

BOOK REVIEW

The Invention of Place: Nostalgia and Memory in the Film A Touch of Spice

by Christos Dermentzopoulos
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Christos Dermentzopoulos's monograph *I Epinoisi tou Topou: Nostalgia ke Mnimi stin Politiki Kouzina / The Invention of Place: Nostalgia and Memory in the Film A Touch of Spice*, written in Greek and published by Opportuna in 2014, is a welcome addition to the scholarly study of Greek film for two reasons: Firstly, it is the first attempt in the study of Greek cinema in terms of audience perception (which aims to explain the appeal of the film to the audiences) as opposed to audience reception (Box Office). Secondly, it is a serious and sound effort to create a space for academic discourse on the interrelationship and interdependence between nostalgia, collective memory, and popular Greek cinema.

This monograph comes at a very critical time when Greek films, and in particular the so-called Greek Weird Wave, have been receiving critical acclaim in international film festivals all over the world, which might lead, as some of us would like, to the academic study of Greek cinema as a distinct field. So far the academic study of Greek cinema has mainly been conducted within Greece – and by a number of Greek scholars abroad – but the whole area of Greek film audience studies, and the relationship between Greek popular cinema and nostalgia, has been neglected. In this climate, Dermentzopoulos's monograph not only follows the current international trend and scholarly focus in Film Studies on nostalgia towards the past and nostalgic representations of the past in cinema, but it is one of the very few extensive works on individual Greek films as well. More importantly uncovers a critical space for reassessing the idea of Greek popular cinema within the context of nostalgia and space.

Here, Dermentzopoulos investigates Greek film differently: he examines the reasons for the immense popularity and success of Tassos Boulmetis's film *Politiki Kouzina/A Touch of Spice* (2003). As he discusses, the film was widely successful not only in Greece but also internationally, while it also received critical acclaim in film festivals and everywhere it was shown. It managed to bring back into the theatres in Greece audiences of all ages, including old people who returned to the cinemas after many years, namely since the Old Greek Cinema's heyday in the 1960s. The author argues that the film's immense success and popularity among different age groups lies in the film's capacity not only to evoke memories of family gatherings and coming together to older generations, but also to create such memories to the younger ones. This is succeeded in the film with the use of nostalgia, a powerful device in its own right, and the invention of the city of Istanbul as a place of memory (*lieu de memoire*). Hence, the film itself becomes a place of memory, while the ways it functions as such are reinforced by the pervasive reflective nostalgia in the film.

Svetlana Boym argued that there are two kinds of nostalgia that influence our understanding of our relationship with the past: restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia refers to the urgent need to hold on to origins as it has been fixed in collective memory. Restorative nostalgia sees the past as perfect, and can be found in nationalist movements, revivals, and reconstructions of monuments. In contrast, reflective nostalgia is meditative on the past with the view to create a better future (Boym 2001). While one might question whether his work overlooks the effects of restorative nostalgia in the film, following Boym's categorisation, Dermentzopoulos's innovative use of interviews and anecdotes makes his argument convincing, and a significant contribution to a field that has been dominated by strictly formal analyses. By renegotiating the approach to Greek film it provides a so much missed from the academic, and not only, community crucial examination of the little studied area of audience reception in Greek film studies. It utilises a cultural and anthropological approach in its analysis drawn particularly from cultural memory studies, nostalgia, and trauma studies. In this cultural and anthropological direction, and as the study of Greek film is slowly emerging internationally, Dermentzopoulos's book is a substantial and pioneering contribution towards the establishment of Greek film audience studies within Greece, and within a broader cultural perspective, as a legitimate and significant field of research.

Divided into six chapters, with an introduction and a conclusion, the book is smartly organized and also includes a very interesting and comprehensive preface/review by Sotiris Dimitriou. As Dermentzopoulos in his book examines the audience reception of *A Touch of Spice* and sets out to understand and

explain the reasons for its appeal, therefore, one of his first tasks is to present the reader with a detailed account of the film's box office success, as well as its critical acclaim. While *A Touch of Spice* was on the cinemas for a staggering whole year in Greece, what is interesting, and noticeable, is the wide range of people, in terms of age, to which the film appealed, similar and comparable only to the Old Greek Cinema's appeal in the 1960s as the author argues. Audiences showed either indifference or mere tolerance towards Greek cinema in later years and, hence, the general and wide acceptance of *A Touch of Spice* by audiences was indeed surprising. This in itself deserves academic attention, and as the author claims, it can be seen as a social and a cultural phenomenon. The cultural significance of the film lies not only in the fact that people went to the cinemas in bulks, but also in that they actively took part in the viewing. Although the film evokes many aspects of the Old Greek Cinema, for example the linear narrative or the melodramatic and comical elements in the film – albeit thrown into new circumstances – and cultural memories, Dermentzopoulos believes that this is not adequate to explain the film's success. *A Touch of Spice* is noteworthy for offering a more nuanced view of the power of nostalgia on the one hand, and the film's function as a place of memory (*lieu de memoire*) on the other. Because cinema influences collective identities, cultural memory and history, the film was able to show a broader range of the political and aesthetic dimensions of memory.

