



BIOWPOWER PRACTICES IN THE CINEMA OF YORGOS LANTHIMOS

YORGOS LANTHIMOS SİNEMASINDA BİYO-İKTİDAR PRATİKLERİ

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Abstract

Yorgos Lanthimos is one of the prominent directors of modern cinema by his unique narrative style and visual aesthetics. His films, which are included in the "Greek Weird Wave" movement, are shaped around themes that question social norms, power relations and the individual's place within these structures. Michel Foucault's concepts of biopolitics and biopower, which explain how the state controls social life, provide a powerful theoretical framework for analyzing Lanthimos' filmography. The absolute control of parents over their children in Dogtooth, the forced societal couplehood in The Lobster and the dependence of individuals' fates on the decisions of others in The Killing of a Sacred Deer illustrate how Lanthimos addresses power relations. This study aims to show that the director's films offer a deep critique that questions power structures in modern society, especially by analyzing Lanthimos' early films and his latest film Kind of Kindness in the context of Foucault's concept of biopower.

Keywords: Cinema, Yorgos Lanthimos, Greek Weird Wave, Biopower, Biopolitics.

Öz

Yorgos Lanthimos, kendine özgü anlatım dili ve çarpıcı görsel estetiği ile modern sinemanın dikkat çeken yönetmenlerinden biridir. "Yunan Tuhaf Dalgası" akımı içinde anılan filmleri, toplumsal normlar, iktidar ilişkileri ve bireyin bu yapılar içindeki konumunu sorgulayan temalar etrafında şekillenir. Michel Foucault'nun biyopolitika ve biyoiktidar kavramları, Lanthimos'un filmografisini analiz etmek için güçlü bir teorik çerçeve sunar ve devletin toplumsal yaşamı nasıl kontrol ettiğini açıklar. "Dogtooth" filminde ebeveynlerin çocukları üzerindeki mutlak kontrolü, "The Lobster"da zorunlu çift olma toplumu ve "The Killing of a Sacred Deer"da bireylerin kaderlerinin başkalarının kararlarına bağlı olması, Lanthimos'un iktidar ilişkilerini nasıl ele aldığını gösterir. Bu çalışma, özellikle Lanthimos'un ilk dönem filmleri ve "Kind of Kindness"ı Foucault'nun biyoiktidar kavramı bağlamında analiz ederek, yönetmenin filmlerinin modern toplumdaki iktidar yapılarını sorgulayan derin bir eleştiri sunduğunu göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sinema, Yorgos Lanthimos, Yunan Tuhaf Dalgası, Biyo-İktidar, Biyo-Politika



"Now (...) power is no longer hidden, it's proud to exist and say: "Love me, because I am power."
Michel Foucault (2018, p. 113).

INTRODUCTION

Yorgos Lanthimos is one of the remarkable directors of contemporary cinema and recognized for his unique narrative language and striking visual aesthetics. His films often associated with the "Greek Weird Wave" movement, generally explore themes that question social norms, power relations, and the individual's position within these structures. Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics and its social application biopower, provides a powerful theoretical framework for analyzing Lanthimos' filmography. This concept helps explain how the state and power structures control and manage social life. In Lanthimos' films, these mechanisms of control and their effects on individuals manifest themselves in various forms.

In Lanthimos' films, the power of *"to make live and let die"* brought to the fore by Foucault's concept of biopolitics is represented in striking and disturbing ways. In director's international debut, *Dogtooth* (2009), he shows how the absolute control of parents over their children can lead to complete control of the biological and psychological lives of individuals. This control deprives individuals of the freedom to explore their own identity and existence and making them objects of power.

In Lanthimos' filmography, the power relations established over the body and life of the individual are prominently highlighted. For example, in the film *The Lobster* (2015), a society is depicted in which individuals are compulsorily pushed to become couples. This dystopian world shows that biopower can intervene in the most intimate areas of individuals in the name of population management and social order. Similarly, in the film *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2017), a narrative is established in which the destinies of individuals and their bodies depend on the decisions of others. This film also presents a story that questions the authority of modern medicine and health policies over individuals.

This study aims to analyze Yorgos Lanthimos' three films, especially from his early cinema, and his latest film, *Kind of Kindness* (2024), in the context of Michel Foucault's concept of biopower. The power relations over the bodies and lives of the characters in Lanthimos' films will be treated as microcosm reflecting how biopolitics works in modern society. This study aims to show that Lanthimos' cinema offers an in-depth critique that questions the power structures over the life of the individual and the place of these structures in the social order.

