

New queer Greece: thinking identity through Constantine Giannaris's *From the Edge of the City* and Ana Kokkinos's *Head On*

Dimitris Papanikolaou *University of Oxford*

Abstract

Reading From the Edge of the City and Head On as world examples of New Queer Cinema, this article shows how the role they assign to sexuality crucially inflects their perspectives on diaspora and Greekness. From the Edge of the City undermines the conventional narrative of successful Greek repatriations by presenting a group of Russian-Greek young men negotiating both their position within Greek society and their framing by a new queer (cinematic) gaze. Head On screens queer desire as a strategy which finally unsettles the traditional space (and the accepted narratives) of Greek-Australia and disrupts the heteronormative temporality of Greek emigrations. Both films thus present us with new understandings of movement and ethnic belonging they suggest genderfuck and nationfuck as positions which dismantle the traditional framing of national and gender identities and propose a new queer(ed) Greece as a fluid space-off for the radical rethinking of identity.

Keywords

identity
Greekness
diaspora
queer
Giannaris
Kokkinos

In her well-known 1992 article, which named, if not shaped, 'New Queer Cinema', Ruby Rich observed the then-increasing interest in the work of independent gay and lesbian film in festivals and other contexts. Among the first examples she gave were Greg Araki's *The Living End* (1992), Tom Kalin's *Swoon* (1992), Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning* (1991), Todd Haynes' *Poison* (1991), Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) and Isaac Julien's *Young Soul Rebels* (1991) (all films in English, incidentally). Rich pointed out that the films had few aesthetic or narrative strategies in common, but that what they seemed to share was an attitude, a style: 'these works are irreverent, energetic, alternately minimalist and excessive. Above all, they're full of pleasure' (Rich 2004:16). New Queer Cinema may seem at first a simple designation but it certainly pointed to a complex situation. It coincided with a larger theoretical and cultural dynamic easily identifiable today as the shift from gay to queer. Teresa de Lauretis's proclamation of the moment of Queer Theory, for instance, had only come a year before, insisting polemically that:

rather than marking the limits of the social space (. . .) gay sexuality (. . .) acts as an agent of social process (. . .) both participatory and yet distinct,

claiming at once equality and difference, demanding political representation while insisting on its material and historical specificity (1991: 3).

Yet New Queer Cinema, as both a concept and a genre in the making, went a step further (evident already in Rich's original article). The claim was that film can be a privileged medium through which to think new identifications and the intersection between sexuality (-ies), politics, identity (-ies) and the already existing archive of narratives with which we negotiate all of the above. In the introduction to the *Routledge Queer Film Reader*, Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin explain:

New Queer Cinema makes use of postmodern ideas and aesthetic styles (as does queer theory itself). The films also regularly explore sexuality in relation to gender, race, class, age, etc.- in order to show how *other discourses of social difference inflect our understanding of sexuality*. In most of these films there is a focus on permeable formal boundaries – the crossing of styles and genres. New Queer Cinema simultaneously draws on minimalism and excess, appropriation and pastiche, the mixing of Hollywood and avant-garde styles, and even the mix of fictional and documentary style (11, emphasis added).

I start this essay by asserting that the opposite is also true: New Queer Cinema, especially if considered in the larger perspective of World Cinema, can also show how our understanding of sexuality (and the representational politics of queer desire in particular) brings about new perspectives on social and cultural difference, national identity, movement and belonging, mobility and stasis. Therefore, my aim in this article is not only to give an example of the dynamism of a New Queer film aesthetics as it migrates to more peripheral cinematographies (focusing, in this case, on a Greek and a Greek-Australian film), but also to trace this aesthetics in relation to migration, movement and national identity.

