

## BOOK REVIEW

*Από τον πρώιμο στον σύγχρονο  
Ελληνικό Κινηματογράφο:  
Ζητήματα μεθοδολογίας,  
θεωρίας, ιστορίας*

*From Early to Contemporary  
Greek Cinema: Questions of  
methodology, theory, history*

edited by Maria Paradeisi & Afroditi Nikolaidou

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Reading a new book on Greek cinema is like starting the exploration of a familiar and yet totally unknown imaginative landscape. For the Greek viewers today, especially those who grew up watching Greek films, one after another, during the golden age of Greek cinema in the 1950s and after, the familiar faces of actors, the household narratives of their stories, and the demotic aesthetics of their images seem to develop new meanings as we look back at them critically and from the distance of time.

As we study the succession of films from a present day point of view, we discover complex underlying processes of meaning and codes of representation which have passed unnoticed by the film critics, historians or reviewers when these films were first released. The change of context has led to a change in the texts themselves – not simply in the reception of the filmic texts but in their actual meaning, intentional or not. It is the complexity of the Greek cinema as a social

and aesthetic phenomenon that makes their study so interesting and necessary today, in the era of post-national or indeed post-cinematic mode of filmic production. Moreover, it is obvious that a new generation of scholars, educated particularly after the 1990s and who witnessed the gradual demise of Greek cinema, first by the onslaught of television, then by the gradual bureaucratisation of production and finally by the devastating economic crisis after 2010, started exploring questions of methodology, theory and history, which have remained unaddressed and probably undiscussed for far too long.

The present volume, so meticulously and diligently put together by two of the most promising scholars in Greek film and media studies, offers the unique opportunity to view the complexities and the intricacies of Greek cinematic production from certain early films, when organised production began, down to our contemporary post-cinematic digitalised images in the strange period of total crisis that we still experience at the moment. It is a unique collection of articles which, through a variety of approaches and a diversity of questions, aspires to bring together commonalities as well as dissimilarities in the production of Greek films, their dissemination, historical setting, reception, anthropological references, political ideology, formal structure and, ultimately, cultural significance.

The volume offers some surprisingly diverse and multidimensional approaches to cinematic images as formal constructs, social texts, material products, symbolic spaces, and visual experiences. The chapters written by various contributors fuse history, theory, and form under persistent questions of diverse methodologies, centred around the crucial question of how we are to approach such filmic texts in an interpretive and historically accurate manner. The editors worked with material from a seminar on Greek cinema that took place between 2013-14. The papers therefore are characterised by heterogeneity and the personal choices of individual scholars; in that sense they are not based on a common ground or start from a specific point of view. The editors divided them in two parts; the first entitled 'From Early Greek Cinema until the Time of its Mass Production' ('Από τον Πρώιμο Ελληνικό Κινηματογράφο στην Περίοδο της Μαζικής Παραγωγής του') which focuses on the first seven decades of Greek cinema and 'From the New to Contemporary Greek Cinema' ('Από τον Νέο στον Σύγχρονο Ελληνικό Κινηματογράφο') which explores the period after the movement we call the New Greek Cinema which appeared in 1970. The contributions in both parts are extraordinarily diverse and radically different, yet the editors manage to compile a sequential line of arguments that elucidate historical aspects of the production, while simultaneously raising questions of structural-formal approaches especially in the second part of the volume. Maria Paradeisi stresses in her prologue that "[...] although the topics presented have been explored in the past, their approach is novel, combining film studies with

theoretical approaches from the field of historiography, sociology, anthropology, town-planning, musicology, and gender studies” (p. 10).

By all means the scope is extremely large and ambitious. The first part consists of four seminal texts. The first one by Manolis Arkolakis investigates one of the most vexed questions of Greek cinema’s historical development, that of its periodisation. Irrespective of whether one accepts the suggestions made in the chapter, the reader finds an amazing array of information about the early period as Arkolakis incorporates cinematic production to the general context of European capitalist modernity (p. 40). The chapter sets out a new agenda of questions which have to be taken in consideration every time we attempt to discuss the historiography around Greek cinema. It also paves the way for fresh approaches to the early forces that contributed to the emergence of filmic production in Greece.

The chapter by Orsalia-Eleni Kassaveti on Greek melodrama is a detailed and systematic analysis of the development of the genre in the country, its formal poetics, and narrative logic. Kassaveti suggests that the “nature of the genre itself dictated a [...] reconciliatory logic: distinct for its ritual function, tried to familiarise its viewers [...] with harsh reality and normalise the prevailing injustice, of class or other origin” (p. 69). It explores with meticulous care the rise and fall of Greek melodrama as a genre in its similarity and difference from the dominant Hollywood tradition. The next contribution by Nikos Poulakis is a fascinating exploration of the role of music in the Greek cinema of the 1960s, especially in the productions of Finos Films. The analysis of the work of composer Mimis Plessas is really unique and highly inspiring. Poulakis concludes the “music and song constitute essential parameters which contribute to the formation of specific aesthetic conventions, preferences and specificities in the Greek cinema of the 1960s [...]” (p. 101).

