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Allegory and Gesture in Yorgos Lanthimos' *Dogtooth* and *Alps*

Abstract: Yorgos Lanthimos' *Dogtooth* (2009) and *Alps* (2011) examine the conditioning and possibilities of self-determination of the subject within microcosms that function as national, neoliberal and biopolitical allegories. Through a performative use of allegory, both films illuminate ways of constructing and instrumentalizing meaning and ideology. The deindividuation within each microcosm and the attempts at emancipation of each protagonist are attested by bodily and cinematic gestures. Their necessary alienation from their microcosm lastly leaves each protagonist in a suspended state between potentiality and subjectivity without a subject. I argue that these states point towards the necessity of radical change regarding the allegorically implicated societal dynamics and exhibit cinema's potency both to keep viewers oblivious to their living conditions, and to aid in the subversion of these conditions.

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1. Introduction

Yorgos Lanthimos has become somewhat of a household name in recent years, both internationally and in Hollywood. Yet even before the Greek auteur began to play with genre and distorting camera lenses in his English-language productions from 2015 onward, his 2009 breakthrough *Dogtooth* and 2011 *Alps* already examined the conditioning and possibilities of self-determination of the subject within overtly constructed cinematic microcosms.

Whereas *Dogtooth* portrays the everyday life of a family whose unnamed adult children are kept isolated from the world, *Alps* centers on the members of an eponymous service company that offers temporary substitutions for the deceased. Though both films' microcosms resemble contemporary Western societies, they are permeated with peculiar rules and customs that induce them with a sense of 'strangeness'.

Released in the wake of the Greek government debt crisis from 2009 onwards, both films were initially seen as allegories for the Crisis and deemed exemplary for what was publicly perceived as movement of emerging Greek filmmakers whose subversive works were seen as part of a "Greek Weird Wave."¹ More strikingly than any other film deemed part of this "Wave," *Dogtooth* and *Alps* attest to the ever-intensifying pervasion of contemporary Western societies by neoliberal and biopolitical dynamics and policies which became particularly noticeable in Greece during the Crisis. Both films display cinema's inherent dialectical capacity both to partake in processes of deindividuation within such dynamics, and to counter-act them through critical deconstruction, gestural activation of viewers and the demonstration of the necessity of solidarity among them.

2. Allegory and Gesture

Dogtooth and *Alps* work with various allegorical and gestural dimensions, the interplay of which is crucial to the functioning of each microcosm, their characters' subjectivities, and to the viewer's engagement with each film.

Allegory is here to be understood firstly as a narrative device employing a succession of metaphorical utterances, instances or images to create frameworks of meaning-making that point beyond a text's literal level² to "reveal its structure of multiple meanings."³ Allegory is secondly to be understood as interpretative mode, that is, as interpretation based on a narrative structure, which is to be distinguished

¹ The label of a "Greek Weird Wave" was coined by British journalist Steve Rose in a 2011 article for *The Guardian*.

² See Knaller 2002: 91f; Hansen 2004: 672.

³ Jameson 2009: 10.

from what Fredrick Jameson calls *allegoresis*, namely “a conflict of interpretations that has no particular structural basis.”⁴

Gesture is to be understood first of all as a yet to be instantiated potentiality, or, following Giorgio Agamben, as mere “communication of a communicability”⁵ which opens up a sphere of action.⁶ It does so, following Walter Benjamin’s analyses of gesture in Bertolt Brecht’s epic theatre, through its power to interrupt narrative and ideological processes and through its capability to cite itself and its underlying conditions as symptoms of a broader social state.⁷ Gesture according to Agamben also correlates with the polarity inherent to cinema: for Agamben, every image “is animated by an antinomic polarity: on the one hand, images are the reification and obliteration of a gesture [...]; on the other hand, they preserve the *dynamis* intact”, meaning they preserve a state of potentiality – therefore, “[t]he element of cinema is gesture and not image.”⁸ This claim seems apt considering how cinema at its most basic brings life to a standstill, or *captures* it, in order to reanimate it in a different form. Cinema thus carries in its basic functioning an “antinomic polarity” between motion and stillness, one may even say between life and death.

