

## BOOK REVIEW

# *A History of Greek Cinema*

by Vrasidas Karalis

New York: Continuum, 2012

Vassiliki Tsitsopoulou

University of Indiana, Bloomington

In the preface of his *History of Greek Cinema*, Vrasidas Karalis questions the aptness of designating the filmic corpus that he treats as “Greek,” wondering whether “it would be fairer to talk about the history of cinema *in Greece*” instead (p. xvi).<sup>1</sup> Karalis is referring to several related methodological challenges he sees facing the project of writing a Greek film history. First, how to account for films that are recognized internationally as “Greek” without being made (financed, scripted, directed, acted, filmed, etc.) *by* or even addressed *to* Greek nationals. As he puts it, what international audiences came to consider as “Greek cinema” has not been determined “by films made solely by directors of Greek origin, or, indeed, for Greek audiences” (ibid.). Another methodological challenge the author highlights has to do with the continuous institutional impact of foreign personnel on Greek filmmaking: “Greek cinema and images about Greece were made by Greeks and non-Greeks alike; starting with the patriarch of local cinema, the Hungarian Joseph Hepp and continuing after [WWII] with the English Walter Lassally and the Italian Giovanni Varriano” (ibid.). The personnel problem is directly linked to a third difficulty which has to do with the “sourcing” of Greece’s cinematic image (“images about Greece”): The attribution and construction of cinematic “Greekness” are an international affair outside Greek “national” control. There is yet another related methodological stumbling block which is not mentioned in the preface but shows up briefly in the

---

<sup>1</sup> A version of this question was raised in discussion during the conference “Greek Cinema: Texts, Histories, Identities” organized by Lydia Papadimitriou and Yannis Tzioumakis at Liverpool John Moores University in May 2008.

second chapter: the domestication of internationally-produced “images about Greece” into Greek-made cinema and their internalization as cinematic *self*-representations. To put it differently, how to account for Greek-produced cinema, adopting a foreign-produced cinematic “Greekness”, and for Greek audiences doing so as well.

A direct implication of these methodological problems is that what is conventionally labeled as “Greek cinema” may not actually qualify as a *national* cinema according to basic (or, at the very least, naïve) film historiographic criteria. The author does not pursue this line of questioning any further. And yet, the *History of Greek Cinema* is haunted by repressed concerns about authenticity, which are exacerbated by the lack of clarity about the meaning of “foreign,” “international,” or “non-Greek” in the context of Greek film production, and about the meaning of “Greekness,” a notion to which the author alludes frequently. Karalis returns to the subject of the problematic nature of Greek cinema’s nationality at various points in the book. Each time the discussion cuts off shortly after the subject is broached, as in the introduction. These recurring moments of unease are tantamount to an acknowledgment on the author’s part of the conceptual limitations of his approach. But they are also symptomatic of the general theoretical and methodological tenuousness incipient in any attempt to write the history of a peripheral, non-canonical cinema based on national criteria.

I would like to focus this review on the author’s stance towards the issue of the ownership and control of Greece’s cinematic (self-)image and flesh out some of its implications. The publication of *A History of Greek Cinema* offers an excellent opportunity to begin a long-overdue conversation on the history of Greek cinematic (self-)representation. This is a subject of crucial importance for Greek Film Studies that does not seem to have attracted the attention it deserves. For this reason, I will take the liberty of forgoing the more common formats of the book review to concentrate on the parts of the *History of Greek Cinema* that I consider the most relevant for illustrating the stakes involved. I will expand on the author’s brief points regarding the methodological problems facing the project of writing a Greek film history through the dual lens that he introduces: the Greek-themed films made by Greek diasporic filmmakers and the Greek careers of foreign expatriate filmmakers. An expatriate himself, professor Karalis is particularly interested in both these demographics, which in many ways mirror each other in reverse, from a long-term historical perspective. I am taking my cue from a prominent textual feature of the *History* which is the thematic pairing of the categories of Greek diasporic and foreign expatriate represented by Michalis Cacoyannis and Jules Dassin respectively, as the emblematic “Greek” and “non-Greek” jointly responsible

for fashioning Greece's cinematic (self-)image. The place of Jules Dassin in this pairing could easily have been given to Josef Hepp considering his pioneering status and long career in Greece. So I will examine both Dassin's and Hepp's role as key "non-Greeks" in the *History of Greek Cinema*.