The ethnographic-anthropological approach in the next chapter by Mimina Pateraki is also significant and provocative. As it states from the start, it takes the people who watch films seriously, especially in the case of the working class area of Korydallos, and studies their reactions, re-enactments and re-imagining of the experience of watching Greek films especially in terms of singing and dancing. The narratives of the people are really indicative of the profound socialising effect of movie-going. As Pateraki stresses “it focuses on the diverse mediations which the cinematic chorus causes as ‘residue’ involving historical time and social memory” (p. 131). Although it is time to move beyond the restrictive and schematic division between Hellene/Greek and Romaic that Michael Herzfeld has suggested some many decades ago, the narratives of the participants raise some extremely important questions about the polymorphous cultural experiences of Greek audiences.

The second part of the volume focuses on specific works and movements by analysing a number of different questions. Maria Paradeisi in her contribution discusses the gendered dimensions of space and labour in New Greek Cinema, especially in the films *Reconstruction* by Theo Angelopoulos and *Anna's Engagement* by Pantelis Voulgaris. The essay is an intriguing analysis of gender representation in these two seminal films, although its scope embraces the whole of filmic production in the early 1970s. Paradeisi states that both films are exceptional because “[...] their central characters are women, bringing to the fore crucial dimensions of their latent or visible oppression within the context of patriarchal Greek society” (p. 166).

Afroditi Nikolaidou's contribution on the formal representation of Athens in modern Greek cinema offers an exemplary analysis of urban space as cinematic material over a period of time examining the ways in which “the filmed Athens is not only the one that is presented as the protagonist (as for example *Apo tin akritis polis/From the Edge of the City* [Giannaris, 1998]) but the one which silently, almost in absentia, unseen, functions as the framework for the stories” (p. 197). Athens as a cinematic space will definitely be one of the most fertile topics of investigation for the future of Greek films studies and Nikolaidou's contribution sets solid foundation towards that direction.

Ioannis Skopeteas's study on the transition of the old film production industries to contemporary digital electronic images is extremely interesting in its analysis of the consequences of the transition of the production itself and its impact on its aesthetics. “There is no more ‘cinematic’ but ‘visual-aural’ production something which is also recorded in the official legislation framework after 2010 [...]” concludes the essay (p. 232). Aspasia Lykourgoti's contribution on acting, discussing the famous French actor Jean-Pierre Léaud and the Greek Vangelis Mourikis, is one of the best analyses of the role of actors, through the specificity of their presence and character, on the impact of films on the collective social experience. Mourikis himself is an actor with wide-range of acting styles, both angry and soft, a strange eccentric figure in contemporary Greek cinema weaving, what Lykougriotis calls “the relationship between the existential characteristics of the actor and the characteristics of its symbolic image” (p. 259).

Maria Chalkou's article on heritage films in Greek cinema examines from a variety of perspectives the recent proliferation of heritage films through the lens of nostalgia, transnationalism, and cosmopolitanism. Through them Chalkou states that “[...] the reconstruction of the national imaginary, as it emerges from heritage films, is accompanied by the reconstruction of the imaginary of Greek cinema itself” (p. 279). This has already led to the revival of film attendance and the image of a new filmic culture, with European identity, both national and transnational. Heritage films have also changed the perception of local audiences

about Greek films, according to Chalkou. This is a very hopeful message and indicates the new trends in spectator studies which might lead to a new interpretation of the act of watching films based on local experiences.

Anna Poupou's study examines the underrated case of Philippos Tsitos's cinema whose distinct work presents an aesthetic and formal density that needs further exploration. Poupou contextualises Tsitos's films within the framework of the so-called Greek Weird Wave, but also explores its innovations and deviations from the norms and conventions of other cinematographers, like Yorgos Lanthimos, Athena-Rachel Tsangari, Ektoras Lygizos, Argyris Papadimitropoulos amongst others. She concludes that "[...] Tsitos's films, despite their differentiations from the rest of contemporary Greek art films and despite the fact that many of their aspects move in the intermediate spaces, can be considered as belonging to the hard core of the New Wave aesthetics" (p. 299). Detailed studies of each one of these filmmakers are imperative as their work evolves in front of our eyes. The whole process indicates the constant interaction between society and cinema.

The last essay of the volume belongs to Yun-hua Chen exploring Greek cinema through Gilles Deleuze's idea of 'any-space-whatever,' a space that leaves inhabitants uncertain and indecisive about how to react to their surrounding spatial and temporal realities. It explores the representations of such random social spaces in a number of recent films connecting with films from global cinema in order to explore its oscillations between virtual and actual states of time in the implied social experiences. The author concludes that "Greek cinema by promoting silence and by disconnecting the signified from the signifiers, is involved in the multiplication and transmutation of 'any-space-whatever' inhabited by characters-observers" (p. 319). This is a very crucial observation in order to understand the absurdist tendency that dominates the Greek Weird Wave and is at the heart of cinematic representation.