The two films I will be focusing on, *Head On* (1998) directed by Ana Kokkinos and *Apo tin akri tis polis/From the Edge of the City* (1998) directed by Constantine Giannaris, use an identifiable New Queer filmic vocabulary, falling neatly into the category of New Queer Cinema as understood, for instance, by Michele Aaron (2004) and H. Bernshoff and S. Griffin (2002) in their respective introductory works. Indeed, *Head On* has already been theorized as a paradigmatic New Queer film in an article collected in Aaron's *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader* (Jennings and Lominé 2004), and *From the Edge of the City* is the work of a director widely who has been discussed in the context of the British Queer Cinema movement of the 1990s. I should stress that the films were marketed together when they came out on DVD, introduced in gay film series and advertised to a queer oriented world audience, while in Greece (and for *Head On*, in Greece and Australia), they were successfully promoted to mainstream audiences and presented with an array of national prizes. The more mainstream audiences that watched these films in Greece and Australia create a spectatorship dynamic that also informs my readings in a number of ways.

Even though critical reception of both films has underlined their New Queer Cinema perspective, it has not yet focused on the ways their reshaping

of stable gender and sexual identities affects their views of Greekness – which is exactly what I aim to do here. Moreover, I will argue that through their queering of dominant migrant narratives (the narrative of repatriation to Greece, and of Greek migrations), both films present Greece as a queer space (or rather, a queered *space-off*), a conceptual leaking closet that consistently undermines the apparent stability of national identification, ethnic belonging and gender performances.

From the Edge of the City

The 1992 *Sight and Sound* special issue on New Queer Cinema (itself a response to Ruby Rich's original review first published in *The Village Voice*) featured short interviews with directors including Isaac Julien, Derek Jarman and the up and coming Constantine Giannaris, who was at the time making his first feature films in England. In his interview, Giannaris made a comment very much in tune with a larger New Queer Cinema poetics emerging at the time:

What I am trying to grapple with now is whether my sexuality has any relevance to the broader world. How does it allow certain insights (. . .) I want to use these formal devices, that outlook and sensibility to look at a wider society (. . .) It's taking on taboos, saying the unsayable – to me that's what queerness is.

(Giannaris in Bell et al. 1992: 35)

With works such as *Caught Looking* (1991), produced and screened as part of Channel 4's Out series and *A Place in the Sun* (1994), about a man who falls in love with an Albanian immigrant in Greece, Giannaris's filmography has returned constantly to the intersection of identity, sexuality and politics. This also happens with *From the Edge of the City*, perhaps his most famous work to date, the first film Giannaris directed after moving back to Greece. In many ways, the film tries to build on the impulse to 'say the unsayable' by using an already developed New Queer aesthetics that sits awkwardly in the context of Greek Cinema. It is no coincidence that on its first Greek release, Giannaris's film was seen as a huge challenge to the poetics of New Greek Cinema, a cinematic movement exemplified in the films of Theo Angelopoulos. Angelopoulos, a director internationally recognized as a European cinema auteur, had just been honoured with the Palme d'Or at Cannes that year. In the Greek Cinema awards of 1998, *From the Edge of the City* was up against Angelopoulos's lauded *Mia aioniotita kai mia mera/Eternity and a Day*, both films dealing with immigrants to Greece, albeit in extremely different ways. To the surprise of many, Giannaris's film came close to beating Angelopoulos's for the prize and the younger director made his dissatisfaction obvious in a provocative manner during his acceptance speech at the award's ceremony. Not only did this become a powerful sign of a new generation of Greek directors interrogating an established film-making tradition, but it was also read as the gesture of a queer, post-national film-maker who wanted to challenge the limits of what could be told on the Greek screen.

