

BOOK REVIEW

Masculinity and Gender in Greek Cinema, 1949-1967

by Achilleas Hadjikyriacou

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Hadjikyriacou's study on masculinity and gender relations¹ in Greek cinema between 1949 and 1967 is an altogether positive contribution not only to Greek Film Studies, but also to Anthropological and Social Studies on post-war Greek society. The book focuses on interrelating cinema – and similar “neighboring” products of popular culture such as magazines – with masculinity and gender relations and on projecting them, combined, on the historical background as valid historical sources and explanatory categories. This is achieved within a meta-theoretical and methodological framework, which admits that “a contextualized reading of Greek feature films can provide a more accurate recognition of realities behind filmic representations” (Stassinopoulou qtd. in Hadjikyriacou, p. 6). The book manages to capture the spirit of change and transformation both in gender “realities” and in their cinematic representations by visiting typical Greek film productions between the end of the Civil War and the onset of the Dictatorship. The close reading of twelve popular and/or artistically acclaimed films of the period reveals their underlying take on gender, production, spectatorship, cultural meaning and critical appreciation, while allowing the reader/viewer to revisit and reevaluate them from an entirely new vantage point. For those with a Film Studies background, the book provides an anthropological and social science frame of reference that goes beyond the study of cinema itself as a component of popular culture; for those with a solid background in Gender Studies, it provides a new field of work and

1 The word “relations” is a necessary addition to make full sense of the title of the book. This is how it appears in the title of Hadjikyriacou's Ph.D. thesis (2010): “Men in Crisis: Representations of Masculinity and Gender Relations in Greek Cinema, 1950-67”.

implementation. For the international Film Studies community and especially for non-Greek speakers, who are reaching for a better understanding of Greek cinema, the work can serve as a valuable reference, one might even dare say, a valuable introduction and guide. Finally, for all readers, as we will have the chance to see later on, it can provide a fertile ground for further discussion of methods, epistemological choices and the canon of Greek popular films. In other words, Hadjikyriacou's study certainly can be called "a really useful book".

Furthermore, the timing of this book is intriguing, since it was published at a time when the international focus was firmly on current Greek film production. "The so-called Greek new wave, much favoured by international festival programmers in recent years" (Lodge 2014), has attracted the attention of both critics and theorists keen on researching, describing and explaining what has also been called "the Greek weird wave" (Rose 2011) – and through that to understand the overall crisis in the country that produced it, or rather the country *where* it is being produced. In this context, a publication about Greek films that were first shown at least 47 years ago might seem, somehow, out of date. However, this is not the case at all. On the contrary, this study can make a positive contribution to the reading, understanding and appreciation of the more recent Greek film production by showing continuities or discontinuities over the time in the interplay of a continuously changing Greek society and its filmic representations in terms of gender relations within the family circle. If the author is right to claim that "cinema and popular culture viewed as social institutions can inform a historical study" (p. 5), then the approach suggested by the book can lead even further into an understanding of contemporary Greece, providing a kind of shortcut to what the social sciences have to investigate at their own pace and, most probably, at a later stage to ensure 'safe' findings. This study therefore can be called "a really useful book" twice over.

But let us start with a précis of the contents of the five chapters that compose the book:

- Chapter 1, "Masculinity and gender relations in Greece: 1949-1967", tackles the social anthropological view of Greece, criticizing anthropological views of gender for giving "an incomplete picture" and relying on the findings of other social sciences to prove that post-civil war Greek society was undergoing transition and change, including a substantial redefinition of gender relations. Moreover, the chapter explores the opportunities, challenges, and continuities faced by the youth of the time, as well as new youth cultures.
- Chapter 2, "Greek cinema: 1949-1967", attempts to give a coherent description of post-civil war Greek film production, discerning a shift

towards a Greek version of Hollywood in terms of films, audiences, and companies. It also explores the role of the state; takes a look at Greek popular films, their actors, genres, themes, and characters; and examines masculinities and femininities both through the rise of a local star system and through the representation of youth in films. This provides insights into a representation of the crisis that was taking place in Greek society at the time regarding gender roles.