In the first chapter of his monograph, Dermentzopoulos presents his methodology drawn from anthropology and cultural studies. He discusses systematically and in satisfactory detail the chronological division of Greek cinema into Old, New, and Contemporary Greek Cinema, a division that has long obstructed the study of Greek cinema as a whole. In these circumstances the study of Greek film audience reception is almost absent. To avoid anti-historical analyses, the film is discussed in relation to the socio-economic and political conditions at the time it was made. Rather than analysing the form and style of the film, Dermentzopoulos's anthropological perspective offers the reader a different and meaningful way of understanding the film's success.

The second chapter explores the notions of collective and cultural memory and their powers, while it gives a brief account of Boym's categorisation of reflective and restorative nostalgia. Since one of the book's claims is that reflective nostalgia is pervasive in the film, here a deeper exploration of Boym's categorisation would perhaps be fruitful. The third chapter discusses the way in which the film was advertised in different parts of the world in terms of genre and narrative. This enables the reader to realise that the film worked on many levels, namely as a social film, a historical political movie, a family and political drama, or as a nostalgic coming-of-age soap opera. Hence its international

success relied partly on its multi-generic structure, and partly on its linear narrative.

The fourth chapter covers a narrative analysis of the film. The past transforms into the present as the protagonist narrates the story. However, Dermentzopoulos states that the film does not merely tell but shows, while the events are depicted in a linear way. This leads the author to argue that the narrative of the film is linear. However, the linear structure of the film argued here by the author seems to override the movements back and forth in time evident in the film. The protagonist remembers his childhood throughout the film, and his memories take the form of flashbacks. The discussion of the narrative of the film here is based on a detailed analysis of the plot, and it is a positive aspect of this chapter that Dermentzopoulos's interpretations do not intend to be exhaustive but suggestive, while the table detailing the narrative structure of the film provided at the end of the chapter is useful for the reader.

The fifth chapter discusses the discourse of the film in detail. As the author argues, the film is structured around two representations, which result firstly in the elevation of memory to an audience category, and secondly in the understanding of cinema as a medium that can manipulate memory. The presentation and analysis of the double structure of *A Touch of Spice* is particularly interesting, as this provides the reader the process through which the film develops, and more importantly, the working process through which nostalgia develops and works in the film. In doing so, Dermentzopoulos highlights that there are two functions of memory in play in the film: the representation of a counter memory to the official one, and the functions of performative memory. The performative memory evident in the film involves bodily practices. For example, in the film the characters' roles during meals are always specific, while the kitchen becomes the absolute social and cultural space for the Greeks in Istanbul, as well as a form of identity. As history always remains in the background, the film succeeds in showing the collective memories of the Greeks in Istanbul, and not the constructed memory of the official history based on the cosmopolitanism of Istanbul as a metropolis.

The last part of the book is dedicated to a fruitful discussion of the reasons why the audiences liked the film. The careful and well-researched analysis follows the pattern established in the previous sections, namely the role of the city of Istanbul as a constructed place of memory, and the powerful mechanisms of reflective nostalgia. The author shows that the linear narrative of *A Touch of Spice*, its melodramatic and comic elements, the choice of casting, and even its excellent technical aspects like *mise en scène*, photography, and the nostalgic soundtrack, were all important aspects for the film's success. Even the period the

film was made helped, as Greek-Turkish relations were good. However, as Dermentzopoulos argues, all the above are not adequate to explain the immense success of the film. It is the public history shown in *A Touch of Spice* that goes hand in hand with memory that made the audience identify with the characters in the film, and either evoked lost or buried memories, or created new ones. The book concludes with a summary of how the film creates these common places of memory, and its interdependence with nostalgia.

Although this monograph tries to cover an extraordinary amount of territory, Dermentzopoulos deliberately leaves the door open for future scholarship. For example, the inclusion of interviews in the analysis of the audience reception of the film is innovative and inspiring, but the author does not continue on this path to thoroughly examine these interviews in relation to the research questions laid out in the book. Moreover, a deeper exploration of the powerful notion of 'postmemory' would have added to and enhanced the argument. As Hirsch argues postmemories are transgenerational memories of traumatic events, and as such they are always mediated since they are marked by an "inevitable distance and lack of understanding" in the course of telling the story (2012: 13). Postmemory is particularly evident in the film through the narrative device of the child-protagonist, a device prominent in any postmemorial work according to Hirsch (2012). However, these are only small omissions. Dermentzopoulos's work is a valuable and in-depth anthropological examination of this very successful film, in Greece and internationally, and establishes space for further research in the field. Its greatest strength lies in the questions it generates to its readers: cinemagoers will likely find themselves thinking critically about the power of cinema as a medium. It also opens up a space for the neglected Greek cinematic tradition in audience perception and reception. Finally, the author's rich style of writing, his analytical skills, and sound theoretical knowledge make this work pleasurable to read.

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