THE CONCEPT OF BIO-POLITICS AND BIO-POWER

Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics is the idea manifested in the way the modern state manages and controls biological life over populations and individuals., Foucault used the concept of biopolitics to analyze how states, since the beginning of the 18th century, were concerned with practices such as regulating the lives of individuals, protecting health, managing populations, and increasing productivity.

Foucault's understanding of biopolitics, especially in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, develops on two basic axes: *Anatomo-politics* and *biopolitics*. *Anatomo-politics* is the disciplining power over the body of the individual: *The body as a machine*. This power is exercised for purposes such as educating and regulating bodies and making them productive. *Biopolitics*, on the other hand, is concerned with the management of populations and the regulation of large-scale biological processes such as birth rates, mortality rates, health, hygiene, and migration (Foucault, 1992, pp. 102-103).

Biopolitics can be understood as political rationality concerned with the management of life and population: *"A power whose main role is to provide, support, amplify, reproduce, and regulate life"* (Foucault, p. 101). The concept of biopower names the way biopolitics operates in society and includes what Foucault describes as *"a profound transformation of the mechanisms of power"* since the Western classical age (Foucault, p. 100). Instead of carrying out the exemplary 'death' penalty of the classical age, the power network aims to discipline individuals through various institutions and practices and ensures the regulation of 'life.'



Biopolitics encompasses a set of mechanisms and strategies that consolidate the economic and social structure of the modern state. Practices such as government health policies, insurance systems, urban planning and public health measures are practical examples of biopower. Foucault continues to define biopolitics and biopower in *Society Must Be Defended* (Foucault, 2002, pp. 245-246). He emphasizes that individuals delegate not only their political rights but also the decision-making authority over life and death to the state. An important aspect of biopower is that modern power is defined more as the power to "*make live and let die.*" This means that power not only allows individuals to survive but also has the power to marginalize or destroy certain groups or populations by controlling their living conditions.

Foucault's concepts of biopolitics and biopower have found wide resonance in various disciplines such as health, politics, sociology and philosophy and are becoming an important analytical tool in understanding the power structures of modern society. The relationship between Michel Foucault's concept of biopower and cinema offers a rich field of discussion, especially in terms of examining how the power structures of modern societies and their effects on the lives of individuals are represented in cinema. Biopower can manifest in cinema in different ways, both at the thematic and narrative levels.

Dystopian films and science fiction genres often depict the control and discipline of the state or authoritarian regimes over individuals. Productions such as *Blade Runner* (1982), *1984* (1984), *The Matrix* (1999) and *The Hunger Games* (2012) are strong examples of biopolitics and biopower in cinema. Films can address health policies and control mechanisms over the body. For example, films such as *Gattaca* (1997) and *Aeon Flux* (2005) show how the biological lives of individuals are regulated and controlled through genetic engineering and reproductive technologies. The effect of biopower to marginalize and exclude certain groups is a frequent theme in cinema; for example, *Children of Men* (2006) and *Babylon A.D.* (2008) deal with the effects of the state's biopolitical practices on the social and individual levels and the resistance that develops against them.

Foucault's concept of the panopticon (1992, p. 251) also has an important place in the treatment of the themes of surveillance and control in cinema. Films in which surveillance cameras are frequently used convey the feeling of individuals being constantly monitored and controlled. *The Truman Show* (1998), for example, deals with the theme of monitoring and controlling the entirety of an individual's life. Furthermore, Foucault's works explaining the practices of power over the body can be used to analyze how the body is objectified and controlled in cinema. Films like *Black Swan* (2010) dramatize the processes of controlling and disciplining the body. In the case of Yorgos Lanthimos, the critical and allegorical view of the concept of family in cinema can be discussed through the concepts of biopolitics and biopower. In these films, with a metonymic and allegorical approach, power is established through the family with layers of narration about society and the individual.

GREEK WEIRD WAVE

The Greek Weird Wave is a cinematic movement that emerged in Greece in the late 2000s, noted for its unique aesthetic and narrative style. The films belonging to this movement, born as a reaction to the economic crisis in Greece in 2009 and the subsequent social upheaval, attracted attention with their extraordinary stories. The Greek Weird Wave has garnered interest from many film festivals and critics worldwide. This trend has helped many new directors and actors from Greece gain recognition on the international stage. Yorgos Lanthimos has been one of the most well-known representatives of this movement, especially with the movie *Dogtooth*. One of the most important common themes of the films is alienation. These films often explore introspective worlds where the characters are isolated from social norms and reality.

