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Theophilos

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Red Hulk: A Modern Greek Tragedy of Dysfunction and Alienation

Abstract

Red Hulk, Asimina Proedrou's 2013 multi-award-winning Greek short film, explores themes of identity, nationalism and xenophobia in a contemporary Greek setting. It is a hard-hitting exposé of a society in decline, where frustration at the failing institutions gives rise to racism, sexism, intolerance and violence in an effort to cleanse society of the foreign element which is blamed for all its dysfunction. The plot offers insights into how conceptualisations of difference can lead to violent action, and its underlying causes. With the absolute rupture between signifier and signified in the national symbols, values, codes and traditions, the issue of identity has become narrowly defined, all-encompassing and self-absorbing, resulting in the severing of ties between individuals, their families and friends, as exemplified in the film by its protagonist. His inevitable alienation from traditional supports leads him to seek refuge with a close-knit ultranationalist group linked to corrupt police, which operates under strict codes of secrecy outside of the law, and ensures its longevity by binding its members within a web of ultranationalist criminality. Within the conference theme of *Un-framing Hellenism*, we explore nationalism in a Greek context and attempt to de-stereotype the nationalists' support base.

About *Red Hulk*

*Red Hulk*¹ is a confronting, multi-award winning² short film produced in 2013 in Athens, Greece, by Film Director, Producer and Screenwriter, Asimina Proedrou, as her self-described “low budget” graduation project for her film school.³ The film has received high praise for its creative and brave treatment of the themes of nationalism, racism and neo-fascism and has found a very receptive audience in Europe which, plagued by a rise in ultranationalism, has been actively seeking narratives to understand and contain it.

The film’s online synopsis offers the following apt description:

“The story takes place in Greece, in the current environment of rising chauvinism and racism, and deals with the matter of the distortion of a person’s personality as he experiences the excessive need of belonging to, and becoming a member of a group. The movie explores the effect on the character’s psychological state as he faces the potential consequences of his choices, raising questions about how the social, family and work environment can affect him.”

In an ironic twist of fate, the timing of the film’s premiere screening, at the annual Drama4Short Film Festival, on the evening of September 17th 2013, coincided with the murder of 34-year-old Greek anti-fascist hip-hop singer and rapper, Pavlos Fyssas, by members of the neo-Nazi *Golden Dawn* party, which reinforced fears of the real threat neo-Nazi violence presented, not only to foreign immigrants, but also to Greek nationals.

When asked whether hatred is the only answer for a lost soul in a Greece controlled by the TV channels and Troika, the Director offers insights into her motivation for making the film. [Translation from Greek]

“... with this film I did not want in any way to give advice, nor did I want to show how ‘bad’ Golden Dawn is... I just wanted to ask some questions... Questions dealing with the process of turning a society towards fascism, the social, economic, familial conditions that impact on it but also on the individual himself... the distortion that could occur in his personality under the insurmountable need for integration and ‘easy’ acceptance.”

Asimina Proedrou sets up her short film in a documentary style that is fast, blunt, compelling. She looks behind the façade, to her characters’ thoughts and motivations, not to exonerate them of their crimes, but to

understand them and convey to her audience how mundane, everyday events that lead to collective behaviours can lay the groundwork for barbaric actions to proliferate. By starting her film with a shocking crime, and then revealing the story’s background, she challenges her viewers to go beyond first impressions and seek an understanding of the underlying complexities, and an appreciation of how alienation, disillusionment and corruption can have a detrimental effect on the individual, and catastrophic consequences for society.

A crime with no punishment

In the film’s opening minutes, we witness a carload of young men passing a lone male waiting at a bus stop, talking carefree on his mobile phone and oblivious to the danger awaiting him. Totally unprovoked, the five men stop the car, get out and start circling around the hapless immigrant like a pack of wolves, hurling abuse and taunting him in a provocative and aggressive manner, with one of them repeatedly making racist ape-like gestures at him. Their deliberate mocking actions and insults aim at eliciting a response, to justify the act of aggression they have planned for their victim:

“Wow, wow, wow! What have we here? Cheese pie? What, you had cheese pies in Pakistan?”

