

BOOK REVIEW

*Αμερικανικές σειρές στην
ελληνική τηλεόραση
Δημοφιλής κουλτούρα και
ψυχοκοινωνική δυναμική
American series on Greek
television
Popular culture and
psychosocial dynamic*

edited by Vasilis Vamvakas and Angeliki Gazi
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The collective volume entitled *American series on Greek television: Popular culture and psychosocial dynamic*, edited by Vasilis Vamvakas and Angeliki Gazi was published in 2017 and is part of a series under the auspices of Papazisis Publications and the general supervision of Nikos Demertzis.¹ It is centered around the conditions of broadcasting and reception of US television programs in Greece since 1967, with a particular interest towards registering their impact on the identity of the Greek television viewer. It is an incredibly valuable

¹ The series includes both original works such as George Pleios's (ed.) *Η κρίση και τα ΜΜΕ/The Crisis and the Media* (2013) and Maria Kontochristou's *Ταυτότητα και ΜΜΕ στη Σύγχρονη Ελλάδα/Identity and the Media in Contemporary Greece* (2007), as well as translations of important Anglophone publications, all at the intersection of Society, Politics and the Media.

contribution to Greek-language scholarship, enriching and boosting the study of Greek television. It radiates a newly-established confidence in the scholarly analysis of a rather underresearched subject, which is slowly claiming its place among media and cultural studies in Greece through serious and well-coordinated attempts such as the one led by Vamvakas and Gazi.

The general introduction provided by Nikos Demertzis constitutes a presentation of the volume's contribution, especially in relation to its distance from the theoretical orientation of sociological analysis as a tradition of sociological studies in Greece. Instead, what is emphasized is the volume's commitment to the support of theoretical notions and arguments by rich empirical material, the combination of quantitative and qualitative studies, as well as its reading as gap-filler of the general social history of the media in Greece. However, it is in the editors' introduction where a clearer motivation for this volume becomes more evident. Vamvakas and Gazi have identified two important research gaps. Firstly, the underestimation of the relationship between Greece and the USA on a cultural level in the history of contemporary Greece and, secondly, the underestimation of Greek television and the status of US television programs for local audiences. Especially in relation to the latter, they argue for the value of the study of television as "a privileged field for the exercise of a critical, but at the same time not elitist, way of understanding contemporary popular culture" (p. 24).

In response to the above research questions, the editors provide a clear view of the dual analytical framework followed in the constituent parts of the book. This consists of (a) the historical analysis of the programming of Greek television when it comes to US television programs and (b) issues of reception, including the symbolic and imaginative projections and uses from the viewers themselves, the fans, and the critics. In this sense, the editors deservedly believe that they "[...] trace a research field, significantly virgin, in Greek scientific bibliography which finds itself at the intersection between the sociology of media, cultural studies and social psychology, at the intersection of political and popular culture between individual, psychological and social processes" (p. 26-27).

In line with the two clearly identified analytical approaches described in the introductory chapter, the volume is divided into two parts, each one consisting of seven lengthy chapters. The first part, under the subtitle 'History of the flow, mediation, and impact of American television series in Greece' ('Ιστορία της ροής, διαμεσολάβησης και απήχησης των αμερικανικών τηλεοπτικών σειρών στην Ελλάδα'), begins with an insightful chapter by Grigoris Paschalidis. The chapter focuses on the study of US television fiction broadcast between 1967 and 1974, the dictatorship years, and it is mostly geared towards evaluating their place in the channels' programming. The author identifies their generic position, as well as initiates a discussion about their ideological veneer by taking into

consideration their socio-cultural context. The chapter provides valuable arguments and observations covering a wide variety of underresearched topics, including a sub-periodization of the television of the dictatorship years, the basic scheduling principles and time slots of the channels, the duration, format and genre of television programs, their production time, the co-presence of foreign production coming from countries other than the US, a comparative lens on the operation and orientation of the two channels, as well as a brief presentation of some of the most iconic programs which were broadcast at the time. This multilayered analytical approach provides the foundation for the articulation of the basic argument that Paschalidis offers; the fact that empirically-based evaluations of television content have the possibility to question generalizations leading to its understanding as mere propagandistic or escapist entertainment. In this way he challenges a well-established yet frail 'accusation' of television as an ideological instrument of the dictators, which has translated into a general aphoristic attitude towards Greek television, and calls for closer attention to the "heterogeneity, complexity, and the unpredictable dynamic of the cultural" (p. 45).

