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TRACING THE EPHEMERAL

‘LESBIAN’ CHARACTERS IN GREEK TELEVISION COMEDIES

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Abstract: This paper examines how Greek television fiction introduced and represented lesbian characters during primetime. Drawing on feminist and queer theory and taking the codes and conventions of the comedy genre into account, the paper reveals Greek comedy’s elusive and ambiguous stances towards heteronormativity. By applying a qualitative textual approach, the paper argues that despite their subversive potentialities, the television shows in question (re)produce cultural stereotypes about lesbian identity, invest in queerbaiting strategies and play down the transgressive elements of certain lesbian characters. Despite this critique, the paper stresses the importance of recording, archiving, and further exploring such ephemeral moments in television history in understanding how small national television industries as well as audiences have engaged with the visual representation of gender and sexual diversity.

Keywords: comedy, Greek television, television series, lesbianism, queer

1 Introduction

The last decade has seen an explosion of lesbian representations in American and European popular visual culture.¹ As Daniel Marshall notes, “[t]oday, television across many Anglophone markets seems comparatively full of self-declared gay and lesbian characters and people.”² These markets encompass diverse geographies of sexualities and a rich mosaic of unabashedly queer subjects. In contrast to the limited, selective and negatively portrayed images of past lesbians,³ the circulation of everyday and positive images of lesbians through the mainstream media is significant. Apart from independent Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, Intersex (LGBTQI)-themed films and Hollywood productions, lesbian characters are present and visible in television series like *American Horror Story* (2011–present), British soap operas such as *Coronation Street* (1960–present), youth teen dramas such as *South of Nowhere* (2005–2008) and *Glee* (2009–2015), and comedy-dramas such as *How I Met Your Mother* (2005–2014), *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–2019), *Sense8* (2015–2018) and *Transparent* (2014–2019). Thus, the logical question arises: how exactly is visibility measured, and what does it actually mean? On the one hand, several scholars interested in lesbian-related research examine lesbian representations within a progression narrative, according to which lesbian images move, in general terms, from repression to liberation and from vulnerability to empowerment.⁴ On the other hand, a number of researchers view lesbian images as mostly unsatisfactory and caution that visibility and social acceptance are not mutually inclusive by default.⁵ Furthermore, another group of scholars, acknowledging

television's rules and conventions, adopt reading strategies designed to subvert the hegemonic and heterocentric discourse of media texts and/or deconstruct those images, which did not aim to show lesbians or address lesbian spectatorship in the first place.⁶ Despite the diverse standpoints adopted and the lack of consensus vis-à-vis lesbian representations, these studies have undoubtedly accounted for a rich corpus of work, which lies at the intersection of television, gender, and the history of sexuality.

Greek television has only recently been explored more systematically in the national and international bibliography, and the literature appears to be even more limited when it comes to issues of sexuality and gender representation.⁷ Nevertheless, treating television as a non-studied arena would circumscribe TV critics and journalists' deep and prolonged engagement with television shows and series outside of academia. For instance, Zacharias Mavroidis, in his article in the LGBT magazine *10%*, argues that lesbians, unlike gay men, constitute "the exotic fruit that rarely makes it to our TV screens."⁸ This point of view is shared by other Greek journalists, cult magazines, and fans, who raise the simple-to-pose-but-hard-to-answer question: Where are the Greek TV lesbians?

In this article, I explore four Greek television comedy texts featuring lesbian characters and/or storylines and map out prevailing ideas and images emerging from these texts. The shows examined in this article include *Εγκλήματα* (*Crimes*, 1998-2000), *Κωνσταντίνου και Ελένης* (*At Konstantinos and Helen's House*, 1998–2000), *Οι Στάβλοι της Εριέτας Ζαΐμη* (*Erieta Zaimi's Farms*, 2002–2004), and *Μίλα μου Βρώμικα* (*Talk Dirty to Me*, 2009–2010). These series all earned very high Nielsen ratings ever since their initial appearances and aired on MEGA and ANT1, Greece's largest and most popular television stations. The role that the above channels have played within the Greek television industry is of crucial importance; after the liberation of Greek television from state monopoly in 1989, MEGA and ANT1 positioned themselves as the first private channels to invest in light entertainment programs.⁹ Christina Adamou's *Contemporary Television Studies* pays homage to the novel contributions that private television channels have made within the Greek television landscape. Focusing on the case of MEGA, Adamou challenges popular understandings of television (situation) comedy as a priori conservative and identifies unexpectedly daring moments and storylines in their narrative.¹⁰ Adopting a milder tone, Konstantinos Kyriakos acknowledges the transgressive character of early television fiction in Greece yet locates transgression as an element mainly transposed onto straight male and female bodies. Kyriakos' analysis therefore exposes how the presence of queer characters – more often than not – upholds the heterosexual matrix rather than troubling it and attributes such representational strategies to "censorial and prohibitive mechanisms imposed by the administration team of television stations."¹¹

