

BOOK REVIEW

Greek Cinema: Texts, Histories, Identities

**Edited by Lydia Papadimitriou
& Yannis Tzioumakis,
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This valuable anthology on Greek cinema edited by Lydia Papadimitriou and Yannis Tzioumakis – the first to be published in English as a book – makes a wide and twofold gesture towards international and Greek academia. It calls for the reevaluation of a vibrant, multivalent and fascinating, though marginal European film culture and also for a rethinking of the parameters for the study of Greek film. This gesture towards recognition and reassessment is particularly compelling since it occurs at a very critical but propitious moment: when Greek film, having crossed the borders to become a celebrated new voice on the international festival circuit, is marked by unusual extroversion; when – although nation-centric approaches have become less relevant in Film Studies – a growing focus on peripheral and small-nation cinemas has opened up a new space for neglected cinematic traditions; and finally, when the country's precarious financial situation has brought about a renegotiation of Greek identity while increasing the international receptivity to Greek culture.

The collection is a result of the eponymous conference that took place in Liverpool in May 2008 and consists of fourteen pieces combining a variety of subjects, time frames, discipline backgrounds and scholarly perspectives. As a whole, it attempts to tackle Greek cinema in its multiplicity and diversity and to introduce new approaches in terms of content and method.

First of all, the volume suggests a remarkable expansion of the field to embrace neglected or underdeveloped areas of study, such as in Gary Needham's

discussion of the exportability of Greek soft porn and its popularity abroad. Openness to thematic novelty is further enhanced by a significant shift in focus from films as texts, genres as taxonomies and filmmakers as authors, to Greek film culture in general. This is not to suggest that textual analysis, generic explorations or authorial voices are dismissed, but that they are not seen as autonomous and enclosed entities. The real focal points for most of the essays are industry and market practices, audiences, film reception, critical discourses, institutional frameworks, cultural policies, socio-cultural debates etc., in short the wider filmmaking context. So films, genres and authors are discussed in close relation to and interaction with the broader, complex cinematic and socio-cultural formations, while films are often seen not merely as cultural texts but also as industrial products and cultural commodities, thematic reorientations best illustrated by Dimitris Eleftheriotis's essay on *Politiki Kouzina/A Touch of Spice* (Tassos Boulmetis, 2003). Moreover, the emphasis is further fixed on popular cinema, a trend in the study of Greek film over the last two decades and part of a general shift within Film Studies towards the reevaluation of popular European cinemas (Papadimitriou 2009: 61). Not only is popular cinema – both older and contemporary – foregrounded, but the very notion of popularity, once dismissed as incompatible with aesthetic excellence, is placed under intense scrutiny with detailed explorations of phenomenal box-office successes such as *A Touch of Spice* or the newly-emerged Greek “blockbuster” (Michalis Kokonis).

This attempt to broaden and remap the subject of study is accompanied by the reassessment of old values, established beliefs, fixed taxonomies and dominant methodologies. Thus, for instance, established Greek film periodization and practices of historiography are openly contested (most evidently in Maria Stassinopoulou's and Eliza-Anna Delveroudi's essays), while the questioning and revision of entrenched rules is the major driving force behind some of the most interesting pieces of the volume, such as Eleftheria Thanouli's contribution on Dinos Dimopoulos's style. Theory is subtly and successfully handled, challenged and even expanded (Eleftheriotis and Thanouli), analytical tools from other disciplines, such as psychoanalysis and literature, largely neglected by Greek scholars, are employed to uncover socio-cultural aspects of films (Alexia Kosma and Nikos Leros respectively), while methodological tools indigenous to Film Studies such as David Bordwell's theories – which seem extremely influential among Greek scholars – are used in productive ways. By renegotiating the approaches to Greek film, the collection develops another, particularly welcome, trend: the systematic attempt to move Greek cinema out of its isolation and exceptionalism into the broader international and transnational contexts, to view it as integral to the wider European or global film culture. This trend, which runs through the entire volume, is well exemplified by Panayiota Mini's

exploration of how Kanellopoulos's 1960s films draw on European art cinema of the time or Anna Poupou's discussion of the representation of the city of Athens under the umbrella of neorealism. Renewal of both theme and method in this book are inextricably linked: expanding the field brings in new modes of study and these new perspectives demand thematic reorientation. All these diverse new topics and innovative ways of thinking about Greek cinema then reshape Greek film scholarship, which has often been criticized as parochial, bringing it into line with some of the most recent developments within Film Studies internationally.

