

BOOK REVIEW

*Επιθυμίες και πολιτική
Η Queer ιστορία του ελληνικού
κινηματογράφου (1924 – 2016)
Politics and Desire
The Queer History of Greek
Cinema (1924 – 2016)*

by Konstantinos Kyriakos
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Konstantinos Kyriakos's monumental study of the politics of representation of queer desire in the history of Greek cinema begins with the programmatic aspiration to expand and restructure an already established, yet arithmetically limited, queer canon of Greek cinema, while at once avoiding limiting itself to a generic historiographical chronicle that pursues an exhaustive cataloguing of a linear and supposedly progressive series of queer representation. Of course, the study does include an impressive and meticulously organised list of more than 800 films, which are nonetheless classified according to interpretative thematic elements and read against key theoretical tenets and analytical tools of feminist, gay, lesbian and, most importantly, queer theory.

In the introduction of his book, Kyriakos justifies his rather alternative methodological approach, drawing on the fluid and expansive analytical possibilities of 'queer' as a theoretical and aesthetic term, which offer him the opportunity to investigate queerness in films produced within certain industrial contexts or by specific filmmakers, who canonically resisted such classification or interpretation. Even though he acknowledges the existence of three distinct periods in the history of queer representation in Greek cinema, it is already

evident in the introduction that those periods, rather than sharp and impenetrable temporal demarcations, are more of overlapping strands or modes of representation, inflected by industrial and production contexts (which considers issues of censorship, funding, target audience, genre, etc.), the talent involved (namely, directors, producers, actors, et al.), as well as the ever turbulent social and political conditions in Greece. In what Kyriakos understands as the unbroken negative canon in the representation of homosexuality in Greece, one can identify the first two homophobic and/or sensationalist periods of the Greek queer film history. The first period pertains to the establishment and reproduction of the abundant in the farce-comedy genre stereotype of a hysterically effeminate male character, whose bodily stylisation (dress, gesture, posture) relied heavily on clichés and camp aesthetics, and whose narrative function (if it had any other than being the target of ridicule) was to reinforce, by way of contrast, the ideal of Greek masculinity that was epitomised by the male protagonist. In the second period, we have the emergence of more aggressive homophobic and sensationalist representations of queerness as sickness or as social and moral threat. Queers are presented as depressed, self-destructive or dangerous, and always doomed to fail or die. Making their first appearance in the avant-garde scene of the 1970s and crossing to the mainstream from the 1990s onwards, the representations that pertain to the third period depart from the homophobic, judgmental and scaremongering image that was imposed by the dominant heterosexist perception of homosexuality towards more diverse, non-remorseful, colourful and even optimistic depictions of homosexual desire and experience in Greece. In the final parts of his introduction, Kyriakos touches briefly upon the major representatives of queer theory and gay/lesbian/queer film history and theory in an attempt to lay the theoretical ground upon which his analysis and categorisation of Greek cinema as queer takes place.

Astonishingly enough, although Kyriakos's overarching division of queer representation in Greek film history in three major periods underlies his categorisation and discussion of the films that are mentioned and/or analysed in the book's chapters, the organisation itself of the book in chapters does not necessarily follow the logic of this periodisation. The book is thus organised in seven thematic chapters, each of which explores a different aspect of the representation of queerness, across different eras, periods and movements in the history of Greek cinema.

The first chapter, entitled 'The Era of Silencing and Concealment' ('Η εποχή της αποσιώπησης και της απόκρυψης'), ventures a queer reading of the work of three of the first major and highly influential Greek directors, namely, Michalis Cacoyannis, Nikos Koundouros, and Yiannis Dalianidis. Although addressing a mainly non-queer audience, their films, according to Kyriakos, explore issues of sexual and social deviation through the use of codes and disguises. Deploying a

range of analytical tools offered by queer film theory, the author investigates such issues as mechanisms of guilt and concealment, camp aesthetics, homosociality and homoeroticism, as well as the construction of gendered filmic spaces, respectively characterised by repression, subversion, or voyeurism. Especially with regards to Dalianidis's oeuvre, the author points out the emergence of gay icons through female fetishist representations.