He has not been targeted on account of his behaviour or to settle a score. He is not known to them. It is a random attack against a defenceless and unaccompanied immigrant. He only happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, and fits the racial profile of their intended victim. They verbally belittle and abuse him on account of his foreign ethnicity, which has not vested him with the entitlements bestowed on the locals, the ‘owners’ of the land, its language, and even its food. Cheese pie is arbitrarily elevated to their chosen national food, to serve as an example of what only they have a right to savour.

With no response coming from the victim, one is quickly invented. They give chase, five against one, and catch him in a secluded area under a building. While the other four hold him down, the strongest of the five, Yiorgo, is relentlessly and frantically urged by the others to stab the victim. The fatal stabbing of the innocent Pakistani takes place within the first few minutes of the opening scene. This intentional positioning of the stabbing at the start leaves the audience dumbfounded and numb.

The overall confusion is also reflected in the dialogue, consisting of unclear and muffled words uttered by unseen characters. Though unclear, their effect is nonetheless definitive, absolute and final. They unmistakably urge quick and irreversible action. A collective command, instigated for and on behalf of the group, to be executed without delay. An action that aims at proving loyalty to the group and its agenda that will, in turn, bind its members together in a web of secrecy towards a goal much bigger than any of them could pursue on their own.

The perpetrators leave the victim dead, and flee. The sight of them fills the audience with horror. We are appalled by their callousness and hatred; they do, indeed, deserve the most scathing condemnation, each and every one of them. But having witnessed the fateful event at the start, the lens has now moved on and is fixed upon the protagonist, seeking to interrogate him and find the causes that lead young men to commit such atrocities.

The film's protagonist, Yiorgo, or Giorgos in the official synopsis, is a fitness and sports fan working and living in Athens. He is an active supporter of the *Olympiakos* soccer team but his club membership has lapsed, as he, along with his co-workers, have not been paid for some months, a common phenomenon in a post-financial crisis Greece, where a massive, over fifty percent, unemployment among young people, and over twenty-five percent overall, forces workers to endure increasingly adverse working conditions to avoid retrenchment.

Soccer provides Yiorgo and his friends with a sense of identity by being a part of a network of peers with similar interests. The stadium is an inclusive arena that attracts fans of every race and gender, offering them companionship and social interaction. It also provides an outlet, or an opportunity to vent their frustrations, a 'release valve' which can take an aggressive turn when hooligans and neo-Nazis seize their opportunity to use the stadium as a battlefield to intimidate, implicate, attack, and cause chaos and disorder by promoting their racist agenda of violence against their victims, chosen at random for their race or colour.

On his return home after the stabbing, Yiorgo reveals a different side to his personality. Deep distress and guilt cause him a violent retch. He washes the blood off his clothes and tries to get some sleep, but keeps tossing in bed. He has great difficulty coming to terms with the crime and his

own involvement in it. His phone is incessantly ringing, but he leaves it unanswered. We will soon find out that those persistent calls are from the neo-Nazi group leader, one of the four others in the car, who, unlike Yiorgo, are totally remorseless, cold-hearted and devoid of any empathy.

Yiorgo's attempts to distance himself from the group are thwarted when the group leader visits him at home to express his support and allay his fears by giving him assurances that his police contacts will protect him. He uses misogynistic language when attempting to entice Yiorgo with prostitutes –to which the latter shows no interest– and forewarns him of further racist attacks the group has planned, where Yiorgo's involvement would be crucial and valued.

While still overwhelmed by fear and guilt, Yiorgo shuns the group's support, and declines joining them on their next round of intimidation attacks. They loosen the noose and let him off the hook temporarily, yet the phone keeps ringing unanswered while he walks home, through a sea of shops run by immigrants. There is no visual hint of Yiorgo ever harbouring ill feelings against migrants. He does not share with his neo-Nazi comrades any emotions of racism, xenophobia, intolerance or prejudice against foreigners. With new insight, we can now revisit the scene of the stabbing. Yiorgo's momentary hesitation was undoubtedly caused by fear, and was a reflection of his powerlessness and lack of control in the moments leading up to this dramatically escalating situation. He was trapped.

Having no time to react, Yiorgo seemed to obey, and that signalled the moment of his entrapment by the group. It was not his intention to kill. Even though we saw Yiorgo holding a threatening knife at the start of the frenzied attack, we could, in fact, only hear the repeated stabs and the victim's groans in the critical seconds that followed and could only guess at who had actually inflicted the blows. But Yiorgo's decision to obey would have been inevitable. Four against one, himself, his situation would have felt utterly precarious. He could not possibly have sided with the stranger, or they would have surely all turned on him. The moment of stabbing had also come too quickly for him to be able to react rationally within the story's time frame.