While allegory always remains entwined in processes of “‘speaking other’ (hiding meaning) as well as a ‘speaking of the Other’ (seeking meaning),”⁹ gesture attests to the possibility of *becoming other* which can show itself viscerally through the body of the actor as what Benjamin called the “‘trembling of its contours’ (*das Zittern ihrer Umrisse*).”¹⁰ This trembling attests to an inner tension between potentiality and reification and makes the conditions it cites corporeal and present while displaying its own gestural essence as always yet to come.¹¹ It also maintains a productive awareness of the medium of display, which can also be achieved through certain cinematic techniques.

⁴ Jameson 2009: xix.

⁵ Agamben 2000 (1992): 58.

⁶ Ibid: 56.

⁷ See Weber 2002: 28ff. and Benjamin 1971 (1931): 17-29 as well as 1971: 32-39.

⁸ Agamben 2000 (1992): 54f.

⁹ Knaller 2002: 93.

¹⁰ Weber 2002: 35; see also Benjamin 1971 (1931): 23.

¹¹ See Weber 2002: 26 and 36.

3. Lanthimos' Microcosms

The 'strangeness' permeating each microcosm firstly owes to strict and deindividuating rules of thought and behavior which are enforced by authority figures through mechanisms of reward and punishment. While the authority figures in each film have established and are upholding their power through different means, their methods of punishment have in common that they are often physical and performative, aiming at rendering the punished a deterrent example for others, intensifying the competition between them and reiterating the status quo. At the same time, the authority figures uphold their power through mechanisms of reward which create the illusion of choice for their subjects while really serving the purpose of increasing their readiness for subjugation. This is particularly evident in *Dogtooth*, where the parents' reward system affords the children stickers which they can exchange for little freedoms such as choosing the evening program, yet the choices to pick from are always predetermined by the parents.

The 'strangeness' permeating each microcosm secondly owes to a variety of estrangement effects. Literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky describes estrangement, or *ostranenie*, as "an artistic device that disrupts the automatization of the everyday" and fosters "a return to the senses in spectators and a movement away from the realm of recognition."¹² The estrangement effect most apparent in *Dogtooth* and *Alps* is the deadpan acting style which denies the viewer the characters' interiority, complicating the former's identification with the latter and the smooth immersion into each narrative. This effect is amplified by means of compositional and perspectival defamiliarization. In *Dogtooth*, this is achieved primarily through a particular way of framing bodies, often relegating them to the edge of the frame or showing only certain body parts (fig. 1). In *Alps*, what is striking in addition is the use of an extremely shallow depth of field which separates characters from one another even during interaction (fig. 2). Through these techniques, both films emphasize the power imbalances and the deindividuation within each microcosm and keep the cinematic medium present to the viewer.

¹² Kelly 2020: 427.



Fig. 1: Defamiliarizing framing of bodies in *Dogtooth* (screenshot, 00:07:36)



Fig. 2: Perspectival defamiliarization in *Alps* (screenshot, 00:43:33).

4. Allegorical Potentialities and Pitfalls

Both films' microcosms offer allegorical links to a variety of issues relevant to contemporary Western societies. Firstly, they function as national allegories, as which they have been most often read due to their release in the wake of the Greek government-debt crisis from 2009 onward. Both films' sense of social isolation, the dysfunctional social dynamics, and the control imposed on minds and bodies were seen as pointing towards Greece's growing economic isolation within Europe, its politics and their representation in Western media,¹³ to the following austerity measures and the saturation of the Greek public sphere "with narratives of a state of emergency, retraining and disciplining."¹⁴



Fig. 3: The essentializing portrayal of Greece in Western media (*namuwiki*)

The national circumstances in which *Dogtooth* and *Alps* were released in turn opened allegorical links to a global intensification of neoliberal and biopolitical policies, especially after the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, which, according to various scholars, led to new and more pervasive forms of surveillance and an overall

¹³ An example of the essentializing portrayal of Greece in Western media at the time is the grouping together of mostly Southern European countries in financial turmoil under the acronym "PIIGS," used in political cartoons and by economic journalists to level their differences into one essentializing narrative; see Galt 2017: 13, as well as Brazys and Hardiman 2015: 23-42. The abbreviation refers to Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece and Spain. The term first emerged in the late 1990s, then as PIGS, not yet including Ireland; see Brazys and Hardiman 2015: 28. Samuel Brazys and Niamh Hardiman (36) suggest that the portrayal of these countries in the media likely impacted their treatment by actors of financial markets.