Philippos Pappas takes up the baton delivering a chapter on the first period after the regime change (1974-1981), which he addresses as a critical era associated with the "development of the private mass entertainment, television, television series, but also when it comes to the survival of older forms of mass culture [...]" (p. 109). His study registers ruptures and discontinuities in the Greek television landscape through a comparison with the earlier period of dictatorship. One of the strengths of this contribution is the detailed presentation of the foreign productions which appeared during this time, in juxtaposition with the local productions which were slowly gaining ground, explaining the conditions of their co-existence on the basis of different practical and socio-cultural functions they had.

Orsalia-Eleni Kassaveti's chapter is a good example of a strong tradition of Greek television scholarship, one that recognizes the symbiotic relationship between politics and television. Kassaveti focuses on the period between 1981-1989, which she connects with the prominence of PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist Movement) and the notion of 'Αλλαγή/Change'. The author explains the efforts initiated by the government of PASOK for the reclaiming of Greek public television by domestic programming, in contrast with the dominance of foreign productions which characterized previous years. In line with the previous chapters, this one also contains a rich cartography of the productions broadcast during the period under investigation. The chapter also includes an insightful analysis of the soap opera as a genre which shaped new viewing habits, as well as a separate section which explains the influences of US television fiction on the commercial cinematic production and the video culture during the 1980s.

The fourth chapter, authored by George Markatas, examines the place of US fiction during the period of the introduction of the private channels until the time of the emergence of pay-TV. Markatas's study is particularly interesting because it clarifies the practical function and status of foreign television programs on Greek television (i.e. as cheap and attractive programs which would attract audiences). The chapter also refers to the conditions that allowed the emergence and prominence of Greek television fiction on the prime time slots of private channels, discussing this as a specificity of Greek television in relation to other European media landscapes.

In the following chapter, Dimitra Karantzeni focuses on a particularly interesting period for the Greek media which, she argues, is associated with the "blooming of the new 'quality' American fiction, as well as important developments which have to do with media convergence and the financial crisis" (p. 251). Karantzeni's chapter examines how the question of quality, one of the biggest debates which have characterized television studies in recent years, translates into choices in the programming of Greek television channels, concluding that it resulted in local adaptations of popular US programs, as well as programs that indicate some kind of narrative, directorial or thematological affiliation with the requirements of quality television.

The chapter authored by Isavella Logotheti differentiates itself from the other contributions in this first part of the collective volume in the sense that it focuses on television programs that were not on broadcast television, but were available to Greek audiences through downloading or streaming services. It touches upon the concept of media convergence and it contains reactions from Greek viewers concerning their new viewing habits, the turn towards a more ritualistic approach towards 'television viewing', the phenomenon of 'binge-watching', and the development of fan communities.

