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BOOK REVIEWS

EPITHYMIES KAI POLITIKI; I QUEER ISTORIA TOU ELLINIKOU KINI-MATOGRAFOU (1924–2016) (POLITICS AND DESIRE: THE QUEER HISTORY OF GREEK CINEMA (1924–2016)), KONSTANTINOS KYRIAKOS (2017)

Athens: Aigokeros, 440 pp.,
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Reviewed by Phevos Kallitsis, University of Portsmouth

The timing of writing a review can play an important role in the way a book is read. This review was in the process of being written when a well-known queer activist was effectively kicked to death in broad daylight in central Athens under still obscure circumstances, pointing both to police brutality and to new forms of violence against those portrayed as figures of marginality and deviance threatening the livelihood of ordinary, 'decent folk'. His death came as a shock-raising question about the role of the police and the public who just observed the death of a young person without intervening. This was followed by a problematic news coverage in mainstream-media, and the expression of outrightly homophobic views by members of the public. With these images in mind it is difficult not to praise Konstantinos Kyriakos's book for revealing the underexplored histories of representing desire, the body and the LGBTQI+ community, and underlining the constant dialectic of achievement, acceptance and setback in Greek society, as well as how these are reflected in the national cinematic production.

The book is part of a larger project by Kyriakos, which aims at covering the representation of homoeroticism in Greek theatre, TV and the fine arts. An intriguing element is that, among the planned four volumes of the project, only this one, dedicated to cinema, includes the term *queer* in the title. The author states that *queer* is an umbrella term that describes 'a divergent voice, a characteristic, a type of presentation or the various ways of promotion' (11),

thus allowing the study to expand to any film that questions heteronormativity and patriarchy. The author examines the whole spectrum of *queer* as a history, politics, insult, appropriation, pride and a distinct cinematic language and, by drawing links between local and global production, trends, practices and theories, defines three main periods of Greek cinema in regard to the representation of homoeroticism, homosociality, trans, drag and queer. The first five chapters of the book present different themes connected to these three periods, while the last two focus on the lesbian continuum and the drag and trans representation.

Kyriakos begins with the moment the official censorship of homosexuality ends in 1951, thanks to the conviction that social control over any 'loathsome phenomenon' will be enough to protect the spectators from themes such as homosexuality. Drawing from Foucault, Kyriakos frames his first period as one of 'repression'. In this chapter, *queer* is stretched to the point of becoming synonymous to marginal; this allows Kyriakos to uncover hints of homosociality or non-normative sexuality in films that were previously read only as simply non-conforming to patriarchy. Some critics might here disagree with the gesture of including the work of such directors as Cacoyiannis, Koundourous and Dalianidis in a history of queer Greek cinema. However, the author by identifying elements of *queening* (as Van Der Leer [1995] has described the crossing of gay motifs to a general audience) ends up proposing an intriguing archaeology. With the help of Dalianidis's films, the author bridges over to the second chapter, where he focuses on *camp*. Camp's presence in Greek cinema is expressed as developing unencumbered, starting with the musicals and melodramas of the 1950s and 1960s, and then seeping through the more intentional strategies of the films of Cacoyiannis (*The Day the Fish Came Out*, 1967), but also of the directors that came much later, such as Koutras (*The Attack of the Giant Mousaka*, 1999), Frantzis (*Polaroid*, 2000) and Perakis (*Thiliki Eteria*, 1999). The hyperbole, irony, style and humour provided by a camp style in the 1950s and 1960s, and the actors and actresses that end up defining the term for a Greek audience in their performances (Vasiliadou, Notara, Paravas, Moustakas) and roles (with Stavros Paravas's character of Fifis becoming the iconic flamboyant gay man in the 1960s) eventually prepare a more fully fledged adoption of certain stars as gay icons (Merkouri, Vougiouklaki). Seen from the perspective of the 1990s onwards, when so many of the older Greek melodramas and their stars had become main attractions in queer drag shows, the 1950s and 1960s emerge as a colourful and joyful celebration of homosexuality. This is a mood that perhaps fades in the 1970s–90s, where more direct references to homosexuality are combined with a bleak and usually homophobic image.