Adamou's and Kyriakos' works provide fertile ground to envision television as a medium characterized by particular institutional logics, production incentives, and creative freedoms. In fact, the different standpoints adopted by both scholars demonstrate how the television of a country constructs its content depends on various factors, including the type of characters that make their appearance onscreen. Queer television scholarship, for instance, has long pointed to the normative impact of media on non-heterosexual identities. With her 2016 monograph *Queer Girls, Temporality and Screen Media*, Whitney Monaghan aptly illustrates the repertoire of roles assigned to lesbian characters on television. Her compelling analysis of those one-off episodes and limited instances where lesbian characters populate the screen resonates with José Esteban Muñoz's assertion that queerness in popular culture often manifests itself as "innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments" that become eclipsed right after its appearance. Monaghan's work, together with that of Muñoz and Amy Villarejo, have also proffered unapologetic investigations of particular television moments and characters (instead of exhaustive genealogies) to understand how "queer modes of becoming, being and surviving have been televised" across different chronological periods.¹² With this in mind, another link between the four case studies selected in this article is that they all feature characters whose presence across the shows varies in terms of duration, plot advancement and seriality. That is to say, the samples in this study are comprised of recurrent characters (regular cast members) as well as guest stars who only appear in one episode or scene. According to Jonathan Gray, "[w]here television provides so little representation, those few characters that do exist become densely loaded with expectation and representational weight." Following Gray's lead, I pick up a limited and heterogeneous stock of case studies in order to construct an archive of lesbian presence on Greek television. Employing a close textual analysis that considers how mise-en-scene, style, narrative structure and dialogue operate within television

texts with respect to the representation of lesbian characters, I am interested in deciphering the ideological function of these images and their dialectic with heteronormative rules and conventions.

2 Contextualizing Lesbianism in Greek (Popular) Culture

Before going further, I will clarify the use of the term 'lesbian(s)' in this article. While queer theory has underlined the importance of deconstructing essential identity categories, the term 'lesbian' continues to be

a relevant category in the sense that it takes into account the cultural forces that play upon TV characters, in experiences of coming out, identity formation, and sexual style in everyday, material culture.¹³

The use of the term 'lesbian', however, is not in itself an untroubled one, as the concept has been the subject of extensive feminist and queer scrutiny.¹⁴ Borrowing Penelope Engelbrecht's definition, the lesbian is defined here as "a woman who invests in a relationship or bonds with another woman in any or a combination of several ways – emotionally, sexually, socially, financially, and so forth."¹⁵

In what follows, I first provide a brief history of the social and cultural conditions of homosexual women in Greece. Although male homosexual practice was decriminalized in 1951, female homosexuality was never mentioned or acknowledged in the Greek criminal code. The lesbian is, therefore, not only invisible before the law but also unmapped. In her 2010 monograph *Potentially Friends, Potentially Lovers*, Venetia Kantsa points out that barely any ethnographic data about lesbians exist.¹⁶ More specifically, as Efthymis Papataxiarchis' ethnographic research on Aegean Greece illustrates, women, including both homosexuals and heterosexuals, were positioned within the private realm of the house, a space that removes them, along with their experiences and emotions, from the social and political spheres.¹⁷ In the same vein, James Faubion and Elisabeth Kirtsoglou argue in separate studies that the unmappability of lesbians can be attributed not only to the aforementioned domestic model of gender but also to the non-phallic and non-threatening elements that lesbianism embeds.¹⁸ In other words, two women may spend time together, and, for instance, walk holding hands or with their arms linked, because their phallically inactive practices do not transgress the codes of conduct set by heteronormativity in the sphere of public culture and, as a result, may 'pass' unnoticed. In the Greek collective volume *Homosexuality in Films: Expectations & Approaches* (2008), two articles exploring the representations of female homosexuality in the US showcase how lesbian sexuality during the beginning of the twentieth century has remained largely ignored, noting that lesbian-related filmography produced during that period abroad did not always reach Greek theatres.¹⁹ As Konstantinos Kyriakos notes in a chapter entitled "Images of Sapphic Love":