- Chapter 3, “Masculinity and locality: Rural versus Urban gender identities”, focuses on the relationship between masculinity and locality by exposing the natural and the man-made landscape behind the main stories in the filmic representation of rural and urban societies. It identifies the concepts of ‘honour’, ‘shame’ and ‘omnipresent neighbourhood’ as major controlling factors of masculinity and reaches conclusions regarding subordination and hegemony as instigating factors of “primitive” violence and a crisis of masculinity.
- Chapter 4, “Money, pride or both?”, explores the relationship between masculinity and class, identifying a filmic idealization of the working classes and a parallel demonization of the upper classes. It studies class transition as a shift between subordination and hegemony and discusses the relationship between modernity and tradition as a re-negotiating procedure. Finally, it highlights the role of females in leading male protagonists into crisis.
- Chapter 5, “Modern Men: Masculinity and the challenges of a new age”, relates the arrival of modernity to a new focus on the actors’/stars’ bodies that, apart from proving profitable, also represented a new morality. It also investigates the way previously ‘undisputed’ hierarchies were challenged, the generation gap in Greece, and the role of women as agents of change. Finally, it examines the conflicting typologies among the traditional, the modern and the ‘in-between’ in the films’ secondary characters.

The opening chapter is the cornerstone of this research. It goes beyond the academic necessity of a literary review and introduces the methodological spectrum through which film culture will be read in the following chapters. Its argument develops around the anthropological and other social science findings regarding Greece in the late 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. With an excellent narrative, the writer begins by showing how the anthropologists of the time focused their gender-related research on the most remote rural communities, seeing Greece as part of an exoticized Mediterranean. Overcoming this incomplete and unsatisfactory research, he moves towards the less frustrating

and far broader studies of other social sciences (occasionally transcending a gender-centered approach) that reveal gender relations in the “other” mainstream Greece of the cities and urbanization. By the end of this chapter, the reader has a coherent idea about concepts such as ‘shame’ and ‘honour’ within traditional Greek society and has also become aware of the transitions and changes undergone by Greek society during the post-war decades in terms of population, migration, job opportunities, consumption, contraception, education and youth. This chapter provides the study with its methodological vocabulary, on the one hand, and with a methodological framework, on the other, in which crossing lines expresses the complexity, antithesis, challenges, hierarchies, and bridges that will be used in this analysis as a stable system of reference.

The second chapter does not, however, offer similar insights into the Greek cinema of the period. Although it refers to change and complexity in the development of national production in the 1950s and 1960s, it does not provide a valid theoretical approach or address the interrelation between different aspects of Greek cinema; change and complexity are thus neither described nor explained properly. Referring, for instance, to “a Greek Hollywood” involves the danger of a reverse exoticism, which is to say an (over)westernization of cinematic production that neglects the specific factors that made Greek cinema what it actually was. The same applies in relation to box office and ticket sales: even if we could actually rely on quantitative data – attractive as they appear in cultural studies as guarantors of objectivity – they cannot take the place of qualitative analysis. Moreover, accepting as a fact that the film production of the period – along with other cultural products such as advertisements or magazines – reflected the social change of the time, somehow, overlaps and even contradicts the research to come in the rest of the book concerning whether and how cinema reflected gender-related social change (p. 138). Such an approach could have concealed the real dynamics of Greek cinema at its commercial and influential peak by restricting its view to a one-way relationship between films and society; as we know, the interactions between the two are far more complicated and elaborate. We have to admit at this point the lack of an unanimously accepted theoretical and historical canon, which could be used in this area as a point of reference; still, a thorough review of the literature on production, popularity, state interference, genre, stardom, and gender would have provided the study with an additional and equally powerful nexus, articulating the complexity of Greek cinema in a structured way and supporting or modifying the assumptions applied later to the study.

In the ensuing chapters and turning to the films, the author chooses to analyze a variety of works². This poses a question: why these films and not others? Which can be translated into a methodological question: what criteria were used to select the specific corpus of films and each film separately from the overall production of the era? The author provides the answer in his prologue, explaining that, given that a close study of the entire film production was impossible due to its massive scale, four main criteria were applied: date of production (between 1949-1967), genre (either comedies or dramas), popularity (in the top 20% at the box office) and storyline, which should somehow involve masculinity in relation to locality, class, and modernity.