The final chapter of the first part of the volume, written by Vasilis Vamvakas, can be read as a meta-commentary on the previous chapters and a return to one of the initially articulated research quests of the project overall: the study of television as a resource for reading the official-political history and the cultural/ideological processes of each of the periods studied in the previous chapters. Vamvakas's chapter corroborates the argument that by following the ways that American television has influenced Greek media and society, through its programming, its ratings, and the critical commentary published in the press and online, we can make some initial observations regarding a so-called parallel history of Greek society. This has to do with the "two-fold reception" of Greek cultural products on Greece, ranging from a condition of syncing with western consumer standards and practices to reactions against a western dominance (coming both from right- and left-wing criticism) (p. 348). While Vamvakas admits that the full history of the flows of American culture in Greece is still a

matter under investigation, he appears to come to this original finding: when it comes to television, the inflow of American influences – through their specificity as products meant to be consumed at home – led to a more generalized habit, “shaping selective identities and contemporary relations of intimacy” (p. 349). Through a synthetic approach combining the discussion of theoretical models and numerous references to popular television shows, Vamvakas proves his competence in providing macro-readings of the history and impact of television on contemporary Greek society, shedding light at the same time to distinctive paths that can be explored in the future.

The second part of the volume is subtitled ‘Reception of American television series: Psychosocial and cultural characteristics of the Greek viewer’ (Πρόσληψη αμερικανικών τηλεοπτικών σειρών: Ψυχοκοινωνικά και πολιτισμικά χαρακτηριστικά του Έλληνα τηλεθεατή) and begins with a historically-oriented exploration of the specific conditions that shaped the political, economic and cultural relationship between the USA and Europe since the 19th century, with an emphasis on the development of anti-American sentiments and anti-Americanism as an ideology which emerged mainly after the end of WWII. In a clear and perceptive manner, the second editor, Angeliki Gazi, explains the particular circumstances which enabled the development of anti-Americanism in Greece, laying out the multi-faceted nature of the notion; as an ideology, as a governmental practice/policy, as a rhetoric. Eventually, she identifies the 1980s as a key era and area of research which can shed further light on the cultural impact of US influences in Greece and talks about the media as an important parameter which can inform our understanding of how the cultural identity of the Greek viewer after the regime change was shaped. Based on data coming from a set of qualitative interviews with Greek television viewers exposed to American TV programs from the 1970s until today, the author suggests that local audiences consider American television products as “vehicle[s] of liberation from well-established, traditional values and ideals, as text[s] which function in an encouraging manner for the constitution of modern and postmodern identities that enhances identification processes with projected gendered roles and redefines the ethics of interpersonal relationships, as well as the content of the collective in relation to the individual” (p. 397).

Evangelia Kourti’s chapter is a case study of the emblematic American TV series *Combat!* (1962-1967) ABC. Kourti treats it as an import which potentially serves particular interests during the period of its broadcast (1968-1971 and 1974-1979). A close reading of the case in question, in combination with comments made by viewers on various websites, offer a reading of the series which questions its assumed propagandistic character and highlights, instead, its multi-layered reception from Greek audiences, resonating more “critical and humanistic approaches” to WWII (p. 434). The third chapter of the second part of

this volume adopts an understanding of science-fiction television as an indicator of ideological and cultural anxieties and presents a reception study of the iconic *Star Trek* (1966-1969) NBC, based on qualitative interviews with a small sample of dedicated male viewers. Without making huge claims towards the generalizability of the study's results, the authors - Patricia Gerakopoulou and Nicolas Christakis - attempt a symbolic reading of an unquestionably popular and influential television program that registers processes of the (existential) understanding of the postmodern self.

In the chapter that follows, Liza Tsaliki and Despoina Chronaki present a reading of popular television programs through the lens of textual analysis and genre, with a particular focus on three US sitcoms that were broadcast in Greece in the 1970s, 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s: *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957) CBS, *Bewitched* (1964-1972) ABC and *Roseanne* (1988-1997) ABC. Following a rich overview of international sitcom scholarship, including references to some of the most prominent debates and reading angles, the authors infuse the study of US sitcoms with a contextual reception framework, namely that of the relationship between Greek and US culture since the mid-1970s. The authors argue that the afore-mentioned programs' open cultural character explains their popularity across cultural contexts and allows for local audiences to develop an intimate relationship with the on-screen characters and events. The analytical part contains mini-analyses of each of the three programs, providing snapshots of their textual universes read with the help of scholarly concepts which illustrate their specificity as television content. More specifically, *I Love Lucy* is read through the lens of constructions of femininity, masculinity, and family life, *Bewitched* invites a class reading through an argument about the legitimation and normalization of the white middle-class family, and *Roseanne* is presented as a good example for the analysis of the relationship between sitcom, humor, and stereotypical representations.