The exploration of the widely available cinematic images of Sapphic love from the interwar years to the present day is defined by the following parameters: a) the presence of female Hollywood stars and gay icons on the Greek film screens such as Alla Nazimova, Greta Garbo, Agnes Mould and Marlene Dietrich, b) the roles of famous female actors who cross-dressed, c) the impact of the first purely lesbian-related film *Parthenes me stoli / Mädchen in Uniform* (1958), and d) the revealing representations of homoerotic love in Dora Rossetti's lesbian novel *Η ερωμένη της / Her Lover* (1929).²⁰

Taking the 1970s as a benchmark of lesbian visibility in Greece, Konstantinos Kyriakos focuses on the soft-porn genre and explains how film productions in Greece regulated the circulation of women who loved other women. Since lesbian sexuality was considered as deviant and, at the same time, enjoyable for the male viewers' scopophilic preferences, "women in these films were constructed as bisexuals and eager to engage in sexual intercourse with other women on condition that a man was present to penetrate them."²¹ From the 1970s onwards, and in parallel to the circulation of lesbian images in the soft-porn industry, films belonging to different genres also experimented with

lesbian characters, although their roles did not cast them in a particularly positive light. In his monograph *Difference and Eroticism*, Kyriakos identifies a significant number of films that depict lesbians – with a few exceptions – as drug addicts, gangsters, killers, victims of blackmail, eccentric artists and nymphomaniacs.²² Such representations of lesbians remained in the Greek visual imagery and were supplemented by tomboyish, libidinous and unruly images of lesbians, which in their turn were later replaced by other women, as the ones in *Γλυκιά Συμμορία* (*Sweet Gang*, 1983), *Singapore Sling* (1999) and *Θα σε Δω στην Κόλαση Αγάπη μου* (*See You in Hell, My Darling*, 1999).

One year before the production of Nikos Nikolaidis' *See You in Hell, My Darling*, the comedy series *Crimes* (1999–2001) premiered on the ANT1 channel and produced 66 episodes during its two seasons. The story revolves around four Athenian families whose lives are interconnected in complex and unconventional ways. My analysis, however, focuses on a specific scene in Episode 18 and highlights four characters in particular – Soso (Kaiti Konstantinou), Pepi (Foteini Baxevani), and two unknown women.²³



Video 1. Soso and Pepi get in trouble with a lesbian couple at a dodgy nightclub (05:01-08:40).

Soso is an unconventional housewife, married to Alekos, whom she tries to kill for cheating on her. Pepi is Soso's neighbour and serves as an obedient and loyal accomplice to her friend's evil plans. The two women visit a dodgy nightclub in order to hire a contract killer who will murder Alekos. While waiting at the table for the killer to arrive, Pepi tells Soso that she is nervous because they are the only women inside the club and worries about what other club clients might think of them. Soso does not take her friend's words seriously and sarcastically answers that, in the worst-case scenario, they would be mistaken for a lesbian couple. This comment, humorous as it may be, foreshadows the appearance of two women at the back of the club, whose bodies and intimate gestures reveal that they are in a relationship. At this point, the comedy series takes advantage of the heterosexual characters' naiveté to advance the plot and create humorous misunderstandings. Pepi, not having realised that the two women are lesbians, does not stop staring at them and makes a motion to one of the two with her glass. The other woman mistakes Pepi for a lesbian and quickly moves towards their table to demand an explanation for flirting with her girlfriend, Chara. The lesbian character, played by the actor Vicky Stavropoulou, whose fictional name is never revealed in the scene, emulates the male gender role of the popular imagination in many ways. Dressed in dark clothes, the character is violently animated, and the scene turns her into a caricature of a stereotypical butch lesbian with exaggerated movements and aggressive behaviour. Paraphrasing Lisa Walker's argument in "How to Recognize a Lesbian: The