The above, however, do not establish a methodological framework: The time bounds are given by political and not inter-filmic parameters (e.g. production); genre includes the two broad and inclusive categories of Greek cinema, namely comedies or dramas – what I call “moods” rather than genres – that cover, in fact, the whole of the production. When it comes to popularity, in the place of the selected films there could have been any among the hundreds of the films of the “canon” of the most popular movies of the period – a canon that is widely reproduced in Greek Film Studies without being really questioned. Plus, the author himself breaks this criterion by including in his study films of a lower box-office take.

Therefore, the only criterion that seems to stand up as valid in the choice of the specific films is the relevance of the storyline to the conclusions of the gender-related anthropological and social science research of post-civil war Greece introduced in Chapter 1. Its validity, however, can be also questioned because it still does not explain why these films were chosen over others. In other words, would the same results occur if we picked any other film? For instance, would the author have come to the same conclusions about masculinity and social class if he had chosen *Koinonia ora miden/Society Zero Hour* (Dimopoulos, 1966) instead of *O Krahtis/The Leader* (Andritsos, 1964)? The two movies share the reverse side of a similar storyline (both were written by the same screenwriter, Nikos Foskolos): the elevation of the working class hero to the upper class through the love of his female boss; and by exposing or not the ugly truth about

2 Including: *To Koritsi me ta Mavra/A Girl in Black* (Cacoyannis, 1956); *Agioupa, to Koritsi tou Kampou/Bed of Grass* (Tallas, 1957); *Mandalena* (Dimopoulos, 1960); *Patera Katse Fronima/Father don't be Naughty* (Karayiannis, 1967); *Mia Zoi tin Ehoume/We Only Live Once* (Tzavellas, 1958); *Sinoikia to Oneiro/A Neighborhood Named the Dream* (Alexandrakis, 1961); *O Krahtis/The Leader* (Andritsos, 1964); *Prosopo me Prosopo/Face to Face* (Manthoulis, 1966); *Stella* (Cacoyannis, 1955); *I Theia apo to Sikago/The Aunt from Chicago* (Sakellarios, 1957); *Katiforos/The Fall* (Dalianidis, 1961); *Despoinis Dieftintis/Miss Director* (Dimopoulos, 1964).

an airplane accident, the dilemma faced by a worthless upper class “hero” between rejection and acceptance – even as a loser – by his own class. But the author decides not to juxtapose films of the same or similar genre, but rather to compare a genre film (*The Leader*) and an auteur film (*Prosopo me Prosopo/Face to Face* [Manthoulis, 1966,]) in which the working class hero abandons the upper class life, he has tasted for a while, to rejoin the rebellious lower-class Athenian youth. While the comparison between two completely different types of films – genre and auteur – is intriguing, it misses however two main parameters that interfere with the impact of the films’ representation: the massive character of a genre film established by repetition with variations, and the exceptionality of an auteur work “hidden” behind what one could also call an “art film”.

At this point, the relevance to the existing literature on Greek film should be addressed once more: the author seems to have avoided an exhaustive review of the material that has already been produced within the framework of Greek Film Studies and even more debating with it. He refers to previous works only if they reinforce his arguments (see the case of *Stella*, pp. 232-236), but regarding other films that have aroused considerable interest on the part of theorists and historians (e.g. *Miss Director*) his bibliographical readings are very selective. This does not imply that he is unaware of what has been written, but it rather characterizes his methodological approach. Moreover, in the context of a new study, it makes sense to give new meaning to concepts already visited by previous writers, but not without argumentation. This is, for instance, the case with the “social criticism” genre, which he sees as having a far broader scope than the one proposed by the study he refers to as defining and analyzing the specific genre³. Finally, I would have been extremely interested in Hadjikyriacou’s reading of stardom in Greek cinema in terms of masculinity, though not so much in terms of Soldatos’s well-known views from the 1980s (p. 87), which the author cites, as through the far more recent analysis by Nick Potamitis (2003) to which he refers only sporadically (pp. 73 & 205).

