

# *senses of cinema*

## An Interview with Sotiris Goritsas

👤 Petro Alexiou © September 2000 📁 Greek Cinema - Past and Present 📖 Issue 9



The following interview was conducted in Greece in January 2000 and has been translated by the interviewer Petro Alexiou.

A full **filmography** for Sotiris Goritsas is at the end of this article.

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Sotiris Goritsas is a dynamic filmmaker whose work stands out amongst Greece's new wave of feature film directors of the 1990s.

Born in Athens in 1955, Goritsas studied economics at the University of Athens and film at the London International Film School. Between 1985 and 1988 he directed twenty-five documentaries for Greek television, as well as television commercials.

He directed his first telefilm *Someone Keeps Vigil* in 1987. It was followed in 1990 by *Despina*, a medium-length feature film, which received the Best Film Award in the Thessaloniki Film Festival of the same year. The feature *From the Snow* followed in 1993, gaining awards in the same year at the Amien, Troia and Thessaloniki Film Festivals (in the latter, in both the national and international sections) and the 1994 Directors' Fortnight at Cannes. His 1997 feature *Balkanisateur* has met with acclaim in Greece and abroad.

Goritsas is now working on his new feature *Braziliero*.

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**P.A. You're known to a wide audience in Australia through your feature *From the Snow* which deals with the subject of migration in Greece. What made you tackle this subject?**

S.G. When I started writing the script in 1992 the first refugees from Albania began to arrive in Greece. You could see the beginning of the problem then and the unprepared-ness of Greek society to deal with it. The script began with a short text by the writer Sotiris Dimitriou published in a newspaper and my own acquaintance with two young Northern Epirots from Albania. I think I can say now that the film was timely in dealing with issues that later became fundamental to the character of contemporary Greek society.

**I remember in 1993, somewhere in Omonia, seeing the slogan "Today's Albanians are yesterday's Greeks in Germany..." It could have said "and Australia". To what extent does your film reflect this point of view?**

Yes, Germany and Australia but also America and, in the past, Asia Minor. The subject of forced exile, the subject of the "foreigner" is I think closely tied to Modern Greek history. Only this time we've found ourselves on the other side, not with the "foreigner", but as the host to the "foreigner". And it appears that we've quickly forgotten our previous life, our past suffering, our identity.

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## Images from *From the Snow*



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**In a scene in *From the Snow* we hear the illegal immigrant Northern Epirots singing a poly-phonic song in the underground of Omonia Station while the police turn their hoses on them. In an ironic sense, we feel that today's Greeks are oppressing the 'old' Greeks. What's happening here?**

Exactly. We could draw a parallel with the son who wants to be free of his father's heritage. It's a necessary but at the same time risky enterprise. At any rate it's an enterprise that will be continually current, if not around the same issue, at least around other issues. In other words, what do we "keep" and what do we "throw out" from our heritage in our effort to keep up with continually accelerating developments?

**Since 1993 the question of the foreign immigrants has taken on greater dimensions in Greece. Do you still feel the need to say more things on this issue?**

For sure. I live in this country and the issue is continually present and evolving. Outwardly the protagonists change, yesterday's Northern Epirots and Albanians might become "acceptable" to Greek society while today's Kurds, Ukrainians, Pakistanis etc take their place. But the issues still remain. These issues are present in the new film I'm working on.

**In *Balkanisateur* you widen your thematic lens and place your protagonists in the Balkan region. What brought about this thematic broadening? What does the title imply?**

The core of both films is a common one. It's my attempt to understand the real nature of the Greek character. I can get to know this character better by placing him in different places each time. One time as a host, another as the visitor, then as a European, at night an Oriental etc. That's what I've tried to do and I think I'll continue to do it. The term "Balkanisateur" is a sort of joke about the Balkans and having a tyre burst. A big "gademya" (a big jinx) from the American "God damn it!". Under confusion.

