</i> (1972)
	80		<i>A Foolish Love</i> (1980), <i>Voyage to Cythere</i> (1984)
	90		<i>Quiet Days in August</i> (1991), <i>Acropole</i> (1996)
Urban Surreal	00	Weird Wave	<i>The Attack of the Giant Musaka</i> (2000), <i>Cheap Smokes</i> (2000), <i>My Best Friend</i> (2001), <i>A Dog's Dream</i> (2005), <i>Dying in Athens</i> (2006)
Photogenic	10	Glossy	<i>What If</i> (2013), <i>Worlds Apart</i> (2015)

Table 2. Connecting Greek Cinema's Phases with Athens' Representation

However, the post-war recovery period was a milestone for the Greek cinematography and since the decade of the 40's, Athens started starring in films (Table 2).

During the Ethographic phase, the black-and-white Athenian cinematic ambiance started to be formed by keeping its distinct character and being mostly influenced from Rome. With the rise of New Greek Cinema, many colored idiosyncratic films were introduced to the audience and they were thematic comments to reality without being limited to a sterile representation of a story. These films were influenced by the Avant-Garde European Cinema, but they were keeping an eye on local elements. With the new millennium, Greek directors started shooting urban surreal films in Athens. Nowadays, during the socio-economic crisis the film-directors choose to deal with social criticism to urban matters and many of them stress the urban alienation and absurd through their creations. However, Papakaliatis' films constitute exceptions and depict the photogenic and glossy side of Athens through some global schemas.

Lastly, in order to codify the transformation of the cinematically promoted Athenian image, four films could stand as representative examples of the four-phase Athenian cinematic representation: *Never on Sunday* (1960), *A Foolish Love* (1980), *Dying in Athens* (2006) and *What If* (2013). Athens' gradual transition from Ethnographic Representation (Local City Image) to Photogenic Representation in accordance with universal aesthetic criteria is more than obvious. *What If* (2013) by Christophoros Papakaliatis tries to promote a 'globalised' Glocal City Image of Athens and unfortunately depicts Athens as neutral scenery. Consequently, the audience experiences the cinematic elsewhere.

Conclusion

Urban hierarchy is a consequence of contemporary rapidly globalised world, where cities are classified in urban lists by taking into consideration multiple criteria (cultural, tourism, as well as socio-economic). Nowadays, due to the rising role of culture in urban dominance, special attention must be also given to cinema city branding. Here, a brief Typology of Cinematic Cities (Table 1) was attempted so to offer an initial roadmap for smaller capital cities to spot their place into the urban hierarchy and protect their distinctiveness.

It is obvious and more than necessary that cities have to promote effectively their unique identity, in order to be established in the collective unconscious. Nevertheless, at the same time, every single city has to communicate its sincere image/brand

through cinema. Effective cinematic branding ought to deal with city's soul (as the intersection point of material and immaterial aspect of the city) without trying to copy elements by the widely recognised cities.

Furthermore, Athens was approached as an example of how the Global City Image has affected the cinematic representation of smaller cities. Athens has promoted easily its Local City Image, while some directors approached its Glocal side (late 00's). Nevertheless, the special cinematic ambiance of Athens vanishes when directors try to form a Global City Image. Athens' Mediterranean landscape and peculiar cityscape (monuments, block of apartments) -so called Athens' body- can be combined with the Greek way of living -Athens' mind- and that should be the base for developing a distinctive Athenian cinematic ambiance (Athens' soul). Lastly, there could also be a variation between audience's feeling as part of a culturally creative epicenter (Glocal) or a special tourist destination (Local). This variation on representation can renew the Athenian brand and refresh the old-fashioned Ethnographic recipe of '60's (which is still the most distinctive cinematic presence of Athens though). Once city's distinctive characteristics are depicted, city's uniqueness is ensured and three things are necessary for achieving that: a) city brand, b) auteurs' idiosyncratic point of view on city's brand and c) deep comprehension of city's cinematic history.

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