Cultural Politics of Looking Like What You Are,” the butch lesbian is well equipped to disrupt hegemonic gender norms of the mainstream.²⁴ However, it is necessary to assess the extent to which the lesbian character’s presence in this scene can really pose such a disruption. Although the character’s appearance can come as a shock to the straight mind and potentially convert heterosexuality into an unstable and vulnerable construction, her short-lived appearance eventually serves only as a source of laughter for the spectators and a means to educate and enlighten heterosexuals, both fictional and real ones, about a specific type of masculine lesbianism associated with gender inversion.

In contrast to the superficial and fleeting way through which the series mentioned above portrayed the lesbian couple, other series provide lesbian characters with more time on the small screen. Anna Hatzisofia and Haris Romas’ comedy series *At Konstantinos & Helen’s House* took to the airwaves in September 1998 and introduced spectators to the lives of Helen Vlahaki (Eleni Rantou), a barwoman, and Konstantinos Katakouzinou (Haris Romas), an assistant professor in Byzantinology, who both happened to share the same house in Marousi due to a pending legal battle over who is the beneficiary of the property. The series produced 68 episodes and lasted for two years, and during the second season, it introduced Marina (Dimitra Papadima), who appeared for one episode as one of the show’s guest characters. In Episode 42, Konstantinos and Helen’s neighbour, Matina (Callirrhoe Miriagkou), asks her cousin Marina to stay at her house and take care of her sick father while she is abroad.



Video 2. Marina’s visit at Konstantinos & Helen’s house gives room for funny misunderstandings.

Matina and Marina, whose names have presumably been selected to rhyme on purpose, have nothing in common. Unlike her insecure and forever-alone cousin, Marina fits nicely into a mainstream and socially acceptable model of femininity: she is pretty without effort, successful in her professional life, and physically fit – but also homosexual.

Adhering to expectations from the comedy genre, the writers camouflage Marina’s sexuality and let her ‘pass’ as straight. Indeed, throughout the entire episode, Marina’s sexuality is never questioned; on the contrary, she is praised for her looks, mind, and humour by the heterosexual men of the show, who think that Marina is interested in them and all engage in a voracious attempt to seduce her. In their article “Keeping the Characters Straight: Comedy and Identity,” Daniel Lieberfeld and Judith Sanders posit that “the humor in disguise comedies derives from the incongruity between characters’ assumed identities and their original ones.”²⁵ Interestingly, *At Konstantinos & Helen’s House* invests in this comedy device and serves two purposes: in concealing lesbianism, Marina can invade and navigate within the perceived heterosexual sanctity of the home and upset heterosexual

characters' expectations with her presence. At the same time, as the limits between heterosexuality and homosexuality become blurred, ideas of true and authentic selfhood also become contested. Nevertheless, towards the end of the episode, the lesbian character evolves and dares to speak about her sexuality. While this interaction, at first sight, appears to belittle Marina's confession and reproduce stereotypes surrounding female homosexuality, the logic of the episode finally endorses the idea that 'being gay is OK,' with Helen suggesting that Marina bring her girlfriend to the house in order to make fun of the men's reactions to meeting her. Using carefully chosen words to sustain the mystery, Helen tells Konstantinos, Manthos (Vasilis Koukouras), and Nikolas (Stergios Nenes) that Marina's *δεσμός* (lover) has arrived, and all wait, expecting to see a man and not a woman. The assumption that a female will necessarily have a male as a partner exposes the centrality of the heterosexual rule, which continues to organize people's thoughts, embodied realities and expectations in exclusionary and restrictive ways. The image of Marina next to her girlfriend (Mary Bisbiki) and the kiss they exchange on the cheek in front of everyone a few seconds before the episode concludes validate lesbian desire and the representation of their own identity. Yet as the camera concentrates on the main protagonists' reactions to the knowledge of lesbianism, the lesbian couple disappears within seconds, becoming peripheral to Hatzisofia and Romas' show and thus rendering lesbianism palpable only through the eyes of confused heterosexual men who struggle with their own reactions and feelings of uneasiness.

