

FILM

The raw material of Greece



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Greece's exciting new wave of filmmakers were on show once again recently at the 46th Karlovy Vary International Film Festival (July 1-9). This festival in the Czech Republic is one of Europe's largest film festivals, attracting tens of thousands of viewers and media from all over the world.

This year the festival presented a special Young Greek Cinema section, comprising seven titles, such as the acclaimed *Dogtooth* and *Attenberg*, with a number of the directors in attendance. One standout film for me in this section was *Wasted Youth*, a sensitive, realistic portrayal of the lives of a street kid,

and a policeman, in parallel stories. Make sure you catch this film at the upcoming 60th Melbourne International Film Festival (July 21-Aug 7).

Apart from this Young Greek Cinema section, the Karlovy Vary festival also presented a wonderful new feature-length documentary film from Greece, *Raw Material*, directed by Christos Karakepelis, and written by Natasa Segou.

The subject matter of *Raw Material*, its own "raw material" shall we say, is Athens' scrap metal industry, and the mainly illegal immigrants who work within it. In the early morning hours, in their rickety trailers and trucks, these people scour the streets of Athens for any discarded metal: spring beds, TVs, computers, etc. From there, they take their

day's findings to the scrap metal yard, where they are given some money. And then other illegal immigrants man the abysmal furnaces, where shiny new metal slabs are produced, ready for use by the building industry.

It is a powerful film, but in a subtle way. Avoiding a hand-held camera and any other melodramatic devices (music, or the people fighting with each other), director Christos Karakepelis has created a very artful, but also very humane, film. The environment is observed with a steady gaze, and the people's lives are expressed eloquently, through sensitive observation and revealing voice-overs. As the film progresses, it gains a bigger and more haunting power, as a cycle of misery clearly appears on screen.

I asked Karakepelis if the people in the film had any dignity or hope left.

"Human dignity, as much as it is tested by circumstances, is never destroyed. Whoever toils has dignity. Lacking dignity are those who exploit others, and the state that allows this. I don't look at the film's characters with pity. In the film I wanted them to speak in their mother tongues, because in an environment which denies them their identity, they can at least take refuge in their own language, their own history, their dreams. As for hope, I don't think it exists for any of us within this framework of unbridled capitalism, whose economy is a new fascism," he

Are there many Greeks who are also scrap metal collectors?

"Traditionally, there have always been the junk dealers,

who collect household items dumped on the sidewalks due to the frenzy and turnover of consumerism. The younger generation of Greeks disdained this, but today many unemployed Greeks are searching the streets for iron. But even this profession is harder now, as there are many collectors, and the waste is less."

It is indeed a bleak picture that the film paints, and Karakepelis has no qualms about telling it like it is. "Many lower and middle-class people are now becoming proletariat, and experiencing fear, insecurity and intimidation that normally only immigrants would feel. And this now complicates the situation for immigrants, who will soon be left with no space for action, and a survival only

in the underworld."

Despite all this, Karakepelis's film is quite beautiful, it somehow alleviates or redeems the tragedy on show. "I don't believe that a tough theme should leave us artistically mute. In ancient Greek tragedy we see extreme situations, but also the authors' lofty artistic qualities. In the face of the people who have given me their presence, I feel the obligation to create a welcoming space. The more persecuted they are, the more they need a human context. When they can't find it in reality, the least I can do is create it for them in my work."

Raw Material, at the very least, creates this human and philosophical space.



Stills from the movie *Raw Material*: Gogos at work in Syntagma Square.



L-R: Gogos and Hussein, two of the army of desperados who recycle Athens' scrap metal.