There was distinct intent on the part of the neo-Nazis to 'punish' the foreigner who, by his physical appearance and implied ethnicity,

represented an anathema to the racial purity of the city's young men whose self-appointed role had been to defend it. Yet, Yiorgo's guilt is undeniably well founded. He is a perpetrator in an unprovoked and heinous racist crime. There are no extenuating circumstances and no fault on the part of the victim. His victimisation has been unequivocal and undeserved.

However, any aggression seemingly exhibited by Yiorgo in his demeanour, scowl, mannerisms and short outbursts could be readily explained away by the difficulties and challenging circumstances of his daily life which are soon to become apparent as further events unfold. There is a sincere and gentle side to Yiorgo's character. Fitness, not aggression, is his way of coping with pressure, tension, anger or fear. He is always reserving his blows for his trusted punching bag, an instrument of fitness and of stress relief. His generation's hopelessness and lack of prospects have not, thus far, turned him into a ruthless thug, but disillusionment with a dysfunctional society can leave the individual unsupported by family and friends and unprotected by the state.

A state of corruption

Wondering whether he could be captured by the police, and with nowhere else to go, Yiorgo's only option now lies with the neo-Nazis who, despite his desperate attempts to avoid them since the killing, continue to treat him well and pledge their protection to him, in keeping, no doubt, with their predetermined recruitment plans. He is fully cognisant that they hold the key to his future, as there is widespread recognition among the population of police corruption and complicity.

Since before the 1950s, successive governments have promised and made numerous attempts to reform and streamline the Greek administrative apparatus, but none of their efforts have been successful, with Greece's bureaucracy remaining as complex, arbitrary and unresponsive to the needs of the citizens as ever. A 1998 public opinion survey found that *"inefficiency and corruption continue to pervade every aspect of the state machinery"*. (Danopoulos, Danopoulos, and Farazmand, 2001: 953)

Corruption involving both citizens and politicians has been a feature of the Greek state for many decades. Despite ongoing pressures on government spending on essential services, a self-serving supersize bureaucracy,

whose *raison d'être* is to provide jobs to more of the 'chosen' people and keep unemployment at artificially low levels, is allowed to flourish at the expense of a properly-run administration and, ultimately, of all the citizens. It can be argued that in their everyday dealings with the state administration, citizens are, in essence, regarded 'guilty' by the state until they can furnish paperwork that proves their 'innocence', so to speak, instead of being facilitated by those whose job description as 'public servants' is to serve the people.

Even though ninety-eight percent of Greek citizens identify corruption as a major problem in Greece, the mutual distrust between citizens and the government, and various schemes legitimising corrupt activities, have reinforced the problem. Corruption and tax evasion can be traced back to the Ottoman period of Greek history, where tax evasion was also considered a form of resistance against Ottoman rule. According to Litina et al.,

"despite the existence of a legal framework that is quite similar to that of most European countries, the existing infrastructure is inadequate to handle such extensive corruption, thereby giving rise to a generalized sentiment of non-punishment and an underestimation of the probability to be caught and punished. Second, this inefficiency of the system reinforces honest citizens' dissatisfaction and ultimately leads to a subconscious legitimization of corrupt acts, as a surviving mechanism in a corrupt society." (Litina and Palivos, 2013: 5-6)

Amid this background, the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party, which was founded in 1980 and entered the 1996 elections winning only 0.1% of the vote, has followed a similar path to other European neo-fascist parties, and saw its numbers swell to around 7% after the global financial crisis, due to the massive unemployment rates and the fear and instability that ensued. The party's ultranationalist rhetoric, violent attacks on immigrants and strong links to state-led corruption, helped along by the state's neo liberal policies, are a big threat to democracy and to human rights.

The more this situation is prolonged, the greater the suffering and the more severe the chasm becomes between the ruling class and the rest of the populace. Disillusionment has set in and transcends their previously regimented, traditional party-line supports. The ineffective and clientelist system of governance has not allowed any development or modernisation of

the country to occur, which has added to the unfair distribution of wealth, lack of cohesion among the people and lack of loyalty towards the state, even while people profess their historic, albeit nebulous, feelings of patriotism towards their country.