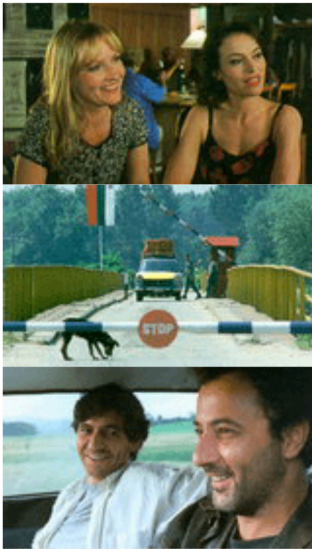
**In *Balkanisateur* the comic element is stronger than in your earlier films. What drew you to this choice of expression and what were the difficulties in creating laughs from situations that could just as easily have been tragic?**

Basically my intention! The rest is a matter of psychoanalysis... When I made *From the Snow* I was, let's say, very "angry". To be more precise, what I expressed most was my anger. Four years later my mood had outwardly lightened a little. It's now more in touch with humour, which in the end I think is closer to tragedy than anger. And, I think, it's a more mature attitude. In fact, humour has been one of the basic weapons that has helped Greeks survive their turbulent history. For example, *karagiozi*, cartoons, theatre reviews, satirical songs etc. This inclination to see things humorously isn't the outcome of some theoretical choice or thinking but a response to a deeper desire in me.

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**Images from *Balkanisateur***





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**As well as directing your films you also write your own scripts which up to now have been based on literary texts. How important is the script in the overall process of your work?**

The most important thing. As strange as it might sound coming from someone who directs, for me personally, the writing of the script is the most important part and, certainly up to now, the most enjoyable. After the writing, the shooting of the film is not something I'm crazy about. Perhaps it has something to do with the conditions of production in Greece. There's always something going wrong. Things always turn out differently to what was agreed on. An apotheosis of the "more or less". More or less like this, more or less a film, more or less a director etc. Whereas in the script you can be exactly what you want. In Greek cinema especially it's well known that there are weaknesses in the area of the script, in the essence of the work, not in the direction, the shots, or, in other words, the aesthetic part. In that department we always get by. The "suit" gets tailored. I don't know about the person who wears it... You know what I mean.

**You're working on a new film. What's it about?**

Its title is *Braziliero* and it's about a character in rural Greece who is unexpectedly visited by two Europeans who've come to check up on what's happened with the funding he received from the European Union. It's a 'Derby' between Greece and Europe.

**Your three films (*Despina*, *From the Snow* and *Balkanisateur*) all have a common narrative form, the road movie. What is it that attracts you to this type of narrative?**

My new film at last doesn't have this form! I say this because I'm often asked, and with good cause, but I never know how to answer. I've said different things over time about the "similarity between the outer and the inner journey" and other such "French" things, but I'm not sure that I mean what I say! What can I say? Perhaps I just like excursions. However, it is a fact that I'm not easily satisfied anywhere. And that's why I make movies. Maybe in the end to make sense of things around me, and inside me.

**You've worked in public broadcasting as a documentary-maker and in commercial advertising. To what extent has your filmmaking been influenced by these two, seemingly contrary, types of genres?**

A lot and in different ways. I mean positively and negatively. It's a big subject but I can say broadly that both these genres have made me love and hate those around me, including myself. Both of these genres, if you respect them, can be a key to worlds that you couldn't easily enter through other professions. As a tourist I'd never be able to understand the work and soul of the *Charcoal-burners of Vitsi* nor as an economist could I ever share the businessman's anxiety for his product.

**Why did you choose to study abroad at the London International Film School? What were the benefits and what, if any, were the disadvantages? Is it a problem in Greece for young people who want to learn the art of filmmaking?**

When I went to study there in 1980, I felt that a cycle in Greece was over for me: the period of the junta, the political change-over into parliamentary democracy, the life of the tavern, chasing women and the endless “questioning”. I’d enjoyed it to the full. I felt that the place was deeply defined by things that for me had ended. I wanted to see things from a different perspective which I felt existed elsewhere and which for historical reasons to do with postwar Greece, we couldn’t get to know here. wasn’t wrong. England, its ways of working and thinking, was a discovery for me. And it was what made me reconcile myself with, and love, Greece again. I fear that if I’d stayed here I would have turned into yet another dejected whiner, who being *here* would want to be over *there*, and being over *there* would forever be thinking of *here*. We have a lot of these types who plague us all the time. Mainly politicians but quite a few artists, too. For those who want to study filmmaking in Greece unfortunately I can’t advise them. I can say simply by looking at other colleagues that I don’t think it’s so important where you’ve studied. There are people who’ve studied “overseas” with whom I have nothing to talk about and other “locals” with whom I feel I’ve followed the same path.