Like most national film histories, *A History of Greek Cinema* structures its content in relation to a certain conception of Greek national history (Rosen 1984; Vitali & Willemen 2006). In this case the most notable aspect of the author's historical approach is his near total silence on the international dimensions of contemporary Greek history. Historians of modern Greece, regardless of their political leanings, have amply documented the importance of foreign intervention in the creation and subsequent fate of the country. What is debatable at this point is not the role of international conditionalities in modern Greek history but only their extent and significance. The author's silence on the international parameters of Greek history is in direct contradiction to his acknowledgment that "Greeks and non-Greeks alike" make "Greek cinema and images about Greece." If Greek cinema was always international or transnational, in the author's term (p. 286), then how did it get to be so?

The Greek career of Josef Hepp (1887-1968) illustrates the extreme internationalization of Greece's domestic politics in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with the Greek monarchy standing out as a key destabilizing international variable. A Hungarian or "German-Hungarian", as Karalis describes him, Hepp is practically the founding father of Greek cinema. He arrived in Greece in 1910 probably at the invitation of King George I<sup>2</sup> and shortly thereafter was named "Royal Photographer and Cinematographer." When Crown Prince-then-King Constantine was openly clashing with Prime Minister Venizelos and much of the voting population over critical domestic and foreign policy issues in a division that eventually spread throughout Greek society into an all-out civil war (the so-called *National Schism*), Hepp was in the unique position of making the only Greek-produced current-event and propaganda films. That is, he had the power to use a new mass medium to influence Greek public opinion exclusively in the King's and his supporters' interests during a national crisis. It is not an accident that, as Karalis notes, Hepp was the highest paid professional in Greece during that period. His Germanic culture and fierce loyalty to Austria-Hungary meshed well with Constantine's own culture and foreign policy leanings—but not Venizelos's, or most Greeks'. This was at a time when the question as to whether Greece would participate in WWI on the Allies'

---

<sup>2</sup> Born Vilhelm to the Danish Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg-Glücksburgs.

side or remain neutral, as Constantine preferred, made headline news worldwide (Lemonidou 2013).

Hepp's most famous propaganda film against the "Venizelists," the public religious excommunication of the prime minister in 1916, testifies to the impact of international forces from inside and outside Greece in bringing about both the event in question and its filming. The "Anathematism of Venizelos" was not an official act representative of the "Greek Orthodox Church," as the author suggests (p. 9). It was a decision made by the dominant faction in a profoundly divided *Church of Greece* — an institution created in 1833 by the Bavarian Catholic vicereignty representing Greece's first King who, himself, refused to convert to Orthodoxy throughout his reign (Tsironis 2007). It should also be noted that a month before the Anathema, Athens was bombarded by the French navy and there was a landing of French troops to "encourage" Constantine to change his neutrality policy and support Venizelos's dissident government in Thessaloniki (Mourellos 1982). In all probability, the Anathema event was, at least in part, staged for Hepp's camera as a message to the Allies and to Greeks at home and overseas. In short, the film is a material historical record of the direct link between Western control over the Greek cinematic image and Western control over Greece.

In the *History of Greek Cinema* the analysis of Hepp's "Anathematism" is limited to quotes from a contemporary eye-witness, the Scottish classical scholar and proto-anthropologist J. G. Frazer. Frazer describes the event as evidence of "the indestructibility of superstition" and affirms that "*in Europe* such mummeries only contribute to the public hilarity, and bring the Church which parades them into contempt" (p. 9, emphasis added). Frazer's essay on the Anathema explains why post-WWII Anglo-American anthropology has been embarrassed by his legacy and eager to dismiss or forget him (Ackerman 1998; Strathern 1987; Manganaro 1990). Giving Frazer the last word on the film shifts the focus away from film history and on to Greek culture as viewed through a distancing Western lens from a dark era before anthropology and the other social sciences in the West became aware of their complicity in manufacturing colonial civilizational hierarchies. The author's readiness to defer to Frazer is tantamount to endorsing orientalist prejudice in the service of Victorian British imperialism as timeless truth on modern Greek culture. It is symptomatic of the persistent hold of West-European authority on Greek self-representation and its paralysing effects on critical judgment.