From the Edge of the City focuses on 17-year-old Sasha (played by Stathis Papadopoulos) and his group of friends, most of them rent boys and petty

1 Of the numerous accounts about Pontic Greeks, their settlement in Greece after the 1990s and the Greek policies and views about them, see Voutira 2006. An exemplary discussion of the Greek Pontic community and the way it is being represented in *From the Edge of the City*, is provided by Panayiota Mini (2006).

thieves originally from Sohumi in the former Soviet Union but now living in the Athenian suburb of Menidi. The boys can easily be recognized by Greek audiences as 'Pontic Greeks', members of the Greek communities from the Black Sea who had been repeatedly displaced under Stalin's minorities policies and acknowledged as a 'kin minority' by the Greek state. Pontic Greeks emigrated en masse to Greece after the break-up of the Soviet Union since they were able to claim full citizenship under the Greek *jus sanguinis*.¹ In official Greek narratives, Pontic Greeks are presented as 'co-ethnic repatriates' who were welcomed to the country with open arms and fully aided in their efforts to settle in Greece during the 1990s. This is one of the narratives Giannaris's film dismantles from the outset.

Sasha and his group of friends introduce us to an immigrant youth subculture on the outskirts of urban Athens, with its own rules, hierarchies and group idiolect. They are filmed hanging around smoking drugs, having sex in bordellos, gambling, fantasizing about cars, easy money and girlfriends, while prostituting themselves to male clients, starting and stopping low-paid jobs in the construction industry and having the occasional adolescent fight between themselves. They seem to abide by a number of masculinity codes – including, for example, the belief that they should only be active during sexual intercourse with men in order to preserve their manliness – codes which they nevertheless sometimes break. At a later stage in the film, a subplot emerges in which Sasha is asked by his friend Giorgos to help 'keep' a Russian prostitute, Natasha, until she is successfully trafficked to another city. The love affair between Sasha and Natasha eventually turns the plot into an adventure narrative and provides the film's tragic end.

To a certain extent, the film develops as a recognizable story about immigrant exclusion, urban marginalization and adolescent alienation. Yet this is by no means a typical account of immigrant alienation. The purposeful mixing of styles, codes and genres (documentary film, docudrama, cinéma-verité, teen adventure, even pornography) pushes the story beyond its expected frameworks.

What we see is not the usual story of Greek 'co-ethnic repatriates' successfully establishing themselves after their return 'to the longed-for homeland'. Instead, the central characters of the film face what José Arroyo has astutely identified as a 'multidimensional alienation', a feeling heightened by the generic and stylistic strategies of the film as a whole:

The great achievement of *From the Edge of the City* is the way it successfully conveys a sense of multidimensional alienation throughout. The boys are old enough to be considered sexually over the hill but not yet adults. They are not as ostracised as the Albanians they insult, but have no illusions they'll be accepted as fully Greek. Most reside in Menidi, a suburb of Athens, but make a living in Omonia, Athens' famous sex and crime district. While they sell their bodies to men, they distinguish themselves from "faggots". Sex is easily available, love visible but out of reach. They don't fit into their 'natural' identities (family, ethnic, national, sexual) yet have themselves formed a community with its own values (. . .)

Even the acting contributes to the film's depiction of diasporic alienation, of belonging to several places and nowhere at all, by combining professional

actors with street kids. The latter's presence has a curious effect: their occasionally clumsy line readings (in Russian and Greek) simultaneously remind us we're seeing a movie and that they are not actors and yet the film seems more authentic *because* they're not actors. (Arroyo 2000: 43)

In fact, almost all the characters in the main group of friends are played by real-life immigrants to Greece, most of them amateur actors (and some without any previous acting experience at all). In what develops as a distinctly creative mimicry/appropriation of Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*, the action in the film is interspersed with interviews with Sasha conducted by an unseen interviewer – a role taken by the director himself. The pseudo *cinéma-verité* effect thus created, paired with the fact that most of the boys keep their real names in the film, disorients the viewer and blurs the boundaries between fiction and 'reality'. However, if the film makes a claim to authenticity, this is not because the viewer suspects that the real-life immigrants may perhaps be playing a version of themselves, but because the characters are engaged in a constant game of identity-positioning that reflects on the (amateur actors') negotiation with the process of cinematic representation in one way or another. Whether one considers that they are playing themselves or not, what we see is people trying to manipulate their to-be-looked-at-ness and meet the demands of a looking gaze represented by the camera *or/and* the characters' clients and their peers. The important point is the blurring of the distinction between these interpellating gazes, the feeling that the performances we see are self-conscious positionings both at the level of the narrative and at the level of the representational dynamics of the film as a whole.