Before moving onto a more detailed discussion of the book, there are two more issues worthy of our attention. The first marks a strong presence throughout the volume: the question of national identity appears in every possible form, either as the subject of pre-war film culture (in Vassiliki Tsitsopoulou's or Yiannis Christofides and Melissanthi Saliba's articles), the critical reception of Cacoyannis's *Stella* (Achilleas Hadjikyriacou), the genre of musicals (Lydia Papadimitriou) or Tsiolis's comedies. This reveals an acute anxiety about Greece's precarious European status, which has resurfaced recently in the crisis, but is deeply rooted in the past. By contrast, there is a glaring absence in the book. While it covers almost the entire history of Greek cinema, from its early period to the present, there are two striking omissions: New Greek Cinema and the much celebrated contemporary art-house trend, although when the conference took place in 2008 most of the newer generation of filmmakers had already produced significant works. The first omission reflects not only the shift towards reevaluating popular cinema and moving beyond the auterist framework of study in terms of which New Greek Cinema was primarily understood, but perhaps also the decline of New Greek Cinema's cultural prestige. The latter largely indicates the failure of critics and scholars to comprehend the importance of recent developments in independent and art-house filmmaking, which only received proper critical attention after the new trend was internationally recognized.

The volume is structured in four parts entitled 'Approaches, Histories, Identities and Aesthetics', in an attempt to orientate the reader within the expansive and discursive material. The first part, 'Approaches', consists of a series of articles discussing popular cinema from diverse methodological standpoints. Thus Dimitris Eleftheriotis's opening essay takes a film's popularity as its main concern and the notion of mobility as the major vehicle for exploring it, in an attempt to disclose the nature of the explosive commercial success of the 2003 box-office hit *A Touch of Spice*. Eleftheriotis relates the film's exceptional public appeal to its ability to address diachronic and contemporaneous national concerns through a doubly-sensed mobility, i.e. a stimulating journey in time and space through narrative and form together with market flexibility and border-

crossing. By opening up new topics for discussion such as the representation of foreign lands in Greek films, introducing new terms such as the 'historical deficit' in relation to this representation, examining two apparently unrelated cinematic texts (*To Vlemma tou Odissea/Ulysses' Gaze* [Angelopoulos, 1995] and *A Touch of Spice*), employing a wide range of cultural references and a diversity of perspectives (from close aesthetic and narrative analysis to consideration of production, marketing and circulation strategies), this essay provides an enjoyably intricate and insightful discussion of a film and its cultural implications, within national and international frames, very rarely encountered in academic texts on Greek cinema. However, I am quite unconvinced that Istanbul has been perceived by the Greek public as a foreign land rather than a lived or imagined motherland.

Also on the topic of popularity, Michalis Kokonis continues the investigation of the commercial revival of Greek cinema in the 2000s and, most interestingly, introduces the term 'blockbuster' to the Greek context to describe the enormous box office success of a limited number of high-production-value films such as the just mentioned *A Touch of Spice*¹. With the intention of uncovering the diachronic problems that have plagued Greek cinema in the past and still impact on the present, he opens the essay with a brief historical account of the domestic film industry and film attendance over the post-war decades until the 1990s. The article moves on to illustrate the structural shifts within Greek film culture at the turn of the millennium and the 2000s, paying close attention to the establishment of multiplex theatres, the high production values secured both by co-production and the involvement of the private and international sectors in film financing, changes in distribution, marketing and exhibition strategies, as well as the international scope of the films. Kokonis suggests that the Greek 'blockbuster' is the result, not only of innovative industry practices that meet the demands of a globalized economy, but also of the films' narratives that combine national and cosmopolitan elements to appeal to a wider audience.

Yvonne Alexia Kosma's essay on *Ta Kitrina Gantia / Yellow Gloves* (Sakellarios, 1960) is a misfit in this section as it abruptly shifts the focus on an Old comedy and gender identities through a Lacanian psychoanalytic approach to the narrative. Masculinity is central to the discussion of the main hero's obsessive jealousy of his wife. The repressed Oedipal trauma of the hero and the recurrent narrative motifs of a pair of missing gloves, the moustache (as a symbol of potent masculinity), the telephone (as a medium connecting the outside and the domestic world) and the non-diegetic tune accompanying the hero are placed at

¹ In addition *Safe Sex* (Michalis Reppas and Thanasis Papathanasiou, 1999), *Nifes/Brides* (Pantelis Voulgaris, 2004), *Loufa ke Parallayi: Sirines sto Egeo/Loafing and Camouflage: Sirens in the Aegean* (Nikos Perakis, 2005) and *El Greco* (Yannis Smaragdis, 2006).

the centre of this analysis to reveal the insecurities that surrounded male identities and the traditional patriarchal order during a period of rapid modernization in Greece. However, although much thought has been invested in the text and Kosma's command of her analytical tools is excellent, the essay often seems over-theorized and more an enthusiastic attempt at applying an analytical method than furthering our understanding of Greek film.