The insulated view of contemporary Greek history that permeates the *History of Greek Cinema* works as a safeguard against having to contend with Greece's position in the historical colonial-capitalist international order and its culture. And thus

dispenses with the task of developing the critical language needed for addressing the issues surrounding the origins, ownership and control of Greece's cinematic (self-)representation. The result of this compromise is the declaration that "Greeks and non-Greeks alike make Greek movies," the most non-committal framing of the material possible, and the least explanatory. Its neutrality is only apparent, however. The range of meaning and information under the "Greek" and "non-Greek" categories is subject to a number of unstated criteria. Under the "non-Greek" rubric only West Europeans and North Americans are to be found. And their treatment is relentlessly appreciative, even to the point of attributing Greek directors' achievements to their influence. This is the case with the cinematographer Walter Lassaly and Michalis Cacoyannis or the cinematographer Giovanni Varianno and Nikos Koundouros. When it comes to the "non-Greeks'" ideological or ethno-cultural conflicts of interest, discretion prevails. This is most noticeable in Hepp's case. In the case of Jules Dassin there is no need for circumspection. Reticence only applies when a "non-Greek's" politics clash with the host environment or with historical and popular reconstructions of it. So the political circumstances that led to Dassin's departure from the U.S. are recounted in detail.

The "Greek" designation is also subject to semantic restrictions in line with the *History's* dominating silence about the international parameters of Greek history. By referring to Michalis Cacoyannis in vague terms as a Greek "born in Cyprus", the author follows an established consensus in "disremembering" Cacoyannis's official status as a colonial subject for a good half of his life. The fact that he came from a well-to-do Greek-Cypriot family with some connection to the British colonial authorities would have been essential to Cacoyannis's access to education and early career opportunities in England. This concerted forgetfulness, for which the author is by no means responsible but simply reproduces, continues to deprive Cacoyannis scholarship of important new perspectives. The muffling of Cyprus's (and Greece's) colonial past under a generic blanket "Greekness" compounds the conceptual elusiveness of Greek cinema and makes it harder to bring into sharper historical focus.

Based on the examples of Hepp, Dassin, and Cacoyannis we can see that the view of Greek (and Cypriot) history that prevails in the *History of Greek Cinema* also affects the content and status of the "Greek/non-Greek" or "Greek diasporic/foreign expatriate" categories that serve as a thematic motif. The consequences can be seen in the author's handling of Dassin and Cacoyannis whom he considers responsible for fashioning the cinematic image of Greece both internationally and domestically (p. 101). At a certain point the author indicates that he is not entirely comfortable with the "Greek images" generated by *Zorba the Greek* (Cacoyannis, 1964):

[F]or some inexplicable reason, the character of Zorba commodified the notion of “Greekness” and made “Zorba” the powerful money-spinning symbol of an amoral, noble savage, of an exotic phallocrat who titillated the senses of an international audience and excited the repressed sexual imagination of European and American housewives. As Robert D. Kaplan remarked, after this film, “Greece was where you came to lose your inhibitions”. (p. 104)

The author is much less outspoken about *Never on Sunday's* (Dassin, 1960) Ilya character about which he could have said the same things almost verbatim after adjusting for gender. Still, he describes Dassin’s film as “poorly written,” “utterly silly,” “naïve and jejune” (p. 92). No matter how strong, however, the author’s misgivings do not command the reader’s attention and are easily submerged under the copious amounts of appreciative prose he devotes to the very same films. For one, these misgivings are at odds with the author’s frequent statements of unconditional preference for coproductions and any other type of international involvement in Greek film. But more importantly, the author’s objections are easily forgettable because they are not grounded in a systemic critical approach to cinematic representation that is suited to the historical specificity of the modern Greek nation-state as part of an international system.