Endemic and entrenched corruption has a corrosive effect on even the most well-meaning and ethical politicians who, over time, may resign themselves to joining everyone else in overlooking their moral compass and seeking a personal advantage. By employing family members to key posts in the public service, accepting 'gifts' for services or favours, shifting one's private wealth to safe havens in Switzerland and overseas, and other disguised or open corruption, they have collectively caused the state assets to dwindle away and the citizens to be left to carry the Atlassian burden of supporting wanton government spending on their own.

Such widespread corruption could not but affect all strata of society, right down to the individual. When Yiorgo's colleague invites him for lunch with his family, his invitation indicates a certain respect for the well-presented, unfrivolous, diligent and dependable young man who lives on his own and aspires to the Greek ideals of sport and fitness. He has assumed a somewhat protective role towards Yiorgo, as he understands that he lives away from his family.

When planning his visit to his colleague, Yiorgo picks up a little toy from the shelves of the neighbourhood grocery store and puts it in his pocket when the shop assistant is not looking, distractedly busy with her phone. He makes no attempt to conceal any of the groceries he is buying for himself, but only steals the gift he picked up for the family's young daughter. It is evident that he is unable to pay or budget for it, but traditional customs of civility and politeness seem to weigh more on his mind than upholding the law, an indication of his alienation from what is generally considered, at least among his peers, as enforced ethics of a corrupt state.

The theft committed by Yiorgo fits neatly within the mosaic of corruption in contemporary Greek society, but can simultaneously be seen as both an act of corruption and an act of rebellion. Shop owners represent a class of independent private business proprietors who are thought to have at their disposal a range of means for manipulating the state revenue system in order to evade tax. Yiorgo would not be in the minority in thinking that a little

plush toy is not going to make a dent in the financial state of the shop, or the country's economy for that matter.

The disinterested female shop assistant, sole employee running the shop who is occupied with her mobile phone, reinforces the stereotype of an alienated employee, who does not care for her job. Her sex also fits the stereotype of females working in low-paying retail jobs, that do not provide either the satisfaction or the monetary incentive that would be considered commensurate with their skills or attributes, thus generating further dissatisfaction and indifference. On an individual level, coupled with the scarcity of jobs, where having any job is the first priority for the majority of the people, lack of job satisfaction adds to their alienation from the workplace, professional and even social life.

Alienation has, in fact, a long and diverse history from antiquity to the present. Marx's adaptation of Hegelian dialectics to the theory of materialism allowed him to articulate the concept of alienation in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* in 1844.⁵ As work (in a Marxian sense) and education have lost their creative meaning for a major part of the Greek population, the country has become stagnant and uncompetitive, and has been especially vulnerable to the spectre of globalisation which has allowed other nations to take advantage of the unique opportunities it offers in exporting, for example, their products to established and emerging markets.

A background of profound alienation

Globalisation has accentuated the feelings of alienation among individuals who increasingly realise that their unique identity is under constant threat, undermined even from within when questioned about its true essence and character. The old triptych 'Πατρίς, Θρησκεία, Οικογένεια' (Country, Religion, Family) may still invoke in some quarters a nostalgic fondness for all things past, but is now a distant memory of no relevance, with its historic value heavily tainted.

Alienation is at the centre of Yiorgo's predicament. In a clear struggle to rid himself of the nightmare of the crime, Yiorgo has declined all persistent invitations from the neo-Nazis and escalated his efforts to disentangle himself from them. Yet, his repeated attempts to rebuild severed bridges with his soccer club friends are thwarted by his increasingly intolerant

response to their anguish at his association with racists, especially as he cannot ignore the fact that they are not aware of how deeply this association actually runs. His guilt for the murder cannot but magnify his remorse for his involvement with neo-Nazis and for misleading his friends, and that, in turn, creates a vicious cycle of escalating frustration and aggression.

Yiorgo now finds himself at a crossroads. With no support forthcoming from friends, his family appears as his only refuge, with geographic distance being but one of the obstacles. Hoping his family can help him pull away from his inescapable predicament, he leaves Athens to visit them at the family home in a regional town, but only his mother and younger brother are overtly happy to see him. Tensions are rekindled as soon as his intimidating father appears on the scene, with his impenetrable and emotionally overpowering presence hindering any expressions of affection towards him.