The second part, entitled 'Histories', is one of the most coherent and interesting sections of the book because it mostly explores attitudes in the relatively unknown pre-WWII Greek cinema, while attempting to revise historiographical practices. Vassiliki Tsitsopoulou's exploration of coloniality in Greek film culture of the 1920s is one of the few essays on Greek cinema to stress the importance of foreign films in shaping domestic film culture and to examine the intricate relations between audiences, specialized press, film distribution/exhibition networks and national cultural policies. The article examines discussions in the film journal *Kinimatografikos Astir* of imported western-made films, which, although were often accused of being 'trashy' and orientaling Greek audiences, were seen primarily as agents of modernization and westernization. It explores how a Eurocentric cultural and racial order was ideologically legitimized and indigenized and Greece's peripheral status within an unequal core-periphery relationship was assimilated. The article sheds light on the national-identity anxieties surrounding film consumption, especially in the period after the Asia Minor Catastrophe and the subsequent influx of Greek-oriental refugees who were bearers of unwanted cultural memories. Tsitsopoulou concludes with Greece's shift from a European to an American periphery, as evidenced in the early Greek film culture, by tracing the links between economic dependency and elite's national cultural interests.

Yiannis Christofides and Melissanthi Saliba study the spread of cinema as a mobile and open-air practice in parallel with the urbanization and expansion of Athens in the early 20th century. The rise of the open-air cinemas is discussed as an extension of a variety of other preexisting open-air entertainment and cultural activities that connected the people with the cityscape. It is also discussed as following the development of Athens from the centre to the periphery resulted by industrialization and the redistribution of the population. Early foreign films, screened at open-air cinemas, provided Athenians with images of the most developed metropolises, shaping their fantasies about urban life, while the new film genre of Greek *foustanela* reconnected them with their agricultural past. Through the discussion of the reception by critics and audiences of two prewar films, one domestic and the other foreign, *Maria Pentayotissa* (Achilleas Madras, 1929) and *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927), the article also explores the oscillation of Greek identity at that time between cosmopolitanism and ethnicity and of Athens itself between the urban and rural.

The connection made between the construction of the city and the film-going experience elucidates the interaction between the real and the imaginary in the formation of urban identities, and also reveals the long histories of Athenian venues such as *Lais* and *Zefyros*.

Eliza-Anna Delveroudi's essay is a concise and comprehensive critical overview of the state of silent Greek cinema studies and a starting point for anyone interested in the period. Delveroudi challenges the neglect of the topic by scholars and historians who tend to see Greek cinema as an exclusively post-war phenomenon and so label silent Greek film "prehistory". She points out that scholarship has been slow to follow the international paradigm on the subject and indicates the lack of reliability and the fragmentation of available historical accounts of early Greek film. She also draws attention to the obstacles faced by researchers due to the general inaccessibility of primary resources and stresses the lack of information about crucial areas of study such as exhibition, stardom and film reception. She endorses the positive developments in the last two decades such as the digitization of newsreels, the expansion of accessible archival material (due to the discovery and restoration of damaged or lost films) and also some recent well-researched publications that examine fresh topics or readdress erroneous information and established canons. She concludes by underlining the need for institutionalized and collaborative academic research.

Similarly Maria A. Stassinopoulou questions the historiography of Greek cinema by considering larger time frames. She challenges the dominant narratives on the history of Greek film, which mainly centre on exceptionalism, and underlines the need to discuss Greek cinema not as an enclosed and isolated phenomenon, but within the broader European and global context. She also questions the dominant periodization of Greek film, stressing continuities rather than ruptures and discontinuities. From these points of view she briefly re-narrates three key periods of Greek cinema, seen mostly in terms of transition: the prewar, war and early post-war era, the two first post-war decades and the passage from the 1960s to the 1970s. She questions stereotypical views on crucial matters such as the role played by censorship and film legislation, the relationship between the domestic popular and art film sectors and the ideological implications of the Old films. Most importantly, by exploring the vitality of cultural life during the Colonels' regime (1967-1974) in terms of continuity with what preceded and followed it, she contests the usefulness of periodizing Greek film and interpreting shifts in domestic cinematic culture according to the lines of Greek political history.

