

TV REVIEW

Maestro/Maestro in Blue

(MEGA TV/Netflix, 2022-)

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Christopher (Christoforos) Papakaliatis is one of Greece's most recognizable and successful "television authors" and *Maestro in Blue*, his latest creation, is the series that managed to turn Greece into a "Netflix nation", both in the sense of a country being included in the global streaming service's catalogue and in terms of a national television market being potentially "transformed by a foreign entrant affecting on many levels" (Lobato 2019: xi). On 19 December 2022, *Maestro in Blue* became the first Greek fiction show to launch on Netflix and the present review provides a critical reading of the series, based on an overview of its major strengths and weaknesses, as well as some additional reflections departing from the critical reception of the series, together with some concluding thoughts about the significance of small television nations being represented in the larger streaming universe.

Maestro in Blue (original title: *Maestro*; see also author's note at the end of this review) premiered on MEGA TV in October 2022, marking the director/screenwriter's return to Greek television after 11 years of absence from the small screen. To those unfamiliar with the Greek television landscape, Papakaliatis can be described as one of Greek television's most notable creators: he is popularly recognized as showcasing a distinct aesthetic (glossy) style, incorporating tricky/unconventional romances and intriguing love triangles, and having an affinity for titillating sex scenes. His series are also widely popular and commercial successes. What is more, he is known for aspiring to maintain full creative control of his series behind the camera (he is even responsible for curating the soundtrack) and for saving the lead for himself, for better or for worse.

Originally produced for and broadcast on commercial channel MEGA TV, Papakaliatis's stable "home" since his first series in 1999, the first season consists of nine episodes. The story begins with Orestis, a professional musician, arriving at the small Ionian island of Paxos to revive a music festival. He quickly becomes entangled in local society, as well as romantically involved with a much

younger woman named Klelia, and ultimately embedded in a bigger network of secrets and lies that seem to define life on the island. Throughout the series, issues such as homophobia, domestic abuse, and corruption—often discussed from the perspectives of the main characters—are highlighted in a manner that castigates, among other things, the painful consequences of heteronormative patriarchy. Shot on the islands of Paxos and Corfu, using the locations strategically in a way that stays loyal to Papakaliatis's signature aesthetic style, but embellishing it with traces of Mediterranean noir and "weird" wave, and experimenting with established (cinematic) representations of the Greek island idyll, *Maestro in Blue* is also an interesting case of Netflix's glocalization practices (Sigismondi & Ciofalo 2022) and an intriguing example of "television that travels" (Waade et al. 2020).

Christopher Papakaliatis (Orestis) and Klelia Andriolatou (Klelia) are joined by an ensemble of both established and younger actors, including Maria Kavoyianni (Maria), Giannis Tsortekis (Haralambos), Fanis Mouratidis (Fanis), Marisha Triantafyllidou (Sofia), Haris Alexiou (Haris), Antinoos Albanis (Michalis), Orestis Halkias (Antonis), Giorgos Benos (Spyros), and Stefania Goulioti (Alexandra), among others. The acting is, on the whole, superb and casting proves to be one of the series' indubitable strengths. Kavoyianni, who has a reputation for excelling in everything she does, manages to deliver yet another memorable performance; this time in the role of a middle-aged woman who is physically and emotionally abused by her husband, while always struggling to keep up appearances, to minimize the effect that the abuse has on her son and to be supportive of the latter through the challenges that he is going through. Alexiou, known both to Greek and international audiences for her impressive singing career since the 1970s, delivers an unaffected performance in the role of the "cool grandma", observing how history sometimes repeats itself, while at the same time maintaining some kind of order in the house and being an ally to the younger generation. Tsortekis stands out in the role of villain, i.e. the abuser; his performance brilliantly balances a considerable degree of physicality (e.g. through facial expressions, gestures, movements, posture, and voice) with psychological depth. Mouratidis, Triantafyllidou and Albanis, all experienced actors, perform with quality and moderation. The younger actors, skilfully cast, complement the rest of the ensemble and are able to effortlessly claim their onscreen space, even though they often share scenes with veteran colleagues. Andriolatou, in the part of the young woman that Orestis falls for, manages to portray youthful energy but also combine it with a distinctive melancholia, convincingly taking in the contradictions of the years following adolescence. Halkias and Benos, whose relationship constitutes the parallel difficult romance that takes place in the series, have chemistry and manage to convey their roles' complex emotions in a credible manner, even though their characters' lines feel at times out of touch with Gen Z parlance. Papakaliatis's performance is consistent with what he usually delivers to Greek audiences: a mixture of

charming and cringeworthy acting, that resonates well with his fans but does not necessarily—in this case, at least—live up to the level of the other performances.