In an effort to introduce new characters, another Antenna production included a lesbian character whose appearance was not exhausted in a single episode. In 2002, Alexandros Rigas and Dimitris Apostolou produced *Erieta Zaimi's Farms*, a satirical comedy with bright political overtones that remained on air until 2004. The programme, set within the homosocial environment of a women's prison and seen as a microcosm of Greek society, depicted several clichéd and stereotypical female characters that included, among others, a big-mouthed and sexually promiscuous woman from Patras (Lilika Kalitsi / Konstantia Christoforidou), an unfeminine anarchist (Mary Skarmoutsou / Sara Ganoti) and a middle-aged religious woman (Pavlina Kakoudaki / Jessy Papoutsis).

Erieta Zaimi's Farms' only lesbian character – Pigi Bakola, played by Vicky Protogeraki – is a protagonist in the series. Nonetheless, the strategies through which the series presented the lesbian character is open to debate. In most of the first season's episodes, Pigi is of no particular interest to the spectators, as her role does not advance the plot and is solely limited to lines where she angrily recalls TV and theatrical roles that were unfairly given to other actors and not to her. From Episode 10 onwards, Pigi begins to express desire and makes her sexuality visible. Besides, as Frasure puts it, lesbians are an indefinable, unspeakable and even unthinkable category of existence, and it thus becomes necessary to make confessions, particularly those of seduction, that lead to the knowledge of lesbianism.²⁶ The confession of lesbian desire through words and actions, however, reveals the series' tension between making lesbianism visible and, at the same time, palatable to the audience. Multiple attempts at achieving emotional and physical intimacy with a heterosexual female prisoner are all doomed to failure. What is, therefore, both assumed and revealed is that Pigi's enforced confinement within the heterosexual and containing contexts of prison ensures the circulation of a version of lesbianism that is generally non-threatening but policed by the rest of the characters when necessary. Indeed, by presenting Pigi as a person entirely grafted onto heterosexual communities and devoid of a queer network and opportunities, the spectators of *Erieta Zaimi's Farms* observe what Laura Cottingham aptly suggests as "a narrative device that eradicates the possibilities for lesbian content from the outset by presenting only one lesbian-like character so that the lesbian is given no one to be a lesbian with."²⁷

Unlike the previous series where the love story between the lesbian characters was doomed from the start, the series *Talk Dirty to Me* (2009–2010) offers an interesting yet not unproblematic shift in lesbian representations. Throughout the series, and mainly in Episode 20, Rita (Klelia Renesi), one of the show's leading characters, informs the viewers of her relationship with Memas (Andreas Kontopoulos) and expresses her happiness for having finally found the man of whom she had always dreamt. In the next scene, however, a woman enters her house and tells her about her engagement with Memas, only to spoil her plans and bring her back to reality. Later on, while working at Bar-ba-Dimos bar and knowing that her colleague, Teri (Vasiliki Kakosaïou), is sexually attracted to her, Rita engages in a provocative game of seduction.



Video 3. Rita kisses Terry inside Bar-ba-Dimos bar.

Despite Teri's initial hesitation on the grounds of acknowledging that Rita is straight, she eventually succumbs to Terry's provocations and kisses her in front of the male waiter, Sadam, who looks at them in confusion. Melissa Hidalgo argues that "as lesbianism becomes more mainstream, there remains a tendency in certain shows to construct it as subversive,"²⁸ and *Talk Dirty to Me* appears to be one of these shows. As I will try to explain, despite the screening of the aforementioned 'hot' scene, the series engages in the process of heterosexualising both women and thus provides what Tricia Jenkins describes as "a type of watered-down lesbianism" whose duration is short and ephemeral.²⁹ The scenes after the kiss speak to this idea when Rita enters a butcher shop and announces to all the female customers present that she is a lesbian, encouraging them to try it themselves. When the customers exit and Rita stays with her friend, Lili (Mara Barola), she confesses that she became tired of men and has now turned a new page in her life. While Rita's behaviour can be read as potentially subversive, another reading may promote the idea that lesbian sexuality is something that can be consumed and thrown away without a second thought. This notion is specially reinforced if we consider Rita and Teri's duo as a queerbaiting strategy. According to Judith Fathallah:

queerbaiting may be defined as a strategy by which writers and networks attempt to gain the attention of queer viewers via hints, jokes, gestures, and symbolism, suggesting a queer relationship between two characters and then emphatically denying and laughing off the possibility.³⁰