¹⁴ Papanikolaou 2021: 46.

instrumentalization and commercialization of more and more domains of human existence.¹⁵

Both films exhibit various pointers towards neoliberal ideology. Alex Lykidis correlates neo-liberalism's way of legitimizing itself "through the pretense of objectivity inscribed in technocratic discourse" with Lanthimos' characters' "hyperbolically rationalist speaking style,"¹⁶ the high extent of repetition in their language, the focus on arbitrary details and the punishment of the slightest deviation from them.¹⁷ Also striking is the frequent "use of clichéd phrasing, such as when the nurse in *Alps* consoles the parents of a young tennis player after she dies by telling them that their daughter lost the greatest match of her life"¹⁸ before adding that "the end can be a new and better beginning," a phrase she repeats after seizing the opportunity to capitalize on the young girl's death by offering the parents her substitution service. Such phrasing, Lykidis argues, "give[s] the impression that speech acts are not unique expressions but rather reiterations of preordained discourses."¹⁹ It also further emphasizes the characters' commodification of themselves and others. In the manner of control exerted by Father (Christos Stergioglou) in *Dogtooth* and Mont Blanc (Aris Servetalis) in *Alps*, which relies on threats, punishment, and the permission of conditional freedom, Lykidis sees mirrored "structural violence masked by rhetorical civility."²⁰ This is best exemplified by the explanation Mont Blanc gives to Monte Rosa (Angeliki Papoulia) of the possible outcomes of hitting her with a club: the club, he says, will either remain white or turn red or blue. If it turns blue, she can stay in the group. Of course, the club can't really turn blue here. Mont Blanc admits the nonsensicality of his logic, but nonetheless makes use of it, demonstrating his power over Monte Rosa. Such scenes for Lykidis reflect aspects of the "European democratic practice today"²¹ in which "[d]emocratic choice is revealed to be a deception," a dynamic one can also see alluded to in *Dogtooth* when Father permits the blindfolded Christina (Anna Kalaitzidou) to choose the music in the car, masking the "oppressiveness of hierarchical social arrangements" with "the permission of a choice."²²

Both films also display a variety of elements of biopolitical governance as theorized, among others, by Michel Foucault, focusing on the one hand on the "anatomopolitics of the human body," that is, "the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility," and on the other hand on "a biopolitics of the population," that is, the monitoring of biological processes such as "births and mortality" and "the level of

¹⁵ See Papanikolaou 2021: 14 and 66f.; and Väliaho 2014: xii.

¹⁶ Lykidis 2015: 13.

¹⁷ See *ibid.*: 12ff.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*: 14.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*: 12.

²¹ Lykidis 2015: 12.

²² *Ibid.*

health" through interventions and "regulatory controls."²³ What can also be observed in each microcosm is the Foucauldian notion of a "conduct of conduct" by which those in power ensure that their subjects surveil themselves through mechanisms of control the subjects have internalized in order to obtain a certain ideal of a "good life."²⁴ All of this is eerily evident in *Dogtooth* in the parents' instrumentalization of words and concepts "related to movement, borders, the body and sexuality,"²⁵ and the children's assignments and punishments which are in large part related directly to the body's efficiency and endurance. It is also evident in the way in which even the children's moments of play and self-exploration mirror Father's rules and ethos, exemplified by "the use of pseudoscientific or technical language"²⁶ when the sisters play doctor. In *Alps*, where the subjects under power are employed adults, as the substitution jobs increasingly take over their lives, so does not only their strict surveillance through Mont Blanc, but also their dependency on the physical and psychological demands of their customers. The depiction of sex in both films provides further pointers towards biopolitics as it is always either strictly monitored by authority figures, "awkward, incestuous [...] or mechanical,"²⁷ transactional or performative, or all of the above, resulting in a "denaturalization of sexuality" which, according to Lykidis, points towards "contemporary regimes of social regulation" that can potentially "govern even the most intimate aspects of our existence."²⁸