The size of the cast, as well as the mode of storytelling employed for the unfolding of the story, are two creative choices that work particularly well, and further add to the impact of the performances. The characters get the time they need to tell their stories from their own perspective, which in most cases proves to be a crucial factor in building their background and in revealing the deeper motives for their behaviour. The episode in which this mechanism works exceptionally well is the one where the character of Haralambos is highlighted. The role of the villain can be tricky—especially in the case of a character like Haralambos: an unpleasant, creepy, violent, unpredictable man whose marginalization from local society and involvement in illegal activities continuously push the boundaries when it comes to what he is capable of doing. “His” episode manages to anchor his behaviour in a story of past trauma, through the popular technique of the flashback, in a way that does not in any way justify his actions in the present but definitely offers a nuanced understanding of the kind of events and life experiences that inform such behaviours. Such interjected scenes are put to use in the case of other characters as well, efficiently managing the onscreen time in order to reveal backstories in a way that lends diversity to the visual aesthetics while at the same time enriching the story with important pieces of the puzzle.

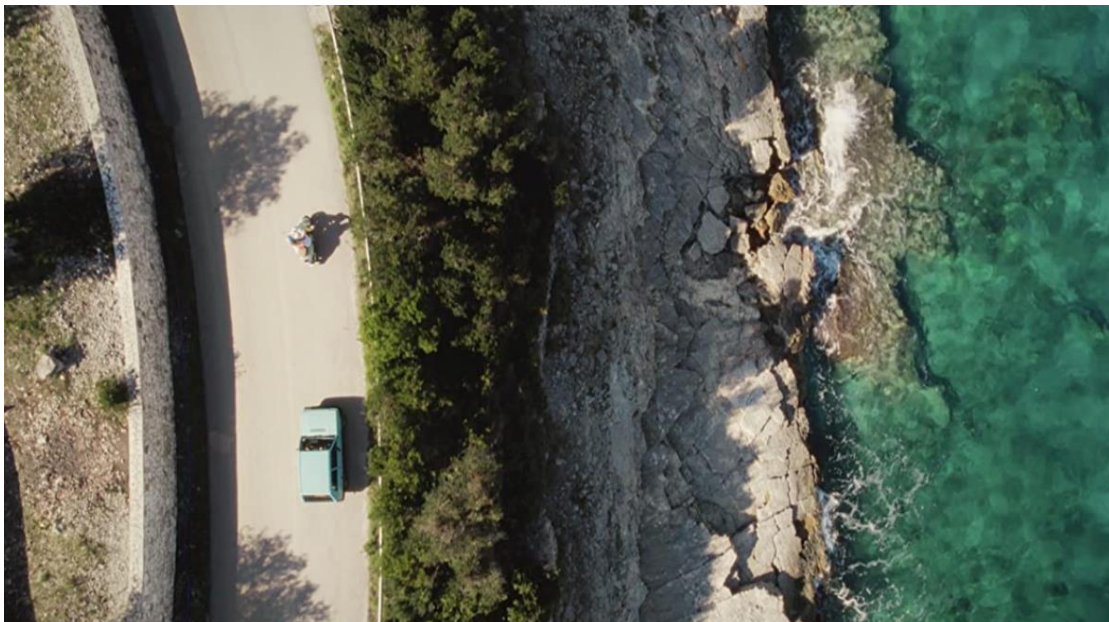


Fig. 1: Screenshot from the first episode of the series *Maestro in Blue*, titled *Clair de Lune*.