His mother and brother live in a traditionally patriarchal family and in fear of a domineering father, unable to show the older son the affection he and they crave, or to even speak to him openly or unhindered. Any comment they make becomes a constant reminder that it can, and does, lead to an argument that the father always has the last and decisive word over. They need to constantly monitor and temper their reactions in the presence of the father, or risk a reprimand and/or an escalation of conflict. Unsurprisingly, misogyny is underlying the language used by Yiorgo's father towards his wife, as well. Her roles as a wife and mother are inextricably linked with her ongoing treatment by him as a servant, and in keeping with existing male chauvinist traditions when giving her orders.

The body language between mother and sons is suggestive of an ongoing silent frustration at the familiarly oppressive scene that dampens all happiness at family gatherings, and serves as an omen for what will come next. The father starts by questioning Yiorgo about the reasons for his impromptu visit, a preamble to a serious conversation that the mother would be expected to initiate. She tries to evade it by bringing out the wine but, having already incurred the wrath of the father for taking her time in bringing him the knife he demanded, the weight of expectation falls heavily on her shoulders and she cannot delay her duty to ask the obligatory question about the son's studies. When that comes, it inevitably provides the trigger for the brewing clash between father and older son to come to a head.

Yiorgo may not be an enthusiastic student, but he is a dedicated fitness fan as glimpsed by his constant boxing practice with the punching bag when he is not cooking or relaxing at home. Boxing gives him the strength and control he lacks in his everyday life. It creates in him a sense of empowerment and purpose that counteract the hopelessness of his situation and, by extension, that of many of his generation in the harsh and alienating post-financial crisis urban society they have chosen, by default, for pursuing their studies or finding work, having had to leave their jobless towns.

His physical prowess has gained him recognition among his peers which, in turn, further strengthens his commitment to his fitness. For his father, however, and many in his generation, sport does not rate as highly as a career-oriented educational qualification, and he seizes the opportunity to show his displeasure at his son's perceived lack of application to his studies. The issue seems charged with an underlying, long term, emotional grievance, seething in the background. Yiorgo's family proves unable to help him at his time of crisis.

Yiorgo, feeling the pressure on him from all sides, storms out, with a breakdown in his relationship with his father looming as an inevitable outcome. Modern society has empowered children and young people, especially sons, to speak their minds but, in so doing, they have inadvertently risked alienation from familial supports which, albeit, are still functioning under the oppressive rules of an overpowering, misogynistic and unwieldy patriarchy. He leaves the next morning, much to the chagrin of his repressed mother and brother and, undoubtedly, his own.

The news bulletin he overhears in the coach on his journey back from the family home provides him with a temporary reprieve. *"There's been a new development in the case of the brutal murder of the 30-year-old Pakistani, who was found stabbed last Friday in Nea Ionia. Senior police officials expressed certainty that the murder of the 30-year-old was in fact a death contract to settle old scores, as the 30-year-old was a member of a drug trafficking ring. This dismisses early claims which attributed the murder to racist violence..."* The police are now blaming the crime on settling old scores within a drug-trafficking ring, a clear sign that his powerful new friends have exerted their influence over the police and, in so doing, have secured his cooperation in planning future attacks.

On revisiting his soccer club to renew his lapsed membership, Yiorgo's tough-guy persona and explosive reactions ensure communications are treading on egg shells. He interprets any hint of criticism as deep contempt, and his former mates are not willing to accept back to the fold the undesirable troublemaker he has clearly become, with his expulsion from the club now assured. After his old friends decline to extend a helping hand and sneer at him for not heeding their warning, his isolation is profound. They have their own battles to fight against the racist mob he has now joined, and will have to defend themselves against them at their team's games. Like him, they, too, feel betrayed by his sudden and—for them— inexplicable turn.