A systemic approach to the “Greek/non-Greek” or “Greek diasporic/foreign expatriate” thematic pairing in the cases of Dassin and Cacoyannis would be to foreground the role of the Hollywood mode of cinematic representation in their Greek-themed films. In this case, the focus would have to shift to the institutional level represented by the Greek-American businessman and Twentieth-Century Fox executive Spyros S. Skouras. Skouras became the president of Fox from 1942 to 1962 after a rapid ascent in the movie business, from theater-chain ownership to studio management, but had other business interests as well, notably in shipping. He was head of Fox’s New York office which handled “corporate strategy, finances, government relations, distribution, exhibition, new technologies, and international relations” (Lev 2013: 2). During WWII Skouras was involved in the Greek War Relief Association, an initiative of the Greek-American community to ship food to famine-stricken Greece, which gave him privileged access to the Greek political class and the Monarchy (Hatzivassiliou & Kazamias 2011; Citino 2000; Swann 1991). After the war he pursued various quasi-diplomatic, semi-autonomous initiatives to influence British and American policies on Greece and Cyprus. One of Skouras’s channels of intermediation was his office as trustee of The American School of Classical Studies at Athens. It was a long established practice for Hollywood to assume semi-official public diplomacy responsibilities along the lines of U.S. government policies.

Skouras also involved Fox in a number of Greek-themed film productions. The practice of making films overseas after WWII was a way for Hollywood to circumvent the problem of the scarcity of exportable dollars in Western European markets (Swan 1991: 7). In addition, Fox's Movietone News received Economic Cooperation Administration (Marshall Plan) funds for producing aid-related informational films about Greece and other recipient countries.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, the blurring of the boundaries between the movie business, U.S. foreign policy, philanthropy, and geocultural and geopolitical intermediation that characterized Skouras's activities was not out of the ordinary. An added factor is the empowerment that Skouras's immigrant identity derived from investing in Anglo-American hegemony. Out of this nexus emerged: 1) Cacoyannis's *Zorba the Greek*; 2) Dassin's *Thieves' Highway* (1949, on a script by A. I. Bezzerides), *Night and the City* (1950), and, of course, his encounter with Melina Mercouri which led to her casting in *He Who Must Die* (1957), *The Law* (1959), and *Never on Sunday* (1960); 3) Gregg Tallas's *To Xypolito Tagma/The Barefoot Battalion* (1953) getting distribution in the U.S. and Canada dubbed in English; 4) Fox's *The 300 Spartans* (Maté, 1962), *It Happened in Athens* (Marton, 1962), and *Boy on a Dolphin* (Negulesco, 1957); and 5) opportunities for young Greek filmmakers, like Vassilis Maros, to pursue training and work in Europe and the U.S. (Greek Film Archive 1996).<sup>4</sup>

A systemic critical approach to the problem of the origins, ownership and control of Greece's cinematic (self-)representation would have to examine the different positions that Dassin, Cacoyannis, Tallas, the Fox films, or Maros occupied in relation to this nexus. For example, it would examine *Zorba the Greek* and *Never on Sunday* comparatively in view of pre-existing Hollywood formulas of *the exotic native untainted by modernity* and locate these formulas in the regimes of knowledge on which they were based. An important part of this task would be to trace Skouras's, Dassin's and Cacoyannis's personal investment in these regimes and thus in Anglo-American hegemony through close (even symptomatic) analysis of

---

<sup>3</sup> Fox Movietone films featuring Greece appear frequently in the Marshall Plan Filmography produced by the George C. Marshall Foundation. The list is incomplete. It is available at: [www.marshallfilms.org](http://www.marshallfilms.org). Accessed 10 August 2014.