In the second chapter, titled 'Camp and Roles: Performance and Mis-performance' ('Camp και ρόλοι: Ερμηνείες και παρερμηνείες'), the author draws on Sontag's, Dyer's and Babuscio's seminal studies on the camp tradition, to explore camp aesthetics in Greek cinema with a focus on performance. This exploration begins with a consideration of "female monsters" in Greek cinema, such as Georgia Vassiliadou and Sappho Notara, whose alternative camp renditions of femininity included praising dysmorphia as well as the combination of feminine and masculine characteristics. Most importantly, however, this chapter is preoccupied with the largely dominant representation of male homosexuality through the stereotype of the effeminate man, especially in the comedies of the classical era, which feature caricaturistic versions of queerness through camp costume and characterisation. Kyriakos analyses particularly the typecasting of specific actors, such as Stavros Paravas, Takis Miliadis, and Sotiris Moustakas, who regularly "mis-performed" gay characters on screen, as camp screaming queens, to the extent of creating a stereotype so prevailing in the national imagery that would later easily lent itself to even more abusive versions, verging on "hate-speech". The author concludes this chapter with a discussion of major female stars, such as Melina Merkouri, Alikì Vougiouklaki, Zoe Laskari, Mary Chronopoulou, and Katerina Helmi, whose powerful presence on screen through melodramatic performances, femme fatale roles, and glamorised stylisation and framing, branded them as unequivocal gay icons.

The third and longest chapter in Kyriakos's intriguing study, entitled 'Mechanisms and Aspects of Homophobic Hatred' ('Μηχανισμοί και όψεις του ομοφοβικού μίσους') discusses what is perhaps the darkest period in the representation of homosexuality in Greek cinema; one that produces and presents the homosexual on screen as a monster, an outcast, a loner, narratively sentenced to death, often by murder, thus reproducing heteronormative perceptions of queer scapegoating and homophobic hatred. Such a negative representation of homosexuality is located even in politically progressive films by major Greek directors, such as Costa-Gavras, Theodoros Angelopoulos and Pantelis Voulgaris, and is often associated with a corrupted, decadent culture, inhabited – among others – by queers, who appear as "characters of darkness", "children of the night", or alternatively vulnerable and hypersensitive, in either case representatives of lost, wasted time. Very interesting is Kyriakos's analysis

of homosocial space and the affective repercussions of close relationships between (straight) men, which films under this category present as replete with contradictions, ambivalence, and oscillation between love and animosity. The second half of this chapter is organised around the landmark film in Greek queer cinema *Angelos/Angel* (Katakouzinis, 1982), considering, firstly, images that (re)produce the homophobic stereotype of sorrow and rejection as primary affects of the homosexual experience in films before the release of *Angel*. Kyriakos then goes on to establish Katakouzinis's film as a turning point in Greek queer representation, not only because of the critical and commercial success of such an unprecedentedly straightforward depiction of transgenderism, same-sex desire, and prostitution, but most importantly, because of the way the film deploys the affective mechanisms of the melodrama in order to produce a rather tender approach towards an otherwise contentious subject-matter, which, for the first time, invites emotional responses other than that of disgust, fear, or laughter.

Entitled 'Lessons of (a) Queer History: Versions of Homosexual Culture' ['Μαθήματα (μιας) queer ιστορίας: Μορφές της ομοφυλόφιλης κουλτούρας'], the fourth chapter discusses the cinematic effort to create a Greek queer history, following a rather unpredictable chronological journey in relation to the thematics of relevant fiction and documentary films. Kyriakos's journey in Greek queer time on screen begins with depictions of homosexual culture in antiquity and mythology through to the twenty-first century with some special mentioning of landmark biopics, belonging to the heritage film sub-genre, such as Takis Spetsiotis's homage to Antonis Lapathiotis, entitled *Meteoro ke Skia/Meteor and Shadow* (1985), Nikos Koundouros' *Byron, i balada enos daimonismenou/Byron, Ballad for a Demon* (1992) on Lord Byron's turbulent poetic, political and sexual life, and Yannis Smaragdis's *Cavafy* (1996) on the (queer) life and work of the eponymous poet.