Filling the void by initiation and conversion

It is not only ineffective governments and political elites that are preying on the people and plundering national assets. All kinds of opportunists and ultranationalist ideologues, like the Golden Dawn, find fertile ground to promote their dubious ideologies by cultivating a tsunami of confusing and contradictory narratives, thus highlighting the lack of cohesion within a people in turmoil. The state mechanisms, paramilitary organisations, militant groups, rogue elements in the police force and unidentified individuals then all play their part by assisting them in their unscrupulous endeavours. (Karalis, 2014: 106-107)

Yiorgo's neo-Nazi friends exemplify these tactics. They seek to appropriate and convert everyone to their way of thinking, and promote their causes by fear mongering and blaming every single problem in modern society on immigrants, women, or any other group they may wish to demonise. The emancipation of women has effected changes which have disturbed their preferred status quo and they leave no stone unturned in their efforts to vilify and blame them. They use propaganda and vacuous slogans, and stop at nothing in order to 'proselytise' their members by appealing to their nostalgia for utopian ideals, religious doctrine or old-world values.

They seek prospective members among vulnerable groups of young, weak, alienated and inexperienced individuals who are willing to be active pawns in furthering their masters' causes, and lure them by promising them sexual favours from prostitution. Women, unseen and non-existent among the neo-Nazis, are vulgarly referred to in totally objectified terms,

as commodities to be used and shared among the group's current and prospective members. They are part of the illicit slave trade, usually sold, orphaned or victimised from a young age due to their family situation and child-like innocence, and end up in a foreign land, trapped and exploited with the aid of drugs and no means of escape.

They build up their victims' confidence by boosting their ego, offering them ample and initially generous support, and then secure their permanent participation in the group's activities by implicating them in acts of extreme violence that would normally result in their prosecution and imprisonment had it not been for their 'help'. It is then an irreversible process that binds new members to the group for fear of repercussions were they to be found out, and, like a cult, they pledge and demand loyalty, and offer protection by utilising their links to corrupt police, in a final act of conversion and ultimately brainwashing.

With his escapist utopian dream of resuming a normal life shown to be a chimera, Yiorgo's realisation that he is standing on the razor's edge looking down a precipice, so powerfully represented by his playing with a lighter at his workplace, as if he is about to burn down the world and himself along with it, culminates in his complete meltdown. Yiorgo's unresponsiveness draws the ire of his demanding and domineering boss. His colleague leaps to Yiorgo's defence, at his own risk, by reminding the boss they have not been paid for four months, and the boss does not miss his chance to threaten him with dismissal. When Yiorgo, still lost in pondering his predicament, does not intervene to defend his colleague, the latter is incensed.

Now Yiorgo is totally alienated from family, friends and colleague, and even from his monotonous and uncreative work. (Goldson and Muncie, 2006: 33) In the tragedy's inevitable conclusion, we see him re-join the racist mob, all seen leaving their headquarters, walking down the stairs, armed and ready for a confrontation and the ensuing battle, planned for the end of the game. In spite of his relentless efforts, Yiorgo's conversion is now complete in becoming a victim to the racist mob.

Concluding remarks

Red Hulk is a film whose depth and insight into racist violence more than make up for its short 28-minute duration. From the first to the last,

its scenes have painted a harsh picture, universal to any society, where nationalist violence can quickly escalate with unpredictable outcomes, especially when peer pressure and mob mentality are involved and dominate over reason and tolerance, leaving the individual with no means to escape the cycle of violence and intimidation. Victims of such attacks are not only their intended targets, but also some of the perpetrators who, by their own misguided actions, are implicated and bound within a group, rendering them hostages to extremism, unable to ever extricate themselves, even if they tried.

The scene at the family table is also devoid of state borders, and typical of any place where patriarchy rules and women are kept subservient; where men are taught to fulfil a tough and unemotional stereotype as the head of the family by making, and then imposing, their decisions on their family members on account of their masculinity. Where women are expected to remain silent, diffuse tensions or mediate between family members to avert conflict and a breakup in the family unit. Where domestic violence, be it psychological, verbal or physical, threatens not only women, but also their children, thus signalling the ultimate loss of their innocence and, apart from its devastating effect on the family, it can turn victims to perpetrators, with the cycle of violence repeated in perpetuity.

Red Hulk debunks popular but superficial views about the homogeneity of ultranationalist parties' supporters, by showing the path to extremism and the opportunities lost in 'deradicalising' at-risk individuals, especially when they are making repeated efforts to leave extremist groups. It shows how unprepared are trusting families, friends and colleagues when trying to comprehend the radicalised individual, as well as their own potential role, and the effort required in order to help them.