On the other hand, absurdist humor and grotesque elements are the hallmarks of these films. They depict events that push the boundaries of reality, sometimes even into the illogical. In these films, the societal effects of the financial crisis are addressed through narratives that emphasize isolated or alienated characters, dysfunctional family relationships, desperate or anti-social behavior, and communication breakdowns (Falvey, 2022, pp. 2-3). Therefore, the Greek Weird Wave is rich with social and political critiques. These criticisms are often expressed in allegorical and indirect ways. In terms of narrative



style, films belonging to the Greek Weird Wave generally have a simple, stylized, and minimalist visuality. Carefully planned symmetrical frames, the use of natural light, and static, elongated backgrounds draw the viewer's attention to the details of the story. The casting is simple, and the actors generally perform with expressionless faces.

In addition to Yorgos Lanthimos, directors such as Athina Rachel Tsangari, Panos H. Koutras, and Alexandros Avranas are among the leading names of this movement. Tsangari's *Attenberg* (2010) and *Chevalier* (2015), Koutras' *Strella* (2009) and *Xenia* (2014), and Avranas' *Miss Violence* (2013) are among the important works of the movement. Tsangari's film *Attenberg* is one of the important works of the movement, telling the story of two young women stuck in a town. Tsangari frequently collaborated with Lanthimos and contributed to the development of the movement. *Chevalier*, on the other hand, focuses on competition and hierarchy among men. Koutras' film *Strella* focuses on social gender identities and expands the boundaries of the movement. *Xenia*, on the other hand, continues the movement's tradition of social criticism by dealing with immigration and identity issues in Greece. Avranas' *Miss Violence* continues Lanthimos' family theme by focusing on a family whose young daughter mysteriously commits suicide.

Dimitris Papanikolaou, in his book *Greek Weird Wave* (2021, p. 38), notes that screenwriter Efthimis Filippou, who frequently collaborates with Lanthimos, creates films that appeal to international audiences precisely because of their strangeness: *Dogtooth*, *Attenberg*, *Alps*, *L*, *Chevalier*, *Pity*, *The Lobster*, *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*, and *Kinds of Kindness*. All of these films are dominated by irony and the depiction of often empty urban spaces. Paradoxical or absurd moments, endings open to interpretation, scenes of sudden violence, and mechanical or distant acting merge with sequences in which someone tries to exert complete control over the bodies and consciousness of others.

The house as the space of the family, school, factory, gym, hospital and even the dystopian hotel that functions as a prison in *The Lobster*. These are spaces that we often encounter in Greek Weird Wave movies. These films, which Papanikolaou describes as "*bio-political cinema*," work with metonymy, making unexpected connections rather than allegories designed largely based on metaphor (p. 48). With the perspective Foucault developed in *Discipline and Punish*, the spaces of institutions (such as schools, factories, and hospitals) that subordinate the individual to social norms and operate by producing consent turn into spaces of inverting allegories that support national and cultural belonging in these films.

CINEMA OF YORGOS LANTHIMOS

Before starting his film career, Yorgos Lanthimos developed his visual expression skills by shooting commercials and music videos. After graduating from the Stavrakos Film School in Athens, Lanthimos began his career with short films and television projects. He is widely regarded as one of the most original and provocative directors of contemporary cinema.

Lanthimos has attracted attention with his unusual narrative style and aesthetic preferences, which generally blend absurd comedy and black humor. His work confronts the viewer with unusual dialogues, cold and distant narration, and depictions of dystopian worlds. Lanthimos' cinema deals with disturbing and unconventional themes, revealing the dark and absurd sides of human nature.

The director's works often revolve around themes that question human inner conflicts, social norms, and the existential loneliness of the individual. Lanthimos' direction, aesthetic sense and unconventional storytelling have made him an important figure in contemporary cinema. His films have garnered wide attention at festivals and in cinema circles and have been praised by critics.

Lanthimos' films focus on power relations in different social institutions, especially within the symbolic or biological family. Thus, Lanthimos' cinema, like all Greek Weird Wave cinema, provides a good context for examining biopolitics and biopower. According to Heidi Ka-Sin Lee (2024, p. 20), his stylistic approaches to queering form and content echo Michel Foucault's dialectic of power and freedom/resistance that encompasses all individuals and interpersonal relations.