The third section of the volume is concerned with identities (national, cultural and gender) articulated through genre, individual films, critical discourses, film consumption and market practices. Lydia Papadimitriou opens the discussion by

revisiting one of her favourite subjects, the Greek musical of the 1960s, and giving a synopsis of key issues dealt with in her 2006 monograph *The Greek Film Musical*. Away from stereotypical ideas about the homogeneity of Old Greek Cinema, she elucidates the variations within the genre itself in terms of theme, style, reference and ideology. She stresses the hybrid nature of the Greek musical and examines its major influences derived from either Hollywood or local *epitheorisis* (Greek revue). Moreover she distinguishes two broader tendencies, one 'modernizing' and 'westernizing' (represented in her analysis by the celebratory Yannis Dalianidis's *Koritsia gia Flilima/Girls for Kissing* [1965]) and one drawing on traditional cultural forms (exemplified by Yorgos Skalenakis's *Diplopenies /Dancing the Sirtaki* [1966]). The discussion attempts to analyze how the two dominant and contrasting versions of Modern Greek national identity (the westernized *Hellenic* and the traditional *Romeic*) were re-constructed by the films' narrative, style and use of dance and music, making apparent that even escapist cultural forms are closely bound up with social realities.

Nikos Leros singles out Stavros Tsiolis as the filmmaker whose almost 40-year career encompasses the major transformations of post-war Greek cinema from its studio era to its post-modern expression. He focuses on what he considers the most typical film of the late period of Tsiolis's work, the 1992 comedy, set in rural Greece, *Parakalo, Ginekes min Klete/Please Ladies Don't Cry*. The Bakhtinian notion of the Carnavalesque serves as the analytical frame for illuminating the hybrid (in terms of mixing 'low' and 'high' culture), transgressive, farcical, feast, ritualistic, marginal and utopian elements that inhabit the cinematic universe of late Tsiolis. Then Leros moves the discussion towards Greekness, a concept that has persistently haunted post-war critical debates on domestic film. He argues that the enthusiastic critical reception of Tsiolis's 1990s films as a celebration of an authentic and timeless Greekness rooted in the landscapes and manners of the provincial country fails to recognize the impossibility of such authenticity and timelessness and the mockery of Greekness that Tsiolis' carnivalized narratives suggest.

In one of the most interesting and well-written essays of the volume, Achilleas Hadjikyriacou focuses on gender representations and explores how the main values of the traditional patriarchal order in Greece of the 1950s (i.e. male 'honour' and female 'shame') are attacked by Cacoyannis' *Stella* (1955). Shedding light on the mechanisms by which patriarchy and gender relations began to be challenged at that time in Greek society, Hadjikyriacou states that this change was the result, not so much of imported modernity, as was widely believed, as of complex internal workings inherent to the indigenous patriarchal structures. In addition, the essay discusses the film's reception by both the local and international press. Although most critics welcomed the film, Greek leftist reviewers severely criticized *Stella* as a national disgrace, an imitation of foreign

models and a false – exoticized in primitive and oriental terms – representation of the Greek people. Moreover Stella's sexual emancipation was condemned by much of the Greek press as well as, surprisingly perhaps, by Western critics. Hadjikyriacou stresses the significance of socio-historical approaches to Greek films since cinema played an extremely influential role in Greek society of the 1950s and 1960s.

Under an entirely new light and from the perspective of the non-Greek speaking viewer, Gary Needham deals refreshingly with what is labeled Greek film and how Greek cinema is perceived outside the national borders. He turns his attention to the online DVD retailers (e.g. Amazon) to investigate the availability and popularity of Greek films abroad, using a variety of search criteria such as Greek language and nation. His findings lead to a strong argument about the function of new media as 'discrimination mechanisms' which largely reproduce old prejudices about European national cinemas (i.e. as cinemas of art and authorship), providing canonical lists that exclude popular and genre films. However, when the search criteria are reduced to best-sellers, by far the most popular Greek film abroad appears to be the porn movie *I Mavri Emmanuella/Black Emmanuella* (Ilias Milonakos, 1979). Needham then focuses on Greek films released on home video in the UK between 1979 and 1984 to argue that UK viewers' actual experience of Greek cinema at that time was dominated by soft porn and other exploitation genres, although the marketing policies of these films tended to erase issues of national identity. The article concludes with a brief textual analysis of the opening sequence of *Natalie* (Milonakos, 1981) to suggest that the appeal of these films typically relies on the eroticization of the female body doubled by the exoticization of the Greek landscape.