On the topic of visual aesthetics, it is worth offering a couple of reflections on the ways that *Maestro in Blue* creatively, but also strategically, incorporates visual languages that international audiences are familiar with. Having already experimented with cinema and tasted the flavour of international exposure,

especially in the case of *Worlds Apart* (2015), Papakaliatis appears to be more confident with “flirting” with genres that he knows will appeal to audiences accustomed to streaming television’s promise of “quality” and “binge-worthy” content (Jenner 2018). The packaging of the story in 9 episodes corresponds to the recent trend of the format of the mini-series and works well in terms of “offering a low-stakes way for harried TV viewers to get immersed in scripted drama” (Davies 2020). It also contributes to sustaining the suspense and leaving audiences wanting more; this is particularly relevant when one takes into consideration that the series incorporates noir aesthetics, particularly through the use of lighting and colour inspired by the waters, skies and landscapes of the Mediterranean. These elements of “Mediterranean noir”, the “almost gaudy yellows, reds, ochres, and above all blues” versus the “blacks and browns of Northern Europe” (Reynolds 2006: 4), make it possible for the series to tell a story of a “darker Greece, hidden in the shadows that become sharper when contrasted with the burning sun” (Poupou et al 2022: 3).

Sub-plots that centre on crime, corruption and cultures of silence eventually manage to overshadow, and perhaps also reveal the weakness of, the central romantic affair at the core of the story. The romance between charming, going-through-mid-life-crisis Orestis and stunning, conveniently-just-above-legal-age Klelia is definitely in line with Papakaliatis’s signature style of building his stories around complex, unconventional or taboo liaisons. The extent to which this choice is timely/necessary, especially within a (post)me-too context and a society that is bombarded daily with news about sexual harassment and violence, is up for debate. This does, however, provide an opportunity for the creator to use Orestis as a vehicle in order to tell an engaging story about Greek (male) melancholia—about unfulfilled dreams, compromises, ideological and emotional disorientations, and ageing. Interestingly enough this attempt to communicate failures and disappointments is done with a nod to one of the most popular and exportable visual strategies that Greek screen industries have produced in the last few years: that of “weirdness”. In the episode that focuses on the character of Orestis, an interjected scene brimming with visual metaphors organized around a game of “musical chairs” among upper-class individuals, turns into a raw, splatter scene, aiming to convey Orestis’s anger with and repugnance for the rotten value system that he became a part of. Using a visual language that his loyal followers would probably feel surprised by, Papakaliatis embraces the “uncanny” and employs visual grammars that serve a concrete narrative function. As such, he also attempts to align with the politics of “weirdness”, in the sense of critiquing “the intertwined meanings of capitalism, (Greek) nationalism and patriarchy” (Psaras 2016: 220), albeit, as is going to be argued later, with significantly less space left for “ambivalence” and “indeterminacy” (Ibid.).

In general, *Maestro in Blue* has received fair reviews from Greek television critics; there are certainly some things that work better than others and this is

astutely highlighted in some reviews, as is Papakaliatis's honest efforts to construct more "extrovert" television. The latter is particularly emphasized in terms of how Papakaliatis "almost aggressively makes use of a wide variety of techniques (ample Dutch angles, beautiful panning shots, widescreen panoramic shots, nerve-racking extreme close-ups etc.), that hoist each episode to an almost cinematic experience" (Spanos 2022). While the comparison between television and cinema through the lens of hierarchies of quality is rather passé and unnecessary in discussions around contemporary visual cultures, it is worth observing that television criticism appreciates Papakaliatis's attempts to incorporate more daring visual choices without betraying the original "contract" he has established with his fans. In this sense, he strikes a good balance between offering familiar viewing experiences and experimenting with new tools. This is also evident in terms of the series' soundtrack, as it combines Papakaliatis's signature needle-drop style with powerful covers that have a clear narrative function (e.g. Halkias's rendition of K. Bhta's *Tyhero Asteri*) together with an original score composed by Kostas Christides.