The director's filmography is as follows:

- *My Best Friend (O Kalyteros Mou Filos)* (2001) tells the story of the complicated relationship and devotion between two childhood friends. Lanthimos is the film's co-director.
- *Kinetta* (2005) follows three people who act out crime scenes in their spare time at a holiday resort in Greece. The film has been screened at various festivals.
- Lanthimos' internationally acclaimed film *Dogtooth (Kynodontas)* (2009) tells the story of three children growing up in a house completely isolated from the outside world under the control of their parents. The film won the Un Certain Regard award at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival and was nominated for Best Foreign Language Film at the 2011 Academy Awards.
- *Alps* (2011) depicts a group of four people who provide services to bereaved families of deceased individuals. *Alps* won the Best Screenplay award at the 2011 Venice Film Festival and the Main Competition Prize at the 2012 Sydney Film Festival.
- *The Lobster* (2015) is set in a near-future dystopian society where single people must find a partner or be turned into animals. The film won the Jury Prize at the 2015 Cannes Film Festival and was nominated for Best Original Screenplay at the 2017 Academy Awards.
- *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2017) tells the story of a successful surgeon who must confront a teenager seeking revenge for a past mistake. The film won the Best Screenplay award at the 2017 Cannes Film Festival and the Best Supporting Actor award (Barry Keoghan) at the 2017 British Independent Film Awards
- *The Favourite* (2018) is set in 18th-century England and explores the power struggle between two advisors of Queen Anne. The film won the Grand Jury Prize at the Venice Film Festival (2018), the Best Actress award (Olivia Colman) at the 2019 Academy Awards, and the Best British Film award at the 2019 BAFTA Awards.
- *Poor Things* (2023) tells the story of a woman who is brought back to life by a scientist. The film won the Golden Lion at the 2023 Venice Film Festival.
- His most recent film, *Kinds of Kindness* (2024), consists of three stories: an office worker who rebels against covert bullying from her boss; a police officer disturbed by his wife's return from a deserted island, suspecting a replica has taken her place; and two cult members searching for a young woman believed to have the power to raise the dead. For his role in the film, Jesse Plemons received the Best Actor award at the 2024 Cannes Film Festival.

Except *The Favourite* and *Poor Things*, the director has collaborated with screenwriter Efthimis Filippou, a significant contributor to the Greek Weird Wave, since *Dogtooth*.

METHODOLOGY

The sample of this study, which aims to investigate the traces of the concepts of biopolitics and biopower in the extraordinary narrative style of Greek director Yorgos Lanthimos, consists of four films directed by Lanthimos and co-written with Efthimis Filippou. The primary criterion for selecting the films for analysis was the extent to which the basic features of biopower are represented. Consequently, the films *Dogtooth*, *The Lobster*, *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*, and *Kinds of Kindness*, which address themes related to family, control of healthy life, the body, punishment, surveillance mechanisms, suppression of individuality, obedience, and resistance, were selected for analysis.

A qualitative approach was adopted for film analysis, employing a descriptive technique. This approach, widely used in social sciences, provides a holistic perspective on the subject and reveals patterns. Data were collected by analyzing these four films and were interpreted and evaluated through descriptive analysis within the framework of the concepts of family, surveillance, oppression, obedience and sexuality frequently seen in biopolitical films.

FINDINGS



Dogtooth

Yorgos Lanthimos' *Dogtooth* (2009) provides a striking example of how the concept of biopolitics operates in modern society. In *Dogtooth*, this control is embodied through power relations within the family, illustrating how individuals' lives can be managed at the most basic level. The film explores how three young adults, raised in an isolated home, perceive the world and the boundaries between reality and illusion. Lanthimos' signature cold atmosphere, bizarre dialogues, and awkward relationships between characters are evident in the film. Parents do not allow their children any contact with the outside world and maintain complete control over their education and socialization. This constitutes a microcosm of Foucault's concept of biopolitical control: The disciplining and controlling of bodies and minds.

A couple (Michelle Valley, Christos Stergioglou), their adult son (Christos Passalis), and two adult daughters (Mary Tsoni, Angeliki Papoulia) live in a fenced compound. The children are unaware of the outside world. Their parents tell them that when a dog loses a tooth, they will be ready to leave home and can only safely exit by car. The children entertain themselves with endurance games such as holding their hands under hot water. They believe they have a brother on the other side of the fence to whom they throw provisions. Parents reward good behavior with stickers and punish bad behavior with violence.

Parents manipulate every aspect of their children's lives, including control over information and language. They invent new words and shape their children's perceptions by distorting the realities of the outside world. This control mechanism reflects Foucault's reflections on the relationship between knowledge and power. Power, which controls access to information, also controls the way individuals think and behave.

The director's opinion of his film is as follows:

"What interested us was how a family or a group, no matter what the leader is, is governed and what kind of impact this has on every member of the group, on their understanding of the world, on their education. What interested us were the ways you can mould a human being's mind and body with extreme methods and the limits this situation can reach" (Lanthimos, 2012, as cited in Papanikolaou, p. 85).