Still, all the above is compensated methodologically by the writer’s exploration of his corpus through the categories of locality, class and modernity. The methodological segregation between these three cognate categories in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 respectively is very thorough and fully elaborated and their clear delineation leaves the reader with a feeling of epistemological fulfillment: In the films examined in Chapter 3, rural areas, especially distant ones of the sort chosen by anthropologists, are closer to those elements of tradition that resisted the coming of foreign ideologies regarding the representation of masculinity. However, they also reveal alternative male identities and the negotiation of

3 Hadjikyriacou is referring to Kartalou (2005) [see pp. 92, 100 (n. 69) & 218]; whereas a much more narrow definition is given by his study (see pp. 166-226).

change (pp. 137-140). Chapter 4 concludes that class significantly impacts on gender representations; consequently, masculinity is not represented in the films as a solid entity, but rather as a concept in constant crisis (pp. 183-186). Finally, modernity, which is depicted completely differently depending on a film's genre, is more connected with the female presence as a force that obliges masculinity to renegotiate its given patriarchic order, as argued in Chapter 5 (pp. 238-243). However, the real power of the study lies not in these statements (or in any other of the writer's conclusions), but rather in the way the author opens up his subject to new readings, which are never exclusive or final, black or white; viewed, as they are, through the lenses of negotiation and change, these readings have the ability to 'bridge'. The final impression the author gives about the films he studies is of a fluid that takes its shape from the methodological tank in which it is placed.

Furthermore, apart from the close reading technique, an added value of this study is the contextualization the writer provides by introducing an extensive and exhaustive reference to the reception of the films – at the time of their release – on three levels: the way various audiences in cinemas all over Greece reacted to them⁴, what Greek film critics saw in these films, and how the foreign press received the films that were shown outside Greece. This approach really grounds the material in time and space, connecting it strongly to the society the films were addressing, and thus enriching our point of view and the field of Greek Film Studies. Critical reactions that might have been previously regarded as 'irrelevant' or 'personally motivated', in Hadjikyriacou's study, are presented within the explanatory framework of the well-grounded ideology of the period about the 'branding' of Greece through cinema and, more precisely, through the cinematic representation of gender. The writer thus clearly demonstrates the fear of the newspapers and critics of the era – almost regardless of their political views – that Greek cinema might give to the whole world a “wrong” impression of a primitive and immoral Greece. Moreover, the writer exposes the exoticism/Mediterraneanism⁵, used by the foreign press to present Greek films, as an analogy to the anthropological approaches discussed above. In this way, the circle of cinema – gender – society – history is completed.

Ending with the author's unique close readings of the selected films, there is no point, within the scope of a book review, to try to describe in detail what is new in every single analysis. What is important is that the twelve films that

4 Although I am not convinced by the fact that the author on various occasions takes male audience as the driving force of spectatorship without providing relevant argumentation (see pp. 164 & 182).

5 For the term, which has been coined as an analogy to “Orientalism”, see Herzfeld (1984: 439–454).

Hadjikyriacou includes in his study are approached equally and without judgments, even when more commercial and more artistic/auteurist works are being compared. The author is engaged in his cause and knows his material, which he reads with care and thoughtfulness without forcing conclusions to accommodate his theoretical framework. His academic endeavors are linked to the pleasure he extracts as a viewer in an obvious but unbiased manner – and this is not something that can be taken for granted when reading about post-war Greek cinema, where a supposedly 'superior' irony and sarcasm has been the hegemonic paradigm of discourse for many years. In other words, his readings of the films create a canon with which to approach Greek cinema and, at the same time, challenge in a positive way any future reading of these or any other Greek films.

The skepticism expressed above about the criteria that define the choice of the selected films can now take another form: while it may not be clear, methodologically speaking, whether these films are representative of the entire Greek production of the era or rather random selections based on their pertinence to the masculinity and gender relations agenda, their close reading can nonetheless be used as an example *par excellence* in applying the same set of gender approaches to the study of any other filmic text, star persona, genre aggregation, auteur work, or production company. It can serve as a creative exercise in any context in which Greek cinema is taught, since it provides students with a concrete means of building on their own further readings and more elaborate analyses in a manner that can enrich Greek Film Studies. Thus *Masculinity and Gender in Greek Cinema* by Achilleas Hadjikyriacou could indeed prove to be a truly “useful book” in promoting a better and deeper understanding of Greek cinema.

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