

## BOOK REVIEW

***Η ελληνική βιντεοταινία (1985-1990): Ειδολογικές, κοινωνικές και πολιτισμικές διαστάσεις***  
***Greek Video Movies (1985-1990): Generic, Social and Cultural Dimensions***

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In 1983 publisher Antonis Lyberis launched a new bi-monthly magazine entitled *O kosmos tou video/Video World*. In its first editorial, Lyberis presented VCR as a novel technological miracle with the potential to change the everyday life of contemporary Greek consumers:

Video is a new product in our country [...] but its future is absolutely positive. If a [...] videocassette entertains, informs and popularizes new ideas why it cannot be the new form of the good, old book? [...] Video contains the sense of creativity. We believe that VCRs, cameras, videogames and personal computers, which now may exist in every household, represent a new terrain that we have to explore (Lyberis 1983: 5).

VCR did not appear only as a modern technological device that opened up new entertainment options but also as a good with subversive dynamics that liberated consumers from the restrictions of the Greek television of the 1980s. Although home videos had experienced considerable success in other European countries such as the United Kingdom since the very early 1980s (Murdock 1990: 79), they were not widely known in Greece when Lyberis's publishing

initiative foreshadowed a phenomenon that came to mark the second half of the decade. Year by year VCR ownership increased and emerged as a marker of modernization and prosperity claiming a privileged position in the sitting rooms of many Greek households. According to a survey, 24.6% of Greek households had a VCR in 1987-8 whilst 60.6% of those who owned such a device in 1988 had bought it after 1985 (Alisson 2004: 489, 491). Its popularity and importance as evidence of prosperity and well-being is confirmed by the popular 1980s slang phrase, "I wish your video burns out", a 'curse' showing that video was an expensive and sensitive device that in case of damage could hardly be replaced.

In the mid-1980s a prosperous industry emerged. From 1985 hundreds of video movies intended only to home consumption (so they were never screened in cinemas) were filmed by various producers usually within very few days and with low budget. These movies were mainly distributed through video clubs, small shops that rented video movies. Such enterprises flourished in the 1980s. According to data published in a specialized magazine there were around 40 video clubs in Greece in 1982, 900 in 1984 and 1,900 in 1986 (Anon 1987: 10).

Film cultures and entertainment practices in Greece of the late twentieth century have attracted the interest of some scholars in recent years<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, despite its importance in the cultural construction of domestic modernity, the phenomenon of videomovies had not been examined. Orsalia Eleni Kassaveti, a media scholar with a background in cultural studies and literature, is the first to attempt an in-depth examination of a phenomenon that marked Greek mass culture of the 1980s. Her book is based on the doctoral dissertation that Kassaveti defended at the Department of Communication and Media Studies of the University of Athens in 2012.

Kassaveti's book is divided into two parts consisting of three and two chapters respectively. The first part focuses on the context of the video movies placing emphasis on their generic dimensions and contexts. The second (shorter) part examines aspects of the broader social and cultural dimensions of the phenomenon. The first chapter that examines the generic dimensions of video movies starts with the author's attempt to historicize the phenomenon. The author distinguishes the development of the video movies market in three phases: video movies appeared in 1985-6, experienced big success in 1987-8 and declined in 1989-90. Kassaveti argues that video movies do not represent a completely autonomous genre, and most of them drew their topics from the "golden years" of commercial Greek cinema, namely the period between the late 1950s and the early 1970s. Indicatively, the video movie *O Tamtakos sto naftiko/Tamtakos in the Navy* (Vougiouklakis, 1987) is based on the film *I Alike sto naftiko/Alice in the Navy* (Sakellarios, 1961), a blockbuster starring Alike

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<sup>1</sup> See indicatively Papadimitriou and Tzioumakis (2012).

Vougiouklaki, one of the most popular stars of the time. Many famous actors and actresses of the 1960s, such as Rena Vlachopoulou, played in video movies in the 1980s repeating film characters that had made them popular. Another feature of video movies is the standardization of roles. Actors who had been successful playing a particular role as, for example, Vina Asiki, the “sexy cat” of the 1980s, who became famous playing the sexy professor in early 1980s school comedies such as *Roda, tsanta kai kopana/ Wheel, Bag and Truants* (Efstratiadis, 1982) continued playing provocative roles in subsequent video movies.