The family can be seen as a drama of dominance. Structures of sovereignty regulate the role and name of the father and parents, the organization of power, and kinship relations. However, the family also functions as a field where discipline is practiced and works as part of the disciplinary society (Foucault, 1992, p. 150). One of the most striking aspects of the film is the children's exercise of control and discipline over their bodies. Parents strictly supervise their children's physical development and sexuality. This recalls Foucault's work on the effects of biopolitics on the politics of the body. The body becomes the field of intervention for power, and individuals' lives are managed and regulated even at the biological level.

In *Dogtooth*, parents marginalize their children by completely isolating them from the outside world. This isolation prevents the children from discovering their own identity and individuality. This serves as an example of biopolitical practices of marginalization and exclusion. Foucault's concept of biopolitics explains how certain groups or individuals are systematically excluded and marginalized. The film's denial of the children's access to the outside world is an extreme example of this biopolitical process.

According to Papanikolaou (p. 150), the family must take care of its members' health and secure their future from vaccinations to monitoring bodily development, promoting health through scientific reason and medicine. It exercises surveillance over their 'natural' sex and 'normal' development, imposes boundaries between normal and abnormal and regulates how bodies interact with each other and with the projected population.



The children in the film are completely submissive to their parents' authority while at the same time resisting that authority in various ways. The older sister's desire to explore the outside world and her eventual attempt to escape is the most apparent example of this resistance. According to Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (p. 101), wherever there is power, there is resistance. In *Dogtooth*, Lanthimos emphasizes the children's struggle between obedience and resistance, the limits of biopolitical control, and the search for individual freedom.

By embodying Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics within a cinematographic narrative, *Dogtooth* reveals the profound effects of power structures on individuals' lives in modern societies. Parents' absolute control over their children shows how biopolitics can govern individuals at the most basic level and shape their identities and freedoms. Lanthimos' film offers a complex and striking examination of biopolitics, allowing viewers to reflect on power, control and resistance.

The Lobster

Lanthimos' first English-language film *The Lobster* (2015) is another work by the director that received significant international attention and praise. In a dystopian future, lonely individuals must find a partner within a short period at a hotel; otherwise, they will be transformed into animals. The story, which revolves around this absurd premise, offers a profound critique of love, relationships, individuality and societal norms. The film provides a powerful example for understanding Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics and examining power relations in modern society. It explores how individuals' biological lives are controlled and how social norms are imposed through a dystopian narrative in the genre of black comedy.

David (Colin Farrell) is taken to a hotel after his wife leaves him for another man. The hotel manager explains that single people have a limited number of days to find a mate; otherwise, they will be turned into animals of their choice (for example the dog accompanying David -a former loner- is his brother Bob). David is determined to turn into a lobster if he fails. Guests are focused on finding a partner with whom they share superficial traits, such as minor inconveniences, which they believe are the key to compatibility.

The Lobster is set in a society where single individuals are forced to stay in a prison-like hotel, and if they don't find a partner within forty-five days, they cease to be human. This narrative symbolizes how biopolitics regulates and controls individuals' lives. The state entirely controls the biological life and social status of individuals and does not allow them to be alone. This is an extreme example of Foucault's concept of biopolitical control.

According to Papanikolaou (p. 151), the biopolitical aspect of the family facilitates its continued modernization. Because biopolitics has become central to the modern family, the institution of the family -although it appears untouched as a symbolic structure- is in a constant state of development and diversification, always responding to new needs and intricately related to new biotechnological and bio-educational opportunities.

In the film, forcing individuals to form couples represents a biopolitical intervention aimed at population management and social order. Individuals who cannot find a mate are excluded from society and marginalized by being turned into animals. This suggests that biopolitics can impose certain social norms as part of population policies and punish those who do not conform to these norms.

According to Papanikolaou (p. 150), if sovereignty and discipline have traditionally been regarded as the main poles of family life in modernity, the family now more prominently represents the domain of the third form of power: Biopolitical power. In addition to its psycho-symbolic and disciplining roles, the family now works more intensively on its members' bodies concerning their biosocial function. That is the regulation of the biological dimension of life which is constantly being reshaped by socio-political forces.

In *The Lobster*, the practice of control and discipline over the body is prominently featured. Individuals



undergo various tests and rituals in the process of becoming a couple. As a rule, David need to be sexually aroused every day by hotel maid (Ariane Labed) without getting satisfaction. Additionally, in the plays staged in the restaurant, the so-called advantages of being a couple are dictated to the guests. This brings Foucault's concept of anatomo-politics to mind, as bodies are disciplined, trained and organized to serve the purposes of power. Individuals' bodily and emotional experiences are brought into conformity with societal norms.