The concluding section of the volume, entitled 'Aesthetics', explores stylistic and representational issues in order to revise entrenched canons, elucidate neglected topics and offer possible connections between diverse film cultures or periods of time. Both Eleftheria Thanouli and Panayiota Mini focus on the work of individual directors, Dinos Dimopoulos (a prominent figure of the Old) and Takis Kanellopoulos (a mostly unclassified art filmmaker particularly active in the 1960s) respectively. Thanouli, in a tight and highly-elaborated text that combines strong insights on theory and methodology with thorough formal analysis of Dimopoulos's films, challenges widely-held prejudices that diachronically haunt scholarship on Greek film. She questions the widespread assumption that popularity is incompatible with artistry and insists on the necessity of revisiting Old Greek cinema in stylistic terms. She argues that the main reason that popular Old films have been neglected as objects of stylistic analysis is that they are associated by scholars with theatrical techniques –

widely seen as antagonistic to a genuine cinematic language – as well as with the classical model of Hollywood filmmaking. Having outlined the differences between the Hollywood production model and that of Finos studios where Dimopoulos worked, and applying analytical tools derived from Bordwell, Thanouli examines the formal choices made by the director in terms of *mise-en-scène*, the violation of the 180-degree rule, editing pace, etc. to offer substantial evidence that Dimopoulos's style departs significantly from classical Hollywood norms and borrows from European art film traditions. Thanouli pays particular attention to the fact that style in Old cinema was often a direct result of specificities of the mode of production and the need to solve practical difficulties, rather than being derivative of the Hollywood paradigm. Thanouli's observations deepen our understanding of the formal history of Greek cinema and challenge the conviction of the dominance of Hollywood over the stylistic formation of other major or peripheral cinemas across the globe.

In her discussion of Kanellopoulos's fiction films of the 1960s, Panayiota Mini contests the two dominant approaches to the work of the director, seen either as a forerunner of New Greek Cinema or as an autonomous romantic artist. By scrutinizing the formal and narrative elements of his three major films (*Ouranos/Sky* [1962], *Ekdromi/Excursion* [1966] and *Parenthesi/Inderlude* [1968]) she traces the influences on his work of Eastern European anti-war films – something that had often been mentioned but never properly substantiated – and also Western European art filmmakers such as Resnais, Truffaut and Antonioni. She argues that Kanellopoulos's style followed a gradual shift from a modernist creative blending of both Eastern and Western European borrowings towards an exclusively Western European point of reference in order to elaborate on memory and loss from a deeply humanist perspective. However, although Mini successfully situates Kanellopoulos's films within the wider context of European art cinema of the time, making clear that he did not come 'out of the blue' as has often been stated, I am unconvinced by her argument that Kanellopoulos is unconnected to New Greek Cinema which assimilated similar influences; given also that several New Greek filmmakers have openly acknowledged their debt to his work.

The final essay by Anna Poupou opens with a short discussion of neo-realism in Greek cinema of the 1950s to the early 1970s, examining domestic and international critical views on the term and emphasizing outdoor filming and the demystifying representation of the urban space as defining characteristics of Greek cinema's neorealist aesthetics. She continues with a close analysis of *Magiki Poli/Magic City* (Nikos Koundouros, 1953) and *Sinikia to Oniro/Dream Neighborhood* (Alekos Alexandrakis, 1961), which have been widely understood as major representatives of the Greek neorealist trend. Poupou reveals the oppositional narratives of the cityscape articulated by both films, which

prioritize the image of the slums to offset the official celebratory representation of Athens as a wealthy, rapidly modernizing city, an optimistic view widely reproduced by the popular films of the same period. She also describes how the films were impeded by state censorship which accused them of damaging the tourist image of the country and, interestingly, she suggests that their provocative urban aesthetics prefigured the alternative iconography introduced later by New Greek Cinema, which focused on peripheral and marginal spaces.

Papadimitriou and Tzioumakis's edited volume comprises a series of very well-researched, methodologically robust and thought-provoking essays that demonstrate diverse and novel ways of studying little-known or previously neglected facets of Greek cinema. One of its main virtues is that it enables the interplay of the national, transnational, historical, political, social, cultural, institutional, financial, and the textual. It enriches our understanding of Greek film significantly, encourages further study and allows Greek cinema, a neglected national film culture, to reintroduce itself as a flux identity under nuanced revision. And for all these reasons we ought to acknowledge the substantial contribution of both its writers and editors towards the elevation of the study of Greek film to an advanced field of research with international reach.

REFERENCES

- Papadimitriou, L. (2009), 'Greek Film Studies Today: in Search of Identity', *KAMΠΙΟΣ Cambridge Papers in Modern Greek*, No. 17, pp. 49-78.