

DOGTTOOTH

Paternal Philosophies of Entrapment: Dehumanisation and Name-of-the-father in Yorgos Lanthimos' *Dogtooth*

Dr. Sambhu R.

Abstract

Yorgos Lanthimos is a Greek director whose films adeptly weave Hellenic myths into the fabric of contemporary reality to articulate a postmodern sensibility centred on acute bathos, moral agnosticism, and the banality of human misery. The paper discusses Lanthimos' *Dogtooth* (2009) as a forerunner of the Greek Weird Wave which in time gave rise to a new

cinematic sensibility that sought to portray the insularity of Greek urban life from a defamiliarized perspective. The paper analyses the film as a bold foray into the totalitarian dimensions of family life using the Lacanian concept of name-of-the-father. It attempts to illuminate how the absurd excesses of the closed symbolic order created by the unnamed father figure in the film, whose unswerving insistence on preserving watertight boundaries between the inside and the outside through a policing of language, leads to an implosion of the family structure, and by extension, the logic of paternal authority.

Keywords: *Symbolic Order, name-of-the-father, Greek Weird Wave, paternal authority*

Introduction

Yorgos Lanthimos's *Dogtooth* (2009) examines how totalitarian power structures within the family reproduce relations of subjugation and depersonalization encountered in repressive political regimes. The film, which was nominated for the Oscar in the category of "Best Foreign Film", also competed in the "Un Certain Regard Prize" section at Cannes, in addition to receiving a slew of other accolades that commended the film's penetrative portrayal of the sordid underside of family life, especially the incest taboo. The film, along with Athina Rachel Tsangari's *Attenberg* is supposed to have launched the "Greek Weird Wave", which refers to Greek films produced following the Great Recession of 2007-2008, and dealing with the nation's discontent and enervation in the face of socio-economic turmoil (Papanikolaou 1). As the forerunner of the Greek Weird Wave which brought forth a number of films that illustrate the detrimental effects of authoritarian power structures on the nation as well as the family, often through the perspective of an alienated protagonist, *Dogtooth* anticipates related themes of weirdness that Yorgos Lanthimos would go on to develop in his subsequent films like *Lobster* (2015), *Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2017), *The Favourite* (2018), and his latest short film *Nimic* (2019).

One of the hallmarks of Lanthimos' films is their reluctance to conform to pre-established genre conventions. His films create an "affect" of horror though they are

not, properly speaking, horror films in any conventional sense. The element of horror in Lanthimos' films comes rather from a deft handling of atmosphere and the displacement of signifiers from their established positions, to create a sense of estrangement and absurdity. *Dogtooth* too fits into this pattern of thematic uncertainty and radical open-endedness. The film portrays the ideal of home-schooling gone terribly wrong on account of the patriarchal desire to construct a parallel symbolic order from which the outside world along with all its seemingly deleterious influences has been banished. It follows the lives of three teenagers, who have lived out their entire lives within the closed world of their walled-in house, receiving all their educational inputs from their father (Christos Stergioglou), who works in a factory, and their stay-at-home mother (Michele Valley). The father is the only person who can leave the family compound and is therefore the family's only means of contact with the outside world besides Christina, a security guard, whom the father brings home from time to time to have paid sex with the son (Hristos Passalis). The two post-pubertal sisters, played by Aggeliki Papouliou and Mary Tsoni, along with their brother, are kept imprisoned by the father under the pretext that they cannot survive in the world beyond the garden wall which is putatively filled with poisonous gases. The fact that the film does not name any of the characters except Christina reflects a conscious attempt on the director's part to depersonalise the family members and present them in a pre-symbolic order.