The fifth chapter, written by Jo Fragkou, continues the discussion around television and genre. This time the focus is placed on the reception of US soap operas by Greek viewers and is based on an earlier doctoral dissertation by the same author, comparing the reception of US and Greek soap operas by local audiences. Drawing data from semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted between 1998 and 1999, the author initially presents a typology of soap opera reception, including the aesthetic position, the social observer, and the ironic distance. Especially when it comes to viewing habits associated with Greek soap operas, Fragkou claims that they are received in a qualitatively distinct manner compared to the US programs. On the one hand, Greek soap operas are viewed in a more critical and playful manner, motivated through cultural and linguistic references to a familiar social context. On the other hand, US soap operas are often interpreted through the binary 'us versus them', which resonates a kind of

anti-American rhetoric based on moral evaluations of the status of national identities and cultures.

In the sixth chapter, Iosif Konstantinou examines the representation of weddings in two very popular television programs, *Friends* (1994-2004) NBC and *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) HBO, against the backdrop of social transformations in Greek society. The author reads the programs through registered tensions between the 'modern' and the 'traditional', as well as gender stereotypes. The main argument revolves around the contribution of popular culture to the perpetuation of the dominant status of marriage in collective consciousness, which –whether challenged or enriched by each reception context's particular characteristics and social transformations – is not easily rejected.

The volume's final chapter, written by Dimitra Dimitrakopoulou and Efthymios Savvakis, turns the reader's attention towards the new conditions of production and reception shaped by streaming services such as Netflix. The chapter's empirical focus is placed upon *House of Cards* (2013-2018), which is examined (a) as an example of a television program which enables new viewing patterns through the liberating possibilities provided by new media and (b) as media content with an evident political significance. Using focus groups, the authors confirm the generally recognizable character of the program as an "x-ray of politics in contemporary democracies, focusing on power play and strategies in which the media are involved, while at the same time try to expose them" (p. 592). What is more, they make a case for a rejuvenation of the concept of the active viewer, made possible through Netflix's model for the production, dissemination, and consumption of television content and through the "redefinition of the television product in the contemporary interactive and flexible digital environment" (p. 593).

To conclude, the volume deserves to be recognized as an important boost to a newly-emerged interest in the study of Greek television, a rich area of studies with many possibilities for original work on historical analysis, textual and contextual approaches, audience research and reception studies.² The first part is an example of historically-driven enquiries of television, providing macro-perspectives on television content at the backdrop of socio-political changes and developments. The second part can be described as an ambitious work towards reception studies, with an emphasis on case-driven investigations of emblematic TV programs. Overall, what this volume is an example of is an attempt towards a systematic production of high-quality scientific work on Greek television.³ The

² This does not mean that studies of Greek television have not been undertaken in the past. For an overview of earlier scholarly currents and accounts, see Aitaki, G. (2018), 'The academic study of Greek television: Mapping a scattered field', *Critical studies in Television*, 13: 3, pp. 244-253.

³ Hopeful signs of such work were already presented by both established and emerging scholars in the '50 Χρόνια Ελληνική Τηλεόραση / 50 years of Greek Television' international conference

collaborative character of this publication resonates a collective interest for a deeper understanding of the history and impact of the medium in Greece and perhaps also the emergence of a new generation of researchers who are academically and rhetorically equipped to lead an analogous endeavour. Such publications set a high standard for future studies focusing on the content of Greek television, the conditions surrounding its production, as well as its reception from audiences. It is reasonable to expect future projects to focus on domestically produced television fiction, as well as other types of programming.