Patriotism and nationalism, in their multiple manifestations, define our identity and sense of belonging: to a family unit, community, town, nation, world. We feel the need to be part of a whole, but the closer we get to that whole, the more fragmented and divided it often seems to become. Every war we have fought has been testament to this duality of being together but apart, united but at odds, or part of a divided whole. *Red Hulk* hints at the effects of unemployment and financial anxiety on an already insecure, ignored and neglected people, under pressure from several external

and internal threats. In spite of their topicality, the themes are universal. The rampant influx of transient refugees whose aim is to gain a foothold into Europe on their way to affluent Western countries, handled so haphazardly and incompetently by the local authorities, has also caused huge change and disruptions, resulting in massive, even existential, upheavals for the local residents who feel disenfranchised by their own government.

The radical rhetoric of the totalitarian ultra-right-wing minority, which uses a utopian notion of collective mythical identity and ignores the intertextuality of its historical origins, then becomes a powerful pole of attraction for people who have lost everything they consider essential to the essence of their being, and are insecure or incognisant of their own identity but still captivated by its supposed majestic superiority and allure. This is a secret society bound by what its members consider as ideals of racial purity and patriotism. And racial purity, or ethnic cleansing, is arguably at the core of many wars fought as recently as this century, with catastrophic consequences on human lives, destruction of cultural monuments, and tremendous loss of potential cultural, social and scientific progress.

In conclusion, *Red Hulk* is a thought-provoking short film which deconstructs events that are progressively becoming more pertinent in our everyday reality. It is a succinct and faithful account of what can lead a vulnerable young man to establish ties with neo-Nazis and let his life descend into chaos. His own errors of judgment, augmented by the inadequacy of his close environment and the absence of effective support from family and friends, has rendered his descent irreversible.

This scenario plays out in numerous cases of individuals who are drawn into extremist or fundamentalist groups, firmly held together by ideology or religion, and posing a threat to humanity's safety, progress and values. More than a cautionary tale, the realism of this powerful narrative has become apparent from its first official screening. Looking at events devoid of their cause-and-effect complexities is adding to society's fragmentation and the alienation of its members. A void the individual may not be able to fill, and which, under the 'right' conditions may expose anyone, even those with the best intentions, to the risk of falling prey to extremist manipulation, brain washing and conversion.

Notes

- 1 The film's official title is in English and has only rarely ever been translated into Greek, as Κόκκινος Χαλκ. According to the official synopsis, "*Giorgos lives on his own in Athens. He lacks purpose, self-confidence, identity and peer acceptance. He fills the void by becoming the 'Red Hulk', as he is known at his football team's fan club. Until the day he gets involved in racial violence, entailing new problems and dilemmas...*" The character 'Red Hulk' is based on the fictional Marvel Comics superhero 'Hulk' and first appeared in a comic in March 2008. The nickname 'Red Hulk' is given to Yiorgo after the popular 2012 *The Incredible Hulk 2* film. The nickname seems fitting for the protagonist as it is an apt metaphor for the comics superhero who transforms into a giant when he gets upset or emotional, becomes violent and cannot be reasoned with, but transforms back into his calm persona after the crisis has passed. It also symbolises Yiorgo's general athleticism and body shape, his Olympiakos soccer club's colours and red hoodie he often wears.
- 2 The film has been awarded the *Grand Prix (Best Film)*, *Best Male Actor and Cinematography Award* at the Drama Film Festival (2013); *Best Short Film* at the Athens International Film Festival (2013); *Cinematic Award* at the Thessaloniki International Short Film Festival (2013); *Best Short Film* at the Los Angeles Greek Film Festival (2014); *Special Jury Award* at the Yerevan (Armenia) International Film Festival (2014), *Best Short Film (Fiction)* at the Clermont-Ferrand (France) International Short Film Festival (2014) and *Best Short Film (Fiction)* at the Tirana International Film Festival (November 2014).
- 3 AMC, Athens – Film Directing Department
- 4 The northern Greek city of 'Drama'
- 5 "*Marx conceptualised alienation as the separation of a worker from the product that was created, the process by which it was created, or from others who are involved in the production or consumption of the product. [...] other factors identified originally by Marx act as precursors of alienation that are experienced in the modern workplace, such as lack of meaningful work, not 'having a say' over the work process, and the extent to which an individual perceives his or her skills to be utilised in the course of work*". (Shantz, Alfes, and Truss, 2014: 2530)

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