David's resistance to this biopolitical control and his eventual attempt to escape from the hotel reflect Foucault's relationship between power and resistance. David's participation in the group of loners and his search for a new social order there illustrate how individuals resist biopolitical control and discipline and seek alternative ways of life. The group of loners can be interpreted as a resistance movement against the biopolitical control of the hotel. However, this group also has its own harsh biopolitics. Romance is completely forbidden, and those who fall in love are physically punished. David and his "*short sighted*" lover (Rachel Weisz) also attempt to escape. When David's lover is punished and blinded by the leader of the group (Léa Seydoux), David believes he must be blind as well. This emphasizes that, although they manage to physically escape oppression, biopower remains inherent in the individual's mind.

The Lobster also questions the ethical and human dimensions of biopolitics. The transformation of humans into animals demonstrates how biopolitics can devalue human life and how control over individuals' lives can have inhumane consequences. Foucault's theory of biopolitics reveals how the modern state restricts and manipulates individuals' freedoms in the name of protecting and managing life.

The Killing of a Sacred Deer

The Killing of a Sacred Deer (2017) stands out as a film in which Lanthimos blends the genres of family drama and thriller. It depicts the tragedy of a surgeon named Steven and his family, caused by Martin, a young man. The movie delves deeply into the themes of control, guilt, and revenge while maintaining Lanthimos' unique style and aesthetic.

When analyzed within the framework of Michel Foucault's concept of biopower, the film presents a powerful narrative that profoundly questions the impact of power on the biological lives of individuals in modern societies, as well as the moral and ethical dimensions of this effect. The film demonstrates how power and scientific knowledge can exert control over life and death and highlights the helplessness of individuals and families in the face of this control.

The Killing of a Sacred Deer centers on the life and family of Steven Murphy (Colin Farrell), a cardiologist. Steven encounters Martin (Barry Keoghan), who lost his father during an operation performed by Steven, and events subsequently unfold. Martin threatens Steven's family (Nicole Kidman, Raffey Cassidy, Sunny Suljic) with a deadly curse: If Steven does not kill a member of his family with his own hands, they will all die in turn. This reflects an important dimension of Foucault's concept of biopolitics, namely the power of medicine and health policies over individuals' lives.

The plot of the film parallels one of Euripides' best-known tragedies, Iphigenia at Aulis (Euripides, 1999, pp. 328-389): The Greek army gathered in Aulis to sail for Troy but the winds were stopped by the goddess Artemis. The oracle Calchas declares that for the winds to blow again, Agamemnon must sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia to Artemis. Agamemnon initially opposes this decision, but the responsibility of leading the army and external pressures force him to make this tragic choice. Agamemnon deceives Iphigenia and her mother Clytemnestra by telling them that Iphigenia will marry Achilles and brings them to Aulis. When Iphigenia learns the truth, she experiences great sadness but ultimately decides to sacrifice her own life for the good of her father and her country. As Iphigenia is taken to the altar to be sacrificed, she is saved at the last moment by Artemis and replaced by a deer. The film offers a modern interpretation of this mythological story.

Martin's curse causes his family members to collapse physically; first, they lose the ability of walking, then they cannot eat and finally they begin to bleed. This physical collapse demonstrates how the body



can be controlled and punished by power. Foucault's concept of disciplinary power describes how individuals' bodies are disciplined and controlled. This biopolitical punishment inflicted by Martin physically weakens the family and places them under complete control.

Steven's role as a physician underscores the impact of medical knowledge and practice on individuals' lives. The doctor has the power to save or end his patients' lives. This is directly related to Foucault's description of biopolitical power as the power to "*make live and let die.*" While Steven is a life-saving figure by profession, he is compelled to make a fatal decision regarding his family's life due to Martin's threat. This dilemma illustrates how modern medicine and health policies can influence individuals' life and death decisions.

The film also explores the moral and ethical dimensions of biopolitics. Steven's compulsion to kill a member of his family with his own hands creates a profound moral dilemma. This raises questions about the extent to which biopolitical control over human life can go and the moral limits of that control. In the film, Steven and his family are helpless in the face of Martin's threats and are forced to submit to this biopolitical power. Martin establishes a form of absolute power over the family and governs their lives. The family is forced to comply with Martin's demands.

According to Papanikolaou (pp. 150-151), if there were no family and if society functioned solely based on the traditional kinship system and its relationship to discipline, it would be difficult for modern developments to take place, such as the construction and evolution of the modern nation-state. Moreover; in the age of the nation-state the family not only participates in the symbolic, disciplinary and biopolitical aspects of national life, but also becomes the primary site where these aspects intertwine as a sheltered component of the national body. Lanthimos' frequent deconstruction of the concept of family highlights the essence of his social critique.