Even more striking than these allegorical pointers is the way in which both films self-referentially display themselves as 'allegory-factories.' Central to this self-display is allegory's "distance in relation to its own origin,"²⁹ a notion which is repeatedly literalized and played with in *Dogtooth*. The parents' vocabulary lessons and the allegories they thereby instill into the children – for example by rendering "the sea" an armchair – initially appear simply to effect a domestication of language.³⁰ What is decisive, however, is not only that there crucially remains an underlying arbitrariness to this process which enables the parents to attach any signified to any signifier. In an early scene, the word's meanings as created by the parents are furthermore established as incontestable precisely because Mother's voice explaining them is present only as emanating from the tape recorder which thus becomes a literal "allegory machine."³¹ Relying even more on distance is the allegory of the invented second brother who, the children are told, lives behind the

²³ Foucault 1978 (1976): 139.

²⁴ See Lykidis 2015: 23 and Foucault 2008 (1988): 186.

²⁵ Papanikolaou 2021: 159.

²⁶ Lykidis 2015: 14.

²⁷ Ibid: 24.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ De Man 1983: 207.

³⁰ See Brinkema 2012: 2.

³¹ Papanikolaou (2021: 158) argues that "[t]he Dogtooth family itself is presented as an enormous allegory machine."

hedge encircling the family compound. This invented brother not only poses an unbeatable competition for the children in the execution of their assignments, but is also used as example of what happens if they do not follow their parents' instructions, most strikingly in a sequence around the midpoint of the film: After Son sees a cat in the garden and kills it with garden shears, Father cuts his clothes and covers himself with red color in order to make the children believe that a "creature like that in the garden"³² tore their brother on the other side of the hedge to pieces because he was not adequately prepared to face it. Father thus stages the invented brother's death and instrumentalizes its incontestability as one of many allegories turned cautionary tales to emphasize to the children the necessity of his methods of discipline and control. Standing momentarily still before his children, his staged condition serves as 'physical evidence' of his feigned fight with the cat (fig. 4), instrumentalizing the physicality and citability of gesture for his allegory in order to demonstrate the necessity to rely on his guidance. He then makes the children and his wife get on all fours and bark like dogs, inscribing them once more into yet another form of his allegory, which is highlighted to the viewer as instrument of power, not least through the literalization of the metaphor of the children as dogs which need to be tamed.

In *Alps*, the most overt self-display of the film as allegory machine occurs when Mont Blanc names their group "Alps," citing as first reason that this name conceals their true activity, as second a "purely symbolic" one: the mountains of the Alps in their imposing nature could substitute for any other mountain but cannot themselves be replaced. This allegorical description of their substitution work highlights the processes of de-subjectification inherent to their service which renders both the dead as impersonated by the Alps group members based on scripts and remaining objects, and the Alps group members themselves allegories in Benjamin's sense: "Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things."³³ While the dead are reduced to a narrativization of who they might have been, their substitutes are reduced to the ability to physically and psychologically bear their ruins. Here, too, distance – in this case between the living and the dead – is shown to be an inherent element of allegory as it manifests as impossibility to sufficiently substitute the dead, which Mont Blanc repeatedly instrumentalizes.

Through scenes as these, both films display ways of constructing allegory as well as its susceptibility to be instrumentalized as an ideological tool. On the one hand, this makes allegory visible as a deconstructive tool that can point towards crisis, undermine a prevalent ideology, and actively engage viewers in interpretation.³⁴ On the other hand, it risks overwhelming the viewer with an excess of allegorical potentialities, resulting in a frenzy of *allegoresis*. Both films lastly do *not* succumb to this risk primarily due to the repeated interruptions of their narratives through

³² *Dogtooth*: 00:45:05.

³³ Benjamin 1974 (1928): 354 (translated by the author).

³⁴ See Langford 2019: 2.

bodily and cinematic gestures which open up the possibility of a different kind of viewer engagement.