There is, for instance, a clear link between the techniques of teasing and seduction displayed by both the unseen interviewer and Sasha in the interviews, and the way the camera 'behaves' in the narrative parts of the films. The camera often lingers on the youths' bodies, literally teasing, making them the object of visual pleasure. For instance, a scene between Sasha and his friend Giorgos as they are about to close their trafficking deal is set in the showers of a gym. It suddenly takes on an erotic subtext beyond the homosocial when the camera starts focusing in close-up on the two naked male bodies and their interaction.

If anything, what becomes 'authentically represented' in this film is the extent to which every representation is itself the result of power relations and the constant negotiation between looking and being looked at. In another scene, as the group of friends hang around an empty open-air theatre sharing jokes and stories, the camera circles around them in a couple of 360-degree travelling shots. Suddenly one of them, Kotsian, takes a portable CD player and moves to the centre of the empty theatre. The camera follows him. He starts an elaborately choreographed dance and is later joined by Sasha who also seems to know by heart all the intricate dance moves. Who are these street kids dancing for? The viewer realizes that this could be an elaborate choreography prepared by the production (although no choreographer is listed in the final credits), in order to show the two characters sharing codes of subcultural belonging. It is equally plausible though that this is a dance which the immigrant

amateur actors had prepared alone; it could be, for instance, a dance they had used while auditioning for the film (and it certainly looks like such an act). As Sasha and Kotsian keep dancing together, much less for the gaze of their friends sitting around them, and much more for the benefit of the camera that circles obsessively around their dance, the viewer feels that the boundaries between real and fictional characters are purposefully blurred by the representational handling of this performance. With this blurring intensifying, another boundary that comes under attack is that between paying these kids for sex or petty criminal jobs that the characters they play seem ready to undertake in the film, and paying them to act themselves in the film. The viewer is subtly guided to ask this question in the end: where did the director, himself readily identified with a metropolitan gay identity from contextual information, find and cast these youths? What is his relationship with his amateur actors/subjects?

Similar questions are provoked by the film's interviews with Sasha, which seem to have been preserved from pre-production (and thus, one assumes, show 'a character in the making', not a real person playing with the camera but neither a fully-fledged fictional character). The boundaries between reality and its fictional handling are blurred, not simply to support a postmodern cinematic style, but through it, to offer a political comment: identity positioning always blurs the 'real self' and its fictional handling; it is always the result of negotiation and manipulation.

This is, obviously, a point made at the same period in many films in similar ways. Yet what is interesting in this case is that by structuring this multi-layered game of representation around a story about immigrants to Greece, Giannaris upsets normative narratives of diaspora, migration, repatriation and immigration that are especially relevant to the Greek context of his film. On the one hand, he refuses to share a narrative according to which Pontic Greeks, as members of the Greek diaspora, are identified with a deep ethnic Greek self that helps them integrate into the country of their dreams. The boys' performances of the self-change: they are often uneven, adapting to different contexts, both in their sexual and ethnonational identifications. On the other hand, Giannaris undermines the idea that contact with the Immigrant Other is an ethical position based on rapprochement, understanding and tolerance. It is, instead, (queer) desire that articulates the main ethics of contact in *From the Edge of the City*, and this framing has the potential to undermine not only conservative, but also progressive discourses about immigration policies.