The book's fifth chapter, 'Beyond Ridicule' ('Πέρα από τη χλεύη'), is a well-researched tribute on Greek Queer Cinema and its greatest representatives. The chapter begins with a consideration of the explorations of gender and sexual identity in the alternative and marginal voices of the avant-garde scene of the 1970s, which comprises largely unknown short and medium length films of an experimental and, to an extent, elitist mode of filmmaking. Kyriakos then examines the emergence of a Greek version of New Queer Cinema in the early 1990s, through the analysis of the work of major queer Greek filmmakers, such as Alexis Bistikas, Christos Dimas, Constantine Giannaris and Panos H. Koutras. Common thematic threads connecting the preoccupations of these filmmakers include issues such as grief, immigration, family (mother - queer subject relation, incest and the archetypal oedipal complex), as well as sexual, ethnic, and racial otherness, while at the level of form, the author identifies eclecticism,

intertextuality, parody, camp aesthetics, and self-reflexivity as principal stylistic elements of their films. The chapter concludes with a celebration of the great parade of numerous forms of queer imagery and narrative in Greek short and feature films of the 21st century.

In the book's sixth chapter, 'Images of Sapphic Love' ('Οι εικόνες του σαπφικού έρωτα'), Kyriakos deploys analytical tools from feminist and lesbian film theory to examine the representation of lesbian desire, female homoeroticism, and homosociality in Greek cinema, beginning with an interrogation of the voyeuristic male gaze that characterises the films of Nikos Koundouros, the sexploitation or "soft porn" wave of the 1970s, and the unapologetically heretical films of Nikos Nikolaides. He then goes to examine a (homosexual or not) female gaze, analysing aspects of self-representation, with particular regard to female desire, in the films of some of the most important women directors of Greek cinema, such as Maria Plita, Tonia Marketaki, Antoinetta Angelidi and, most recently, Athena Rachel Tsangari.

The final chapter, 'Crossdressing and Transgenderism' ('Παρενδυσία και διαφυλικότητα'), begins with an examination of the proliferation of images of drag by some of the biggest stars of the 1960s, including Alikì Vougiouklaki, which considers the narrative context that accommodated or demanded such disguises, as well as the acting methods and devices deployed by both male and female stars in their drag performances. In the second part of the chapter, the author investigates representations of transgenderism, focusing on the underground spaces as well as the politics of social marginalisation that characterises trans experience and with a special mention of three of the most important films of queer Greek cinema, namely *Betty* (1979), *Angel* (1982), and *Strella* (2009).

In the book's epilogue, Kyriakos revisits what he considers as landmark films of queer Greek cinema, focusing particularly on homoeroticism and related issues of voyeurism, male objectification, and male body fetishisation. The author looks rather optimistic in his study's final note, suggesting a gradually progressive narrative of queer representation in Greece, while celebrating the formally and thematically diverse filmic contexts in which it appears; from the biopics of high profile gay artists, through references to Greek drama and Greek mythology, to the marginalised world of the queer underground, which nonetheless might open a window to a new era, referring specifically to the denouement of *Strella*.

Kyriakos's monograph is a most welcome and anticipated addition to a proliferating body of work on Greek cinema, especially considering that it constitutes the first book-length study on the history of queer representation in Greek cinema, and a very meticulous one. More than a mere cataloguing of films that take on different aspects of queerness, Kyriakos's study raises important

questions about understandings, expressions, and performances of gender, sexuality, identity, and the politics involved, not only within the context of Greek film industry (studio or independent), but most importantly within the broader context of Greek society. Even though the book's structure might at a first glance confuse a rather inattentive reader with its constant swinging between decades and the inevitable overlapping between chapters, one cannot praise enough the merits of this important study for Greek queer cinema or highlight enough the urgency of its translation in English, as a useful bibliographical addition to a growing tradition of studies dedicated on national queer cinemas.