In the next two chapters Kassaveti examines the major topics of video movie production distinguishing them as “open” and “closed”. Kassaveti defines as “open” the stories that revolve around multiple scenario possibilities (namely their plot is hardly predictable) such as love comedies, social dramas and action movies and as “closed” those whose narrative structure, conventions, heroes, *mise en scène* and plot are from the outset strictly predetermined and based on older filmic models. The author examines how, although social and political conditions in 1980s Greece significantly differed from the 1960s, many video movies reproduced stylistic and thematic conventions of 1960s films. In many cases contributors did not try to produce movies characterized by originality especially regarding plots. However, since they reproduced patterns directly adopted from the cinema of the 1960s some video movies did not reflect the social and cultural environment of the 1980s. Kassaveti provides comparisons between the cinema of the 1960s and the video movies of the 1980s adequately backing the argument. However, perhaps a more systematic use of a broader historical bibliography in this chapter could have given even more depth in the analysis.

The third chapter deals with stereotypical characters, situations and social prejudices on specific groups (defined by class, ethnicity, age, profession and social status) in the video movies. Kassaveti detects eight main themes: a) the representation of Romani, a group of films dominated by the character of Tamtakos, a Romani figure successfully embodied by actor Michalis Mosios, b) school comedies based on a bipolar narration representing high school students as humorous and unruly and their teachers as conservative, c) social dramas that discussed juvenile delinquency and emergent juvenile problems such as drug abuse reproducing the aesthetics of some successful early 1980s social dramas such as *Ta tsakalia/The jackals* (Dalianidis, 1981), d) comedies about priests portrayed as oddly progressive or extremely conservative, e) comedies depicting the adventures of ignorant Greek rural villagers, f) comedies that ridiculed the naivety of Pontic Greeks, g) comedies that made fun of the blunders of policemen and armed forces personnel, and, h) those that satirized the clumsiness and amateurism of private detectives and spies. Here Kassaveti provides a historically sensitive analysis highlighting interconnections between the 1980s

and previous decades. Indicatively, in her analysis of comedies based on the adventures of peasants, Kassaveti shows how this topic exemplifies the old-fashioned aesthetics of video movies. Domestic migration had characterized the first post-civil-war decades giving plenty of material to comedy scriptwriters of the 1960s to parody the adventures of the newly-arrived in Athens rural migrants who tried to become accustomed to urban lifestyles. Since domestic migration decreased in the 1970s the reproduction of such stereotypes in the 1980s disclaimed elements of humanist narration, being exclusively based on formalist narrations of rural people investing in the fact that older audiences were familiar with comic representations of provincialism. By contrast, the adventures of Pontic Greeks were based on the fourth wave of immigration from the former USSR to Greece in the late 1980s that provoked various disparaging representations of Pontic Greeks such as the Pontic anecdotes.

The fourth chapter examines the social dimensions of video movies. Kassaveti sees the VCR as an object with futuristic and subversive dynamics in a society characterized by a saturated state-owned mediascape. The author traces how VCRs emerged as devices with subversive and liberating dynamics giving their owners increasing entertainment options. She outlines how VCR's success contributed to the ticket crisis Greek cinema had experienced beginning from the early 1970s to culminate in the late 1980s. Providing an affordable means of entertainment (only the device itself was expensive) video attracted large audiences comprised mainly of viewers (interested in comedies and melodramas), who, in the 1960s and 1970s, attended commercial films. Such audiences, interested in movies without political commitment or complex messages willingly abandoned commercial cinema for the sake of video movies. The last part of this chapter, where Kassaveti provides a fresh insight on how the video-movie industry was organized, is particularly interesting because although many of us are familiar with issues related to video movies, the production process is largely unknown. We discover, for example, that in 1986 a video festival was established, which in 1987 took place in the prestigious Zappeion Hall in Athens. Kassaveti reveals that video movie production was (at least partially) recognized as a part of the mainstream culture industry and was not considered as a marginal cultural terrain.

The last chapter examines the cultural dimensions of the phenomenon. Identifying connotation and horizontal intertextuality as remarkable features of this genre, Kassaveti explores why video movies succeeded despite their aesthetic poverty and lack of originality. The author claims that video movies highlighted aspects of everyday life in the 1980s incorporating them into popular culture. On the one hand, their realistic dimensions were related to the proliferating uses of video cameras in everyday life. If in the 1970s and the early 1980s they were very rare, after 1985 video cameras were increasingly used for

recording personal moments and important family events such as marriages. On the other hand, location shooting of video movies took place in familiar, everyday settings, such as cafes and discotheques; by incorporating familiar everyday trajectories and mapping juvenile cultural geographies, video movies became popular with large audiences. Moreover, they drew on current affairs discussing developments such as the establishment of the National Health Care System (ΕΣΥ) and the implementation of VAT (ΦΠΑ) in the mid-1980s, the scandals leading to the 1988-89 political crisis or public fears of radioactivity after the Chernobyl disaster in 1986. Despite their aesthetic shortcomings, video movies included elements of realism and had an ephemeral charm, two qualities that attracted many viewers.