**How do you see the question of government funding for cinema? Is it a necessary evil? In practice is there any other way productions can be realised? Does the European Union provide a solution to problems of production and distribution?**

I don’t see it as an evil. There is another type of production, e.g. private investment. But for me, the important thing is what sort of films you want to make in the end. Interesting films or not. No one type of production can guarantee that. The European Union does indeed help somewhat with problems of production, but not with distribution.

**Did your previous films enjoy commercial success? How important is revenue from exhibition in Greece compared to overseas sales?**

Personally I’ve had success in both areas. *From the Snow* went well overseas but not so well in Greece, whereas *Balkanisateur* enjoyed a strong commercial success in Greece and not much at all overseas. Both these films have earned more or less the same up to now. Generally though, I’d say that in the past, if a film enjoyed commercial success, the scales were weighed towards it making the money from television sales overseas, whereas in recent years this has started to change. There are examples of films that are profitable exclusively from the domestic market. If this is a good thing or not that’s another matter. Time will tell.

**I have the impression that your films have a particular interest for audiences outside of Greece for the precise reason that in them they see Greeks coming into contact with other Balkan nationalities. In other words, your films show Greeks in relation to ‘others’, in a world which, in Australia at least, we’re used to naming ‘multicultural’. What does this view of the world mean for Greece and how does it function in your films?**

I don’t think there’s another way of viewing the world. In the sense that there can’t be a view of something without taking into account the ‘other’. Existence in isolation and creation out of nothing isn’t possible. The question is to what extent can our viewpoint grasp this interdependence of things. It’s a question of knowledge, sensitivity, in other words, what I take to be talent. It’s not a film matter. It’s what’s important in all types of work. And it exists and is primary, in my opinion, in the political life of our country from the time of Turkish rule up to the European Monetary Unit. To what extent this dialectic influences my work and is expressed in it, in other words, whether I’m “talented” or not, I can’t say. All I can say is that “this is what I know, this is how I do it”. This is something that I learnt from the Cypriot painter Diamandis in a documentary. It doesn’t matter whether the flame inside you is small or great. What matters in the end is that you succeed in expressing it. The rest are “landmark in cinema” for posthumous retrospectives. They don’t excite me much.

Thank you very much. My best wishes to you and all the Greeks of Australia, till we meet again.

## **Sotiris Goritsas**

Born in Athens in 1955. He studied economics at the University of Athens and Cinema at the London International Film School. He has directed many documentaries for Greek public television ET-1 as well as commercials.

### **FILMOGRAPHY**

1987: *Someone Keeps Vigil*, 45 mins, telefilm

1990: *Despina*, 55 mins, medium-length feature film. Thessaloniki Film Festival: Best Film Award, Special Mention for the Actors Ministry of Culture State Award

1993: *From The Snow*, 90 mins, feature film. Presented in the Directors' Fortnight of the 1994 Cannes Film Festival Licorne d'Or (Best Film Award), Amien Film Festival Best Director Award, Troia Film Festival 1993: Thessaloniki Film Festival (international competition): Golden Alexander (Best Film Award) 1993: Thessaloniki Film Festival (national competition): Best Film Award, Best Script Award, Best Cinematography Award, Fipresci Award, Greek Film and Television Technicians Union Award, Cinema Magazine Award 1993: Ministry of Culture State Award

1997: *Balkanisateur*, 35mm, colour, 115 mins.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**Petro Alexiou** [[HTTP://SENSESOFCINEMA.COM/AUTHOR/PETRO-ALEXIOU/](http://sensesofcinema.com/author/petro-alexiou/)]

Petro Alexiou is a researcher, writer and translator. He was the scriptwriter on the short film *The Killing of Angelo Tsakos* (1989).

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