The next period, from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, turns more into a real-life depiction of homosexual characters and homoeroticism; however, the stereotype of Fifis is replaced by other stereotypes with negative connotations. The homosexual subject is introduced in political films, but most homosexual men are presented as victims, dark characters, murderers, and remorseful, fragile and sensitive men. In only a few exceptions are gay characters allowed to be the sole bearers of dignity within a corrupt environment. Notable examples here are the films of Korras and Voupouras (*The Cronos Children*, 1982; *...Deserter*, 1987) that bring sexualities to the centre, take their relationships out of the enclosed environments and study them in their interaction with a

complex social environment. The author makes the connection between this change from repression to portrayal – even with mainly negative and depressing images – and the first election to power of the socialist party of PASOK (1981), with the gay icon Melina Merkouri becoming Minister of Culture, a position she would hold for almost a decade. The milestone of the period though remains *Angelos* (Katakouzinos, 1982), a film that Kyriakos discusses through references to its national press reception, reactions from activist groups, its Greek box office success and international reception. Despite the harsh critique on the film by LGBT activists, Kyriakos underlines how it includes positive elements too, mainly through a focus on the central character's dignity. Its patronizing elements notwithstanding, *Angelos* remains a film about a noble gay man from a working-class background, who works to support his family and faces the hypocrisy of the Greek society towards any form of sexuality.

Chapter four looks at the effort of directors and writers to respond to the need for rooting sexual identity in history, as they trace back stories of homoerotic and homosexual attachment to periods such as the Greek War of Independence, the interwar period, or to the lives of famous artists from the past. This chapter depicts the first steps that could be seen as leading to a Greek version of 'new queer cinema', thoroughly analysed in the fifth chapter. The work of Takis Spetsiotis (*Meteor and Shadow*, 1985) on the life of poet Napoleon Lapathiotis stands out; however, the main figure that defines the chapter is the poet C. P. Cavafy, and the way films about his life and work underline the role of sexuality in his poetry. Cavafy's relation and references to homosexuality remain more or less taboo even today for the Greek cultural establishment, as became evident in a series of personal attacks levelled against critic Dimitris Papanikolaou upon the publication of his book *'Made Just Like Me': The Homosexual Cavafy and the Poetics of Sexuality* (2014), which brought forward sexuality as a driver in the poet's work.

The fifth chapter looks into auteurs who studied and worked abroad, carrying a different openness and approach not only in film but other art forms. Apart from the extended reference to Bistikas, Dimas, Koutras and Gianaris, Kyriakos brings to light a rich archive of films that discuss sexuality outside the nuclear family, heteronormativity or homonormativity, short films presented in the Outview festival in Athens that cover incestuous relationships, questions on biological sex and its importance, the limits of homosociality and male friendship.

Despite making references to trans and lesbian representation, the first five chapters remain male-focused. In that sense, the book is not very successful in discussing the lesbian continuum, drag and trans presence as an intrinsic part of queer cinema. The sixth chapter, dedicated to 'Sapphic love', and the seventh, dedicated to drag and trans, although well-structured and full of insightful analysis, make you wonder: if *Stella*, a story about a heterosexual woman taking a stance in the Athens of the 1950s, is seen as part of a queer history, why, then, is not the same treatment offered to other similar moments in the history of Greek cinema? Why, for instance, director Antoinetta Aggelidi, and her investigations on the female body and sexuality, is not presented as part of the queer continuum too, perhaps next to her contemporary Christos Dimas? On the other hand, through this structure and the strong presence of male directors in the last two chapters (Nikolaidis is the sole director who gets

a dedicated section in the sixth chapter), one can trace the implicit suppression of female (and especially lesbian) and trans voices in the Greek production itself.

Kyriakos covers an enormous body of work and allows future researchers to focus on more specific issues, instead of trying to construct, every time anew, the genealogy of Greek queer filmmaking. He depicts the main antithetical pairs at work in every period, he distinguishes diachronic thematic and formal characteristics (camp, the focus on the mother, specific artists' star text, the type of 'effeminate homosexual' particularly present in earlier films). Last, but not least, he offers hints about the role that the distinction between public and private has played, and discusses the bodies of film characters as potential political subjects on and off screen. A wealth of information and research is contained in the notes for every chapter, while the bibliography offers an excellent syllabus on the subject. To be sure, he could have been more critical in his presentation of the influence of specific films, or discuss further the data on the commercial success of specific films. Having said that, the thematic approach adopted here succeeds in demonstrating that the three periods (repression, bleak and homophobic representation, new queer aesthetics), identified by Kyriakos, do not have a clear ending or beginning, but expand outside their timeframe, underlining through cinema the non-linear history of acceptance of the *queer* subject. In other words, he deconstructs the chimaera of a continuous social evolution regarding the *queer* subject and acceptance of otherness in Greek society. In 1985, in the opening scene of *The Cronos Children* (Korras, 1985), one of the characters, the left-wing journalist Petros, says: '[s]ince I was a kid I was really repulsed by torturing, I just couldn't stand it'; three decades later politics and the occasional shocking event of aggression and violence prove that this has certainly not become a universal value.

REFERENCE

Van Leer, D. (1995), *The Queening of America: Gay Culture in Straight Society*, New York: Routledge.