<sup>4</sup> In the early 1950s Vassilis Maros trained in Italy working for INCOM, a private production company, that made news and documentaries sponsored by the Economic Cooperation Administration and the Italian government. Around 1953 he was hired by Fox Movietone News, which also produced ECA-funded films. He also worked as 2<sup>nd</sup> unit cinematographer for all three Fox films shot in Greece. For Fox Movietone Maros produced footage gathered in Greece and the Middle East but also spent time and filmed in New York where he also worked for NBC. Back in Europe he was hired by BBC and ZDF.

their work and other historical documents. One way to get at this investment, for example, is to decode the cinematic address. Who is the implied spectator and how is he or she constructed in the films? Regardless of methodology, however, a systemic approach presupposes that the researcher examines his or her own dependence on the epistemic and representational paradigms that construct Greekness or Hellenicity in particular ways.

The *History of Greek Cinema* is the first up-to-date, comprehensive yet concise history of Greek cinema to appear in English and for this reason alone it will reach many readers. It is also likely to puzzle its readers with its elliptic references to Greek cinema's West European and American dependence, and its casualness towards its subject's theoretically and historically unsettled status as *Greek* or *national*. This is not the author's failing alone, however, but rather an intrinsic problem of his subject matter, which has remained unexplored. While there is much to correct and critique in the *History of Greek Cinema*, it would be unwise not to make the most of the opportunities the book affords for addressing issues that should have been addressed long ago. Professor Karalis deserves full credit for making this possible.

## REFERENCES

- Ackerman, R. (1998), 'J.G. Frazer and the Cambridge Ritualists and the 'Scientific' Study of Religion,' in A. Molendijk and P. Pels (eds), *Religion in the Making: The Emergence of the Sciences of Religion* (Studies in the History of Religion vol. 80), Leiden: Brill, pp. 129-158.
- Citino, N. (2000), 'Defending the 'Postwar Petroleum Order:' The US, Britain and the 1954 Saudi-Onassis Tanker Deal,' *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 11:2, pp. 137-160.
- Greek Film Archive (1996), *Maros: 50 Hronia Kinimatografos/Maros: 50 Years of Cinema*, Athens: Ergo M&P Grafikes Technes, unpaginated.
- Hatzivassiliou E. & G. Kazamias (2011), 'Hollywood Goes to the Eastern Mediterranean: Spiro S. Skouras and "Unorthodox Power," 1940s and 1950s,' in L. Tsaliki, Ch. Frangonikolopoulos, A. Huliaras (eds), *Transnational Celebrity Activism in Global Politics: Changing the World?* Bristol: Intellect, pp. 140-154.
- Manganaro M., ed. (1990), *Modernist Anthropology: From Fieldwork to Text*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.



- Lemonidou, E. (2013), 'Greece in the Front Pages During the Great War/La Grèce à la Une pendant la Grande Guerre,' *Cahiers Balkaniques* 41, pp. 179-198.
- Lev, P., (2013), *Twentieth Century-Fox: The Zanuck-Skouras Years, 1935-1965*, Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Mourellos, G. (1982), 'I prosorini kivernisi tis Thessalonikis kai oi scheseis tis me tous simmahous, Septemvrios 1916-Iounios 1917/The Provisional Government of Thessaloniki and its Relations with the Allies, September 1916-June 1917,' *Mnimon* 8, pp. 150-188.
- Rosen, Ph. (1984), 'History, Textuality, Nation: Kracauer, Burch, and Some Problems in the Study of National Cinemas,' *Iris* 2:2, pp. 69-84.
- Vitali, V. & P. Willemen eds. (2006), *Theorising National Cinema*, London: British Film Institute.
- Swann, P. (1991), 'The Little State Department: Hollywood and the State Department in the Postwar World,' *American Studies International* 29:1, pp. 2-19.
- Strathern, M. (1987), 'Out of Context: The Persuasive Fictions of Anthropology,' *Current Anthropology* 28:3, pp. 251-281.
- Tsironis, Th. (2007), *O politikos logos kai rolos tis Ekklisias tis Ellados (1912-1940)/The political discourse and role of the Church of Greece (1912-1940)*, Doctoral Dissertation, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.