The Killing of a Sacred Deer examines Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics through a dramatic narrative, questioning the profound effects of power on the biological lives of individuals in modern societies and the moral and ethical dimensions of this impact. Lanthimos' film reveals the power of medicine and health policies over individuals, the reflections of this power within the family and the helplessness of individuals in the face of this absolute control. The film provides viewers with a deep exploration of biopolitical control, health policies, moral dilemmas and resistance.

Kinds of Kindness

In *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (Lanthimos' final film in 2024) submission to authority is deified. Even educated and career-oriented characters are loyally bound by deadly and random rules. The family theme from the previous three films continues in this one, but it expands and becomes symbolic. Alongside the uncanny husband and wife in the second story, there are a father, a mother and a son in the first story, reminiscent of the Christian Trinitarian trilogy. In the third story, cult leaders appear as substitutes for parents. The episodic structure of the three stories adds a strong Brechtian sense of alienation to the film as a whole.

In an interview with A.Frame, the director, who uses power relations as the starting point of the film, stated that he re-read Albert Camus' play *Caligula*, about a cruel Roman Emperor, and continued: *"...so I was thinking about one person having so much power over other people and how that would translate in a contemporary world, and a more one-to-one kind of relationship. That made us start the first story of the three, and then we felt that we wanted to do something different with form, as well"* (Lanthimos, 2024, as cited in John Boone, 2024).

The film opens with the song "*Sweet Dreams*" by Eurythmics, featuring the lyrics "*some of the want to abuse you, some of them want to be abused,*" which plays over the Searchlight logo. The three stories, set in modern-day New Orleans, are briefly as follows: An office worker finally rebels against the secret bullying of his boss. A police officer is disturbed when his wife, a marine biologist, returns home after months of being stranded on a deserted island and suspects that a replica has taken her place. Two cult members are searching for a young woman believed to have the power to raise the dead. The common



themes in all three stories are control, power, and abuse in institutional or bilateral relationships, the conflict between free will/fate and self-sacrifice.

In the first episode, the happily married Robert Fletcher (Jesse Plemons) lives in a world where every aspect of his life is dictated by Raymond (Willem Dafoe), a "*friendly and kind*" businessman who gives Robert detailed daily instructions on what to do, eat, drink, etc. Among the tasks, he has to crash his jeep into an oncoming vehicle at a set time. After doing this, Raymond tells him that he didn't hit the car hard enough and that he must do it again. When Robert protests, saying that hitting harder could kill the other driver (R.M.F.), Raymond says that the other driver is ready to die as well and demands that his order be carried out. Robert refuses and suddenly everything in his life is taken away from him, including his wife (Hong Chau). Raymond, of course, occupies the position of God. He has determined Robert's entire life and now wants him to kill a man because, as in William Cowper's poem (1913, p. 455), "*God acts in mysterious ways.*" Believing that he has free will, Robert initially defies God by emulating a tragic hero. However, as his wife, career and financial possessions are taken from him and he sees someone else (Emma Stone) begin to take his place, he ritually kills R.M.F. Robert, devoted to his God, resigns himself to his fate and sacrifices himself in a sense. In the last frame, we see Raymond, his young and beautiful wife (Margaret Quayle), and Robert peacefully together, representing the Holy Trinity in Christianity.

Robert Fletcher's life is governed by the instructions of a businessman named Raymond. When Raymond tells Robert what to do, it symbolizes the control of power over individuals in modern societies. Raymond directs Robert's life through specific tasks and punishments, which aligns with Foucault's concept of biopolitics. Foucault defines biopolitics as the strategies used by the state and other power structures to regulate and control the lives of individuals.

Robert's refusal to carry out Raymond's fatal order and the subsequent taking away of his life illustrate the resistance of individuals to power and its consequences. When Robert loses his wife, career and material possessions, he reveals how individual freedom and will are fragile in the face of absolute power. This demonstrates how Foucault's biopolitics shapes individuals and makes them dependent on power. As emphasized in the last scene, Robert cannot escape his "*father*" Raymond and continues to live peacefully with his "*family*," devoid of willpower.

In the second story, we focus on a police officer named Daniel (Plemons). His wife, marine biologist Liz (Stone), went missing on an expedition. Liz returns one day and claims that she was stranded on an island for a long time. Daniel notices changes in her ordinary behavior. For example, Liz, who used to be very fond of chocolate, now eats a large chocolate cake and appears more sexually enthusiastic. Daniel begins to think she is not the real Liz but a replica. Daniel, who refuses to eat the food Liz prepares, asks her to cut off her finger and cook it. Liz complies, but Daniel then asks her to cook her liver. Liz dies trying to separate her lung from her body, risking her life. Just as she dies, we see the "*real Liz*" (?) walk through the door. Liz's twin must die for her to be reborn for Daniel's sake. The wound on Liz's liver can be traced back to one of the five sacred wounds of Jesus -who sacrificed himself for humanity- or to the wound of the cursed body of Prometheus as an archetype of Jesus. In the last frame, all three (one of them dead) are at peace.