Through a complex and elaborate game, Giannaris establishes his own cinematic viewpoint as a queer one, either intertextually, by referencing, for instance, Gus Van Sant and Isaac Julien, or intratextually, through a self-expository longing gaze that the camera movement seems eager to share. This radically undermines the standard way of screening stories about migration and displacement, which are normally expected to be mediated by a stable, authoritative and to an extent distanced voice or viewpoint. Greek audiences have, for instance, been regularly exposed to documentaries about Greek emigrants, the Greek diaspora, or new immigrants to Greece. They are also used to crowd pleasing film narratives about Greek emigrants or members of the Greek diaspora (the most recent

examples being *Politiki Kouzina/A Touch of Spice* (Boulmetis 2003) and *I Nyfes/Brides* (Voulgaris 2004), two of the biggest box office hits in Greek cinema history). Finally, a number of Greek auteurs have offered extended meditations on migration and the national self. The trend is exemplified by Angelopoulos's *Eternity and a Day*, a film that fuses the story of a young immigrant boy from Albania with that of a Greek poet in a self-reflective search for national and personal identity. Their generic and stylistic differences notwithstanding, what all these screen narratives share is the stability of the narrating frame. That very stability is stubbornly denied in *From the Edge of the City*, as the narrative mechanism is subjectivized, penetrated by desire and longing for an Other that is both willing and unwilling to play the game.

Head On

'I'm not Australian, I'm not Greek, I'm not anything'. 'You're either Greek or Australian, you have to make a choice. Me, I am neither. It's not that I can't decide; I don't like definitions', 'Words such as faggot, wog, poofter, gay, Greek, Australian, Croat are just excuses. Just stories, they mean shit'.

(Tsiolkas 1997: 141)

These phrases come from Christos Tsiolkas's 1995 narrative *Loaded*, a book about fragmented identity, belonging and sexuality, written as a series of discontinuous personal notes. If identities are 'the result of a successful articulation or "chaining" of the subject into the flow of the discourse' (Hall 1996: 5), *Loaded* was an attempt to resist any fixed meaning or 'chaining' to any of the diasporic experiences it was putting on paper. It was left to the reader to make the connections, and associate them with the narrative of Greek gay migrant adolescence in 1980s and 1990s Melbourne.

Although critically acclaimed, the novel never found the relatively large audiences that greeted its film adaptation in Ana Kokkinos's *Head On*, released in 1998. The film script was written by the director in collaboration with Tsiolkas. Greek-Australian star Alex Dimitriades, famous for roles in the film *The Heartbreak Kid* (Jenkins 1993) and the spin-off TV series *Heartbreak High* (Burstall et al. 1994), was cleverly cast as its main star. Dimitriades's stardom (and the fact that the film shows him naked), assured mainstream publicity in Australia, while his star text added an ironic layer to the casting. If *Heartbreak Kid* was a conventional (and very popular) story about Greek Australia engaging in non-traditional high school romances, *Head On* featured the main lead playing a similar character, only now grown up, grown queer and more interested in rough sex than romance.

Critics from the outset read *Head On* as a successful fusion of New Australian Cinema with New Queer Cinema, or, rather, 'a uniquely Australian example of New Queer Cinema'. Ros Jennings and Loykie Lominé argue further that *Head On* was central in showing not only that New Queer films could be made outside the North American and/or the British context, but also that Australia 'occupies a marginal space [in relation to dominant Western culture] that could even be interpreted as resembling a 'queer' space' (2004: 145). I want to add to this view that

2 *Head On's* stylistic tactics owe a lot to what David Bordwell (2002) has described as 'intensified continuity', characterized by rapid editing, numerous close framings, especially in dialogue scenes, and extensive use of a free-ranging camera. Even though not identical to her main examples, the film seems close to what Eleftheria Thanouli has codified as the new paradigm of post-classical narration in World Cinema (see Thanouli 2008).

the representation of queer desire in this film puts pressure not only on the idea of an 'Australian western space', but also on stable understandings of Greek diasporic identities. It questions the idea of 'Greek diasporic space', and, more generally, of narratives of Greekness supported by emigration stories and images.