Fig. 4: Father staging the death of the imaginary brother in *Dogtooth* (screenshot, 00:42:55)

5. Cinematic and Bodily Gesture

In *Dogtooth*, cinematic gesture shows itself firstly in the context of its way of framing bodies. The conditions of the film's microcosm, the underlying social conditions, and the conditions of the medium of cinema are cited whenever a character or part of their body moves outside of the frame, yet the camera refuses to move with them. An example is when the sisters dress up for a family dinner at which they will be confronted with the current sticker score: After Elder Daughter (Angeliki Papoulia), whose head is already outside of the frame, tells her younger sister (Mary Tsoni) that she has more stickers than her, the latter gets up while the camera stays still, whereby she too is visually 'decapitated'. This citation of the frame's margins also alludes to the state of desubjectifying competition imposed on the children and makes palpable to the viewer the "mere (and momentarily withheld) possibility of motion"³⁵ that appears "in the moment of [...] [it's] refusal to pass over into the image, held [...] 'in' the image,"³⁶ and is thereby exhibited as a mediality. Image becomes gesture and is inscribed into the sphere of action. In *Alps*, a mediality is exhibited whenever the viewer's unconscious expectation of a shift of focus to make clearly visible a character is made conscious, only to be frustrated. This can be seen when Monte Rosa first substitutes for the dead tennis player (Maria Kyrozi) and stares at the girl's parents in anticipation of instructions: while she is delegated to the edge of the frame, their blurred contours fill a large part of it and remain out of

³⁵ Stewart 2014: 162.

³⁶ Noys 2014: 93.

focus even as they speak. A central cinematic mechanism is here too cited to the viewer, as is the state of deindividuation which the Alps group members are subject to.

Both films also rely on montage to achieve what Agamben calls *stoppage*, that is “the delay, isolation, and disruption of the image flow to permit the revelation and redemption of gesture,”³⁷ for example, through the insertion of narratively unmotivated shots. In *Dogtooth*, inserts showing Father’s factory while on the soundtrack, his singing in the garden from the previous scene continues, further emphasize the notion of stoppage through their static nature. In *Alps*, the most explicitly interruptive scene imbues Monte Rosa and Matterhorn’s (Johnny Vekris) walk along the street in unison with an ironic epic dimension through the out-of-place use of slow-motion and the silence of the soundtrack. In each case, cinematic capacities are displayed and viewers are prompted to engage more actively with what they are seeing.

Both films furthermore display a variety of *bodily* gestures, some of which manifest quite literally as gestures “of not being able to figure something out in language,” as “communication of a communicability,” yet often without much room for the subject to compensate for this inability to speak.³⁸ In *Dogtooth*, the gestural potentiality and citability particular to cinema makes itself visible through the protagonist’s body as she performatively cites words and gestures of Hollywood films she secretly watched. Through these re-enactments she manages to briefly disrupt the conditions of her existence and cite both the curtailing and the possibility of her agency. In her final reenactment, what begins as dance for her parents ends in frantic movement which sees her reduced to what Agamben calls “absolute gesturality,” a “pure means”³⁹ that exhibits itself as such. She thereby not only disrupts her parents’ wedding anniversary, but also displays the conditions she and her siblings have grown up in as “distortions that occur under the influence of forces acting upon the body.”⁴⁰ These distortions exemplify the struggle inherent to gesture that necessarily takes place before it can become a “means of emancipation.”⁴¹ The question that arises for the viewer at the end of each film is what can truly still emerge after each protagonist’s reduction to such “absolute gesturality” which seems necessary to truly shed the desubjectifying ideology ingrained into them.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ For Agamben (2000 [1992]: 58), “the gesture is essentially always a gesture of not being able to figure something out in language; it is always a *gag* in the proper meaning of the term, indicating first of all something that could be put in your mouth to hinder speech, as well as in the sense of the actor’s improvisation meant to compensate [...] an inability to speak.”

³⁹ Agamben 2000 (1992): 57 and 59.

⁴⁰ Hedberg Olelina and Schulzki 2017: 8.

⁴¹ Comanducci 2017: 6.