Meanwhile, at one point in the story, Liz mentions a dream in which she saw a society where humans and dogs swapped places. This can be interpreted as a displacement regarding obedience to power and unquestioning dedication.

The fact that Liz changes after returning from an expedition and Daniel suspects she is not real relates to Foucault's theory of biopolitics, which examines the effect of power on bodies and how it shapes individuals' identities. Liz's self-sacrifice and the return of the real Liz question the power exerted over an individual's free will and identity. Daniel's suspicions of Liz and his tests against her align with Foucault's concept of disciplinary power. Disciplinary power controls individuals' bodies and behaviors through constant surveillance and regulation. Liz's self-sacrifice and attempt to separate her liver from her body demonstrate how power shapes individuals and controls their lives.



In the third and longest story, we encounter a cult that advocates bodily purity in extreme ways. Cult members Emily (Stone) and Andrew (Plemons) follow their abusive leaders, Aka (Hong Chau) and Omi (Dafoe), with great loyalty. While Emily and Andrew search for a woman who can bring people back from the dead (just as Jesus did to Lazarus), they also adhere to their cult's practices. Emily is molested by her ex-husband (Joe Alwyn) and is immediately seen as dirty and ostracized by her cult. Emily struggles both to purify herself and to find the woman who can revive the dead. Her search ends with the appearance of twins (Qualley). However, for one twin to be endowed with the ability to be reborn and revive the dead, the other must die. One twin sacrifices herself for the other. The story ends ironically with the third episode's humorous alienation element: The bloody crash of the purple American car that Emily drives.

The third story is about a cult that places great importance on bodily purity. Emily and Andrew follow cult leaders Aka and Omi with great loyalty. Aka and Omi serve as abusive parental substitutes for Emily and Andrew. The cult's practices and the leaders' absolute control over individuals reflect Foucault's concepts of biopolitics and biopower in depth. The cult members' efforts to control and purify their bodies demonstrate the effect of power on bodies. For example, disciples are required to drink "*holy water*" created from the tears of Aka and Omi.

Emily's harassment by her ex-husband and her subsequent ostracism by the cult show the influence of power over bodies and how it controls individuals. From the conservative perspective of the sect, the female body is viewed as unclean. Emily's efforts to purify herself and her quest to find the woman who can bring the dead back to life question the effects of power on individuals' bodies and how they cope with these effects. The emergence of twins and the granting of one by the other the ability to be reborn examines the power relations over individuals' bodies and themes of sacrifice.

By dramatically addressing Michel Foucault's concepts of biopolitics and biopower, Lanthimos' film questions the profound effects of power on individuals' lives, bodies and identities in modern societies. The film reveals individuals' resistance to power, their sacrifices and how they shape their identities. Foucault's theory of biopolitics provides a powerful framework for understanding this complex and multi-layered narrative of Lanthimos.

CONCLUSION

When Yorgos Lanthimos' cinema is examined in depth through the lens of Michel Foucault's concepts of biopolitics and biopower, it reveals the power relations of modern societies and the effects of these relations on the bodies and lives of individuals. Lanthimos' films, especially *Dogtooth*, *The Lobster*, *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* and *Kinds of Kindness* interrogate the absolute control of power over individuals through dramatic narratives and explore how this control shapes their identities, freedom and existence.

In *Dogtooth*, the absolute control of parents over their children demonstrates that both the biological and psychological lives of individuals can be completely manipulated. *The Lobster* reveals how biopower can intrude into the most intimate aspects of individuals' lives in the name of population management and social order. In *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*, the authority of modern medicine and health policies over individuals is questioned through a narrative where the fate of individuals and their bodies depends on the decisions of others.

Lanthimos' latest film, *Kinds of Kindness*, extends these themes by offering a broader examination of the effects of power on an individual's free will and identity. The power relations affecting the bodies and lives of the characters in the film are depicted as microcosms reflecting how Foucault's concept of biopolitics operates in modern society.

This study reveals that Lanthimos' films provide a profound critique of the power structures impacting individuals and their place within the social order. Lanthimos' cinema challenges the effects of power on individual freedom and identity while prompting viewers to reflect on the complex power dynamics



of contemporary societies. In this context, Lanthimos' works, combined with Foucault's theoretical framework, offer valuable insights into the power structures of today's societies and the mechanisms of control exerted over individuals.

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