

CHELMSFORD FILM CLUB

An Independent film society based in Chelmsford

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Alps (Alpeis) 2011

93 mins Greece

Director: Giorgos Lanthimos

Screenplay: Efthymis Filippou and Giorgos Lanthimos

Cinematographer: Christos Voudouris

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| Cast: Stavros Psyllakis ... | Nurse's father |
| Aris Servetalis ... | Ambulance man |
| Johnny Vekris ... | Coach |
| Ariane Labed ... | Gymnast |
| Aggeliki Papoulia ... | Nurse |



In a gymnasium, a clandestine four-person group meets to discuss its name. One member suggests "Alps," explaining: "The mountains of the Alps cannot be replaced by any other mountain. Anything else would be smaller, less imposing, thus, a poor substitute. While the mountains of the Alps cannot be replaced, they could replace any other mountain."

An additional merit is noted: "The name in no way reveals what it is we do"—and for the first section of *Alps*, it is difficult to extrapolate from available clues what exactly it is that this group does. We see pretty young Ariane Labed practicing a rhythmic-gymnastics routine, after which she's threatened by her taskmaster coach, Johnny Vekris. We see Aggeliki Papoulia working at a hospital and coaxing personal information—favorite food, favorite Hollywood actor—from a grievously injured teenager, alongside Aris Servetalis, a co-worker and evidently the group leader. (He renames himself Mont Blanc after the tallest Alp; Papoulia is Mont Rouge.)

Gradually, it becomes apparent that the dying girl's information is being set aside as backstory, to be used as a script in the imminent event of the girl's decease, so that an Alp may take her place for a couple of hours a week in the family living room. Thus, the function of the Alps is revealed: to stand in for those who are gone. This means not only supplying a missing piece to fill everyday moments, but also reliving regretted crack-ups as well: Mont Rouge plays a teenager being walked in on by her parents, a diabetic ex-girlfriend with a dangerous sweet tooth during a lovers' quarrel, and a two-timing best friend caught in the act with a husband. This is all apparently meant to be therapeutic, but seeing the borderline psychopathic behavior of the Alps, it's evident who needs the most help.

Papoulia will be familiar to some viewers from playing the older daughter in *Alps* writer-director Yorgos Lanthimos's last movie, 2009's *Dogtooth*, another study in behaviorism pushed to absurdist extremes, played in automaton line readings. She plays substitute both privately and professionally, for Mont Rouge returns from work to care—like a doting wife—for her elderly widower father (Stavros Psyllakis), whose sole social outlet is trips to a senior-populated dance hall where, it's evident in one glance, aging singles come to grab hold of a living body, so they can dance with ghosts.

Lanthimos creates an abiding sense of isolation with a *mise-en-scène* that enforces separation, through shallow depth of field, withholding long shots, and two-shots where one party is decapitated by the framing. For every scene that provides thematic ballast, however, there are moments that seem to

exist without any architectonic purpose. A deadpan joke—there's no other kind here—involving personalized coffee mugs returns to the film's idea of permeable boundaries of selfhood, but what precisely is the connection of rhythmic gymnastics to the Alps mission? How should their presence be explained save as an opportunity to give the film a visually striking bookend?

It's what's in the middle, however, that's hard to shake. It's quibbling to draw up columns denoting what Lanthimos, a difficult but undeniable talent, does right and does wrong. He's seemingly working intuitively here, and whatever missteps he makes while feeling his way forward, he manages to pass quite near to one of the essential conundrums of being human. We visit grave markers. A beloved old cat dies and is replaced, in sorrowful haste, with a stranger kitten. Hadrian loses Antinous and "resurrects" him in a cult. In every case, the party sought after is no longer, departed to we know not where. How do we confront the lack in this world?

In the case of *Mont Rouge*, it is evident that the dead have given this desperate girl something to live for—though in the process, she has ceased strictly to "be" herself—and her motives are both ghoulish and familiar. A comedy of pained laughter, *Alps* confirms the certitude of our darkest hours: The dead are the lucky ones.

Nick Pinkerton (2012)

Giorgos Lanthimos filmography:

2011 *Alps*

2009 *Dogtooth*

2005 *Kinetta*

2001 *My Best Friend*

Our previous presentation:

Based on the feedback slips returned on the night, you rated *A Hijacking*, screened on 9th April, 4.36 stars out of 5 from 28 responses. Please visit the current season page at <http://www.chelmsford-filmclub.co.uk> to read all the feedback comments.

You can still provide feedback on this, or any other film, by visiting the Discussions page (<http://www.chelmsford-filmclub.co.uk/discussion/>).

Our next presentation:

Nostalgia for the Light will be shown on 7th May, starting at 8:00pm.