Head On starts with Ari dancing at a traditional Greek marriage, giving a coruscating voiceover about immigrant life, heteronormative futurity and his own alienation:

They tell you that God is dead, but man, they still want you to have a purpose; look at your parents, hard working migrants work two jobs, struggle all their life, buy kids a house; hey, that's purpose; they tell you to be a doctor, teacher, be creative, do something, believe in something, believe in family, in the future, save the world, believe in love. But, fuck it. I am no scholar, I am no worker, I am no poet.

This is exactly the moment when Ari is seen breaking away from the wedding party and going to a public toilet for gay sex. Cut to him naked the next morning, masturbating after he wakes up – his face and body shot in a series of close-ups. The film then proceeds to show the next 24 hours in the life of this nineteen-year-old. The camera follows him wandering aimlessly around Melbourne, bored, confused, pissed, pissed-off and constantly aroused. All this is shot extremely placidly, its soundscape obsessively covered by loud music ranging from bouzouki to Dannii Minogue, Madonna to Bobby Gillespie, Haroula Alexiou to Sotiria Bellou.² We see Ari having anonymous sex with a butcher in a market and with a middle-aged Greek man outside a Greek bar. He goes back to his house to eat lunch with the family and is forced to dance *hasapiko* with his father, plays cards in a café and loses borrowed money, buys drugs, smokes drugs, sells drugs to his cousin Joe and drops in on his aunt's to celebrate a cousin's engagement (where he also has a brief sexual encounter with another female cousin Betty). He visits his cross-dressing friend and one-time lover Johnny, aka Toula. They go to a Greek bar where they dance but end up in a police station where they are forced to strip naked and Toula (brilliantly played by Paul Capsis) is beaten up by a Greek Australian policeman while Ari looks on. Finally, Ari goes to a club where he meets his brother's friend, a white Anglo-Australian gay man called Sean. They go to his house and have sex until Ari starts a fight, is beaten up and thrown out. The film ends at dusk with Ari alone on the docks, first cruising for sex and then dancing a self-styled Greek *zeibekiko* dance. His dance is intercut with well-known and recognizable black-and-white documentary footage of immigrants embarking and disembarking from boats, waving goodbye to their loved ones. As these resemble well-known images from the cultural archive of Greek migration, the message here seems clear. Ari, the Greek diasporic son who doubles up as an Australian queer, is dancing in a cruising area that also doubles as the quintessential space of rupture in the symbolic narrative of Greek migrations, the harbour of arrival in the land of migratory destination. In a spectacular fashion, (Greek) migration is queered and becomes the catalyst for a diasporization

of queerness. This is more or less the meaning encapsulated in the last phrase of the film, which we hear in a voiceover, as we see Ari dancing again, alone in the harbour: 'I'm going to live my life, I am not going to make a difference, no one will remember me when I'm dead. I'm a sailor and a whore, and I will be until the end of the world'.

As must be clear by now, in this very fast-paced film we are in *Big Fat Greek Wedding* territory turned upside down. On the other hand, this is also a brilliant 'cinematographic attempt to define or rather illustrate what queer means in practice, not as a concept but as an embodied experience' (Jennings and Lominé 2004: 149). In the film, Ari's acts are shown to be shaped, at least on the surface, by desire, the fluidity of which undermines any apparently stable identificatory positions he is also shown to occupy. This has troubled some commentators who have read this as Ari's inability to have a stable and 'unproblematic' sexual identity because of his Greek Australian upbringing. The point is, I think, misleading, since it fails to take into account that it is precisely because the film is not simply about a young man insecure in his sexuality, that it is neither simply about how homophobic a Greek diasporic community can be. Rather, it is Ari's unmanageable queerness, in a film that formally attempts to screen fluidity in more ways than one, that leads to the questioning of a series of other identifications, or rather, that makes identificatory narratives and spaces leak.