Kassaveti's book is a valuable contribution to the study of contemporary Greek popular culture. The author analyzes her topic exhaustively as part of broader sociocultural developments. Kassaveti's analysis benefits from a wide range of historical and cultural references (visual and textual) and comparisons with not only the years immediately prior to the rise of the phenomenon, namely the early 1980s, but also with earlier periods such as the 1960s, considering thus wider historical processes which were originated in the first post-Civil-War years. Such a perspective, in the context of the history of Greek visual culture, unsettles commonplace assumptions of Greek political history that sees the years before and after the restoration of democracy in 1974 as mainly characterized by discontinuities.

Kassaveti's study is notable for contributing to the scholarly turn towards the study of middlebrow mass cultures, which have been examined only sporadically, and is arresting for at least two reasons: First, it portrays the ways in which many issues of the Greek past and (in the 1980s) present – e.g. upward social mobility, changes in family and moral values, deviance, performances of prosperity, and relations between the state and the church – were discussed by a field of popular cultural production, as sociologist Panayis Panagiotopoulos aptly argues in the book's preface. Second, Kassaveti explores in depth cultural products that although they were widely popular in the 1980s and beyond – e.g. private TV channels such as 'Kanali 5'/'Channel 5' screened video movies regularly in the 1990s and later – have often been described by various media as cult.<sup>2</sup> By having implicitly but effectively crossed borderlines between high-status visual products and images of low cultural status whose thematic context and cultural influences are often underestimated, Kassaveti's book encourages readers to understand why emphasis on mass culture is of pivotal importance.

The study draws on an impressive videography and filmography – including 990 titles in total – on magazines and newspapers of the time and on an

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<sup>2</sup> For an example see Rokou (2015).

interdisciplinary bibliography with emphasis on sociology and media studies. This demanding research is presented in five chapters and 608 endnotes. However, the endnote section (covering 108 pages) is huge and rather unwieldy while much information included in the endnotes should have either been more briefly presented in the main text or more effectively summarized in the endnote section. Another issue is that Kassaveti often uses excessive examples describing storylines and giving names of contributors etc., at the expense of the analysis, a practice that (occasionally) disrupts the reader's attention.

There are some issues on which, in my opinion, Kassaveti should have placed more attention. Greater emphasis on gender politics is the most important one. The late 1970s and the 1980s was a period of transformations in gender roles largely boosted by changes in laws implemented by the first PASOK government (1981-1985). For instance, gender-mixed schools were established in 1979. Three years later, the 1982 education law abolished the obligatory use of school uniforms by females. These changes created the framework on which the scripts of the school comedies that Kassaveti analyzes were based. As the identities that Kassaveti discusses throughout the book are deeply engendered and taking into account that gender power relations changed significantly in the 1980s, I would expect more emphasis on shifts in performances of masculinities, femininities and queer politics and on subsequent transformations in representational politics and hierarchies.

Another point on which Kassaveti could have placed more emphasis is the role of VCR in the formation of technological communities (e.g. amateur filmmakers), an issue indicatively raised by Lyberis (as mentioned in the beginning of this review). Obviously, as the device was popularized, this role weakened as most users were interested in the consumption and not in the production of visual material. It is worth noting that although VCR ownership soared in the 1980s, home video cameras remained rather unpopular even in the early 1990s, as according to one estimate only 3.8% of Greek households owned one (Focus 1991: 199). However, this aspect of the phenomenon is absent from the fourth chapter of the book, where it could usefully have been discussed. Did the VCR contribute to the development of passive relations between visual cultures and audiences? Or, how active the audiences were in the production of video movies? Although such questions go perhaps beyond the author's main questions I would expect some more thoughts on the (potentially) active role of audiences in the creation of a new terrain in Greek visual culture of the 1980s, particularly as the active role of audiences in the production of visual culture trends have been increasingly discussed by media anthropologists in recent years.

In conclusion, Kassaveti's book is a notable contribution to the existing literature. The book deserves to be read by scholars and students in the humanities and by the general public. It explores a phenomenon that marked

everyday life politics in a period that shaped contemporary lifestyles, drawing on an impressive collection of primary and secondary sources while dealing with them from an interdisciplinary point of view. Finally, the book is worth reading because Kassaveti successfully undertakes the risk to investigate a topic that despite being important within middlebrow everyday cultures remained for long in the margins of scholarly interest. Taking into account that in Greece 'elite' aesthetics (cultural products addressed to upper-class and educated audiences, the intelligentsia, etc.) have been systematically accepted as deserving of academic analysis while cultural products made for mass consumption have been largely overlooked, Kassaveti's study is a bold venture that challenges dominant choices employed by Greek scholars, in productive and thought-provoking ways. And if we need authors who can write well-documented analyses we need even more authors that take risks to open up new and intriguing topics something that Kassaveti also does with this book.

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