Historically, Greek film production occupies indeed a very peculiar space – I would call it an *epiphenomenal space* – in which social poetics confronted the policies of a repressive state and established almost by accident an amazingly fertile ground for cinematic visualisation. It is also obvious that the cinematic imaginary emerged triumphant from its confrontation with the dark undercurrents of Greek society, especially patriarchy, intolerance and minority invisibility, as the modernist projects of self-reflection were submerged or absent. Already from the early 1930s, great filmmakers struggled against the negativity of the official state which fought persistently to control the industry and censor its creative freedoms. The conflict between state and society is the most obvious characteristic of the cinematic tradition in Greece. Greek cinema was and still remains the imaginative space of a society without a state, in which free-flowing signifiers of individual and occasionally loosely organised groups

manage to overcome the adversities of legal restrictions or the absence of coordinated movements or waves.

The contributions in this volume explore in a chronological sequence and in a diachronic manner the transmutations of aesthetical projects over the last hundred years. All together they seem to form a continuum which explores some almost permanent dysfunctionalities in Greek society as well some latent asymmetries between space and time as imaginative constructs in the field of visual representation. The volume also raises certain serious theoretical questions regarding its own way of approaching its material. Most of the chapters oscillate between different conceptual frameworks; namely the purely empirical which seems to dominate film studies in Greece and the ambitiously theoretical which is more prevalent in approaches in languages other than Greek, especially in English. Such a hybrid form of investigation is extremely important, although uneven, because it shows that much historical research is still needed. Considerable theoretical reflection must also be done on the existing body of films as historical artefacts. Sometimes the seduction of a new theory (with most of them articulated in other cinematic traditions in which ongoing conversations and debates have been taking place) has changed the postmodern maxim 'always historicise' into a new slogan declaring 'forget history'. Certainly a coherent and solid narrative and interpretation cannot be articulated on the basis of facts alone; yet over-theoretisation (of a reductionist kind as mentioned earlier) is not helpful either. The first approach fails to establish a common framework of references whereas the latter diminishes creative efforts into instants and specimens of a theory (and today there are more theories than films).

It seems a prudent choice on behalf of the editors to follow the middle path exploring both specific films, directors, actors and composers and connect their work with general themes like spatialities, gendered dimensions of space, cultural past, spectatorship, heritage films, and poetics. In their antithetical morphology the studies tend towards a synthesising narrative which is ultimately the central contribution of the volume, proving how much more must be done and how many more conversations we need to start about the construction of cinematic visuality in the country.

As Maria Katsounaki in her review of the volume noticed, the volume is structured around an internal dialogue, "as if each contributor passes the baton to the next one and despite the different cognitive disciplines and theoretical approaches, the different epochs and the different study objects of each one of them, the final result is a unified narrative" (*Kathimerini*, 11-3-2018). Indeed, one of the most crucial projects in contemporary Greek Film Studies is the gradual weaving of such a unified narrative, of a general theory on Greek cinema, based on a coherent language and structured around a nuanced and diverse approach to the phenomenon of cinematic experience in the country. The next

step of course would be to dismantle and deconstruct such narrative but we cannot at the moment do so with something that does not exist.

Yet as I have suggested time and again, the absence of many studies indicates that we are still struggling to articulate a specific language for the construction of the field of cinematic production in the country, which wouldn't simply imitate or copy dominant theories or discursive practices, but would delineate the specific social discourses and cultural practices that defined the cinematic imaginary amongst Greek filmmakers (including actors, directors, editors, photographers, make-up artists, or digital effect creators in all genres possible). The desire for such a language becomes urgent as very few attempts so far try to address the question of the specificity of Greek cinema and its relevance to the cultural and aesthetic conversations of today.

Greek Film Studies are still in their infancy – and this is both demoralising and exciting. We need more volumes like the present one exploring as many aspects as possible in order to establish a distinct discipline with its own questions, practices and principles. Consequently, every new book on Greek cinema constitutes a significant intervention towards that direction which one day must be completed, in my opinion, with a university centre for studies on Greek cinema and media culture. As seen from the previous brief description, this volume is one of most significant contributions towards the establishment of a solid, informed and inquisitive approach to Greek cinema. It avoids the usual folklore around well-known films and stays away from the personal politics that influenced specific practices especially in such a small and money-hungry cinematic market. Overall, the volume explores the film culture and the film industry with special attention to historical detail and care for the interstitial spaces between cinema, politics and social tensions that allowed, through their cracks and rifts, the emergence of images that go beyond the limitations of their historical conditions.

We must always remember that cinema in Greece played the role of the most significant cultural industry for socialisation and subjectification, visualising strategies through which political subjectivity as well as political dissidence were created simultaneously in a dialectical continuum. Greek cinema has been the field of cultural production in which premodernity, modernity, and postmodernity all coexisted in an extremely puzzling interconnection. The volume provides an abundance of material, reflections and future projects to be taken on by young scholars; as such this volume will change many stereotypical ideas about Greek cinema, enrich its cultural problematics and expand its ideological parameters. Greek film studies are grateful to both editors for their decisive and vital contribution to the emerging field.