One can also come across reviews that pick up on concrete weaknesses, especially in relation to how the creator sometimes "drops the ball", e.g. by perpetuating unfair stereotypes about the Greek periphery, by omitting to provide information about help lines that victims of domestic abuse can refer to, and by failing to reflect on the boundaries of "copying" others' work (Galanopoulou 2022). While some of these objections are fairer than others, it is worth noting how Greek television criticism seems deeply invested in offering constructive feedback that can potentially inspire creators to take matters of representation and complexity even more into consideration, especially when attempting to sync with international storytelling trends. At the same time, some reviewers have reacted to Papakaliatis's tendency to over-curate every single detail to the extent that the universe that he creates feels photogenic but somewhat superficial (Kyrkos 2022):

The delicate and curated photography looks for beauty everywhere and it emphasizes it with yearning, but the unequivocally talented director is hooked on his anxiety to cajole the audience. The images radiate expensive perfume and are dressed to the nines, to the extent that they don't allow you to decipher real smells and see something truly lived.

One could argue that this is perhaps the series' most notable shortcoming: the rather discernible concern about impeccable packaging, curated to a tee, and possibly motivated by the creator's (openly expressed) need to control. In other words, the complications that arise when the role of the "author" takes over everything and functions to the detriment of establishing a deep emotional connection with the audience. As Kyrkos (2022) insightfully points out, Papakaliatis appears hesitant to let the stories speak for themselves; instead, the scenes and the dialogues are frequently rather "closed" interpretatively,

something that reveals the creator's anxiety about potential misinterpretations. Without implying that this is done in a conscious way to undermine the audience, it unfortunately contributes to a certain emotional distance, as the viewer is not really allowed to feel and make sense of the onscreen events without being continuously guided by the creator's omnipresence. Indeed, today's television audiences are more used to feeling uncomfortable with and challenged by television series; difficult topics, complex storylines, and morally ambivalent situations are not uncommon in today's television landscape and definitely not in the global streaming universe.



Fig. 2: Screenshot taken from the Instagram account of Netflix Greece, announcing the addition of the series *Maestro in Blue* to the streamer's catalogue.

All in all then, *Maestro in Blue* can be described as a well-orchestrated (pun intended) project that is ambitious, thought-provoking, and means well. It occasionally feels too controlled and closed to interpretation which might disengage the contemporary viewer who is by now trained to navigate highly complex and demanding forms of serialized storytelling. What is more, Papakaliatis's fixation on centring the fictional universe and conflict around the recipe of the forbidden or difficult romance might be experienced by some as a trite narrative vehicle. Greek audiences will be able to identify some familiar flavours, but also witness the ways that Greek television can (finally) speak other visual languages, while international audiences will get the chance to bear witness to powerful performances against the background of a story that "feels very local, very Greek", but at the same time "touches on universal themes like

forbidden love, human nature, conflicts, family”, to use the words of Veronica Vitali, Netflix Italia’s manager of content acquisition (Vourlias 2022).

It is too early to speak of a game changer in Greek television production culture, but we can beyond any doubt speak of clear extroversion tendencies, especially since we know that more Greek series have been close to jumping onto the Netflix bandwagon (e.g. Sotiris Tsafoulias’s *Eteros Ego/The Other Me*). It would definitely be interesting to study more closely the conditions and circumstances that make it possible for this kind of extroversion to appear in Greek screen industries today, with a focus on television production. One could perhaps speculate that this extroversion is not (only) the result of survival strategies in a state of emergency, as has been argued in relation to Greek cinema and the case of co-productions (Papadimitriou 2018), but rather as the expression of a more organic process of synchronization with global trends and tastes, which unavoidably reflect back on the expectations of (some) local and global audiences. Supported by the Greek cash rebate of EKOME (National Centre of Audiovisual Media and Communication), *Maestro in Blue* also exemplifies the valuable role of automatic funding schemes in incentivizing and supporting efforts towards internationalization, as well as boosting the budgets—and by extension the quality—of Greek-produced series (Papadimitriou 2022). It might also be too hasty to speak of a watershed moment for Greek television studies—one that would allow for Greek television scholars to finally work with content that enjoys the privilege of global visibility—, but one can definitely dream!

Author’s note:

At the time of submitting this TV review, the series is only available on Netflix Greece and Cyprus, but is expected to premiere internationally sometime during the first part of 2023. Note that the series’ original title is *Maestro* but it is streaming as *Maestro in Blue*, a change that can possibly be attributed to the overlap with Bradley Cooper’s 2023 film *Maestro*, also planned to be released on Netflix in 2023 (although no official explanation has been provided).

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