Indeed, despite claims to the contrary, towards the end of the series, *Talk Dirty to Me* places Rita with another man, thus erasing the construction of the confident heteroflexible character expressed earlier during the season. Not only does the series ensure Rita's return to heterosexuality but it also normalizes Teri in unconvincing and somewhat unpleasant ways to the audience. More specifically, as the series concludes and most of the characters find themselves in couples, Teri undergoes an unprecedented change and finally engages in a relationship with the male immigrant and waiter, Sadam. In this context, and through its use of humour as a pretext, the series imposes compulsory heterosexuality on each character and makes lesbianism appear as a rest stop,³¹ "a site of tourism to the L land"³² and, paradoxically enough, a sexual relationship that prepares women for their future relationships with men.

3 Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to follow the recent scholarship on Greek television fiction and textually map out the field of lesbian representation in Greek television comedy.³³ According to Florian Vanlee, Frederik Dhaenens and

Sofie Van Bauwel, “One concern that might be raised in regard to textual analyses is that it may convey a false sense of gravity or prominence on storylines that were actually minor and/or marginal.”³⁴ Indeed, the television comedies examined above zoomed into lesbian characters whose presence has remained largely overlooked by the popular press and academia. Although the television shows in question enjoyed significant popularity during the time they were broadcast, the role of lesbian characters in these shows has not been discussed outside LGBTQI magazines and blogs. As a lecturer in television studies, I have noticed the difficulties that television fans and queer students encounter when they are asked to recall lesbian characters that have made it to the airwaves. This points to the scarcity of lesbian themes and storylines available on Greek television and perhaps to the ephemeral and forgetful ‘nature’ through which these images have been construed.

By adopting a critically queer/feminist perspective and combining theories from the comedy genre, this article demonstrated that the comedy texts in question predominantly reify heteronormativity with regards to the representation of lesbian characters and minimize the queer potentialities of these characters. Concentrating on the period between 1998 and 2009, this paper provided a perspective to understand the dialectic of Greek television within the realms of gender, sexual diversity and ideology. Although Greek private television channels may have been radical and eager to experiment with provocative themes and transgressive characters, it appears that not all social groups appearing on Greek television comedy have diachronically enjoyed equal opportunities for such transgressions.

This suggests that potentially daring television channels, such as MEGA and ANT1, may have adopted different standards in their portrayals of different characters. Thus, a show that is envisioned as innovative and progressive may not necessarily exclude the possibility of integrating heteronormative and homonormative characters in its cast. In fact, even examples from recent television programs broadcast in Greece reveal continuing and persistent tensions within what can be permitted onscreen and under what conditions. The beeping out of words like ‘lesbian’ during the rebroadcast of particular Greek comedies as well as the cutting of scenes entailing homosexual practices between women in shows like *Glee* showcase a television culture controlled by the National Radio-Television Consulate and averse to major sociocultural changes.³⁵

Nevertheless, despite its critique, this article, being an archive of gender ephemera, stresses the importance of recording precariously stored segments of audiovisual material in understanding the past of small national television cultures and the lessons to be learnt from such ‘lost’ cultural knowledge. Finally, an awareness of such representational injustices and misrepresentations serves as an invitation for queer television scholars to revisit the past and reassess texts that have escaped critical scrutiny and inquiry. This invitation could possibly include the use of methods that step beyond text-centric approaches, such as the one employed in this article. Such attempts extending beyond researchers’ own analysis of television would shorten the perceived distance between textual representation and reception, revealing how actual queer audiences watch Greek television portrayals and themes while also exploring how they understand and relate to these texts as fans, in affective and embodied ways.

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Biography

Spyridon Chairetis completed his doctoral thesis, titled *Queering the Greek Television 'Comedy': Popular Texts, Dissident Readings* (August 2020) at Oxford University. His general research interests and publications center around the intersections of gender, sexuality, fat embodiment, age, and space in Greek media (cinema & television) and culture.