6. Absolute Gesturality or Objectless Interiority?

Although Elder Daughter in *Dogtooth* manages to escape the family compound, it becomes evident in the film's finale that even in her escape, she continues to adhere to the logic that has kept her imprisoned.⁴² This leaves her entrapped in the boot of her father's car, one step away from her previous prison yet now enclosed in an even tighter space (fig. 5). In *Alps*, Monte Rosa's subversion of the rules of her substitution service⁴³ leads to her expulsion from the Alps group and from the family whose dead daughter she has been substituting for. She goes on to break into this family's home and frantically performs the very gestures and the very 'script' that have so far restricted her existence. Again, she is rejected. Though the final shot of her shows her still trying to somehow re-enter the house (fig. 6), she also exhibits signs of the impossibility of being reduced to this gesture of submission, and perhaps even of the production of a different subjectivity.⁴⁴

In both films, an undecidability thus crystallizes between the possibility of breaking free from the microcosm through radical (self-)alienation, and the impossibility of a subsequent existence as actual subject. This can be read as undecidability between Agamben's somewhat utopian concept of *absolute gesturality*, and what Theodor W. Adorno, in regard of the work of Franz Kafka, calls *objectless interiority*. While *absolute gesturality* is conceptualized by Agamben as a state of pure potentiality which simultaneously entails a destruction of experience and which is thus conceivable as

a figure of annihilated human existence, its 'negative outline' and, at the same time, its self-transcendence not toward a beyond but in 'the intimacy of living here and now,' in a profane mystery whose sole object is existence itself,⁴⁵

Adorno describes *objectless interiority* as one logical outcome of a process of necessary alienation from the world and the self which results in a form of absolute subjectivity that is without a subject and thus blurs the boundaries between the

⁴² Father tells the children they can only learn to drive a car – that is, become somewhat independent – once they lose their 'dogtooth'. As they are already grown, this effectively means they will never be independent. Elder Daughter on the one hand adheres to this rule by leaving only once her 'dogtooth' is removed. On the other hand, she takes her fate into her own hands by bashing her 'dogtooth' in.

⁴³ Monte Rosa at first merely begins to divert from the substitution scripts, but her decisive transgression is lying to the others that tennis player survived her accident so that she can substitute her behind the group's back.

⁴⁴ To Agamben, a subjectivity "is produced where the living being, encountering language and putting itself into play in language without reserve, exhibits in a gesture the impossibility of its being reduced to this gesture [...]."; Agamben 2007: 72.

⁴⁵ Agamben 1999: 84.

subject as human and as mere object.⁴⁶ This undecidability can also be read through Benjamin's notion of a *dialectics at a standstill* ("Dialektik im Stillstand"⁴⁷), a suspended tension between a prolonged hesitation and a final termination,⁴⁸ which gesture "makes corporeal."⁴⁹ Particularly in *Dogtooth*, such a tension is emphasized on a filmic level through the suspended tension between motion and stillness in the film's final image, a static twenty-three-second shot which makes viewers aware of their own "being-present"⁵⁰ and may thereby prompts them to further reflect on or even act upon what they have just seen.

On the one hand, each film's ending reiterates the possibility of their microcosms' mechanisms being temporarily undermined by the individual. On the other hand, each ending makes apparent that any reconstruction of the subject would necessitate some further foundation than the 'pure means' which crystallizes in each finale. Both films therefore provide strong arguments for the necessity of radical change regarding the allegorically implicated contemporary social, political, and economic systems, and can be seen as call for solidarity, that is reciprocal support and collective organization, among those subjected to deindividuation. Precisely the *lack* of translation of gesture into truly self-determined action within each film is decisive, as the transformations that both films evoke are shown as necessary to take place outside of the viewing situation, carried out by "emancipated" spectators who embrace the call to "become active participants as opposed to passive voyeurs [...]."⁵¹

⁴⁶ "[D]ie reine Subjektivität, als notwendig aus sich selber entfremdete und zum Ding gewordene, [wird] zu einer Gegenständlichkeit, der die eigene Entfremdung zum Ausdruck gerät. Die Grenze zwischen dem Menschlichen und der Dingwelt verwischt sich." Adorno 1997: 275.

⁴⁷ Benjamin 1971 (1931): 28.

⁴⁸ See Müller-Schöll 2011: 81f.

⁴⁹ Weber 2002: 26.

⁵⁰ Ibid: 37.

⁵¹ Rancière 2009: 9.



Fig. 5: The final shot of *Dogtooth* (screenshot, 01:29:36)



Fig. 6: The final shot of *Monte Rosa* in *Alps* (screenshot, 01:25:50)

7. Towards a Dialectics of Allegory and Gesture

The actualization of any such transformation is then shown to require not gesture – that is, the interruption of deindividuating ideology and the citation of prevalent conditions – but a dialectics of gesture and an alternative narrative of the self and its social environment.

In both films, I see glimpses of a productive tension between gesture and a form of allegory that can point from within its mechanisms of reification towards alternative, subversive forms of togetherness. This stands out particularly in *Dogtooth*: here it can be something as simple as the children laughing together during yet another assignment from the parents, another re-inscription into their deindividuating allegory which points towards biopolitics but is, through the collective gesture of laughter, disrupted and rendered nothing but a performative game, which at the same time gives a brief glimpse of an alternative narrative of togetherness. There is also a scene in which one sister asks the other to name her “Bruce” from now on: by giving herself a name she took from a film she saw, and through her sister’s performative participation in the institution of this name, counter-allegory, embodied gesture and active spectatorship work together in a productive tension instead of being subsumed into one another.

Such fleeting instances of undecidability between the reproduction of predominant ideologies and solidary and subversive forms of togetherness, implied through an interplay of glimpses of allegorically constructed counter-ideology and instances of their gestural actualization, at once draw on and counter-act those processes of alienation in whose construction and deconstruction allegory has been shown to partake. At the same time, these instances create further bases for the activation of the viewer by means of a gesturally prompted “astonishment about the historical conditions under which they live,” conditions made “graspable”⁵² both through allegory’s *speaking other* and the possibility of *becoming other* attested to by gesture.

8. Conclusion

Dogtooth and *Alps*’ estranging microcosms were highlighted as national, neoliberal, and biopolitical allegories, whereby the methods of disciplining and control employed by each film’s authority figures were shown to stand out particularly as pointers towards deindividuating elements of biopolitical governance. Allegory’s way of creating frameworks of meaning-making that point beyond a text’s literal level was made evident in both films as potential tool to deconstruct present conditions, undermine a prevalent ideology and actively engage viewers in interpretation. Allegory was also shown to potentially thwart the possibility of *becoming other* as

⁵² Butler 2017: 186.

attested to by gesture, that is, a visceral attestation to prevalent conditions which highlights the necessity of transformation or even initiates it. This danger was firstly made evident by highlighting allegory's susceptibility to be instrumentalized as ideological tool and instrument of discipline, which each film's authority figures make us of. Secondly, it was indicated how both film's self-referential display as "allegory machine" could potentially risk an excess of interpretation and thereby stifle action upon prevalent conditions. This friction between allegory and gesture, however, was shown to also be potentially productive, as allegory in both films crystallizes as a potential tool to provide openings for gesture to come into play and aid in the construction of counter-narratives of possibility that point towards alternative futures. As a result, Lanthimos' cinema lastly emerges as exemplary for the potency of an allegorical cinema of gesture to display the medium's inherent dual potency for the capturing and the liberation of human individuality and relationality, its inherent potential both to indoctrinate viewers to remain oblivious to their living conditions, and to deconstruct and viscerally make felt such conditions and the necessity to act upon them in view of a different kind of future.

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Filmography

Alps. GR 2011, Yorgos Lanthimos, 93 min.

Dogtooth. GR 2009, Yorgos Lanthimos, 97 min.

List of Figures

Fig. 1: Defamiliarizing framing of bodies in *Dogtooth*. Screenshot: 00:07:36.

Fig. 2: Perspectival defamiliarization in *Alps*. Screenshot: 00:43:33.

Fig. 3: The essentializing portrayal of Greece in Western media. "PIGS." *namuwiki*.
<https://en.namu.wiki/w/PIGS> (26.09.2024).

Fig. 4: Father staging the death of the imaginary brother in *Dogtooth*. Screenshot: 00:42:55.

Fig. 5: The final shot of *Dogtooth*. Screenshot: 01:29:36.

Fig. 6: The final of Monte Rosa in *Alps*. Screenshot: 01:25:50.