This process is exemplified in the last scene, which effectively disrupts the temporality, genealogical setting and spatial framing of migration and can be read as crucial to an interpretation of the film as a whole. Having established Melbourne docks as a queer space, and Ari's body as a queer body, the last scene of the film invites us to see the archive of migrations differently. Juxtaposing the body of Ari dancing to scenes of immigrants arriving at this very place (perhaps – we never know for sure where the documentary images come from), the film asks us to question the very first impulse we have, that is, to decode this as a genealogical mapping of migratory alienation (a narrative that starts with women crying when they reach a foreign land and ends with a gay man dancing alone, alienated, in the docks). The challenge, which the handling of the scene makes quite clear, is not to see the archive of immigration framing Ari's body, but to attempt the opposite: to see Ari's body as the frame that redefines migration, thus creating a new context for its cultural memory. Instead of the narratives of immigrant 'success' and 'prosperity' that are very much predicated on a heteronormative and progressivist futurity, what we have here is the sinthomosexual³ body of Ari projecting, as it were, the archive of immigration and a diasporic identity out of his own queer gestures.

The last scene also contains a subtle and oblique reference to the cinematic adaptation of *Zorba the Greek*, which adds a further ironic twist. In the famous last scene of Cacoyannis's film, the two men (Zorba/Anthony Quinn, and The Boss/Alan Bates, the latter a diasporic Greek who returns to his country of origin to set up a mine) were seen dancing mindlessly, after their mine operation had spectacularly failed. The intense homosociality of the scene has since become proverbial, and in a sense codes, especially for global audiences and tourists to Greece, the ideal of Greek manliness. *Head On* ends in a similar setting, near the sea (yet *not* the Greek sea), with

3 The neologism has been proposed by Lee Edelman in his *No Future* (2004); elsewhere he defines sinthomosexuals as 'those who reject the Child as the materialized emblem of the social relation and with it the concomitant mapping of the political in the space of reproductive futurism' (2007: 471).

a man dancing a similar dance while the camera hovers over his body before zooming out in a crane shot (in a similar movement to Cacoyannis's *Zorba*). Yet now, a man is dancing alone, and the scene takes place where in the previous scene he had been cruising for gay sex. Not only has homosociality now become homosexual desire, but also the national narrative of gender identity has now been radically queered.

It is important to acknowledge here that as so much in this film is about Ari's quest for sexual contact, we constantly see his search for queer corners, spaces for sex, with the camera mapping his queering of the space available in the metropolitan city of Melbourne. As Aaron Betsky has remarked, queer space 'is a useless, amoral, and sensual space that lives only in and for experience. It is a space of spectacle, consumption, dance, and obscenity. It is a misuse or deformation of a place, an appropriation of the buildings and codes of the city for perverse purposes' (Betsky 1997: 5). What we see in *Head On*, therefore, is 'queer space [as it] becomes an awareness of the emptiness within the city that does not defeat but animates one's self to always go searching' (190).

Crucially, this personal strategy of queering space ends up affecting most of the locations where scenes take place, including the easily identifiable 'Greek places' of Melbourne – houses, cafés, bars, Greek *kafeneia*. The claustrophobia these places emit becomes a theme quite early on, with characters often crammed into small rooms full of furniture and mementos, talking about interiors and interacting because they cannot avoid each other's presence (the latter happens, for instance, in an early scene between Ari and his father). Closed and sealed off, traditional, traditionalist and well-defined closets of a Greek identity kept alive at all cost, these Greek places of Melbourne may be seen initially as the opposite of the queer spaces visited by Ari. These Greek places are shown to be homophobic (Toula's house, with the domineering presence of an aggressive Greek father), compulsively heterosexual (the wedding party ballroom; the Greek youth club; the various houses where engagements are discussed or formalized), and homosocial (the Greek *kafeneia*, patronized only by male clients). Yet, as Ari fluidly moves between queer spaces and Greek places, the boundaries between the two become more and more porous. This strategy ends up showing how the Greek places contain within them a queer element, which may be disavowed, ostracized or simply hidden, yet it is strategically positioned and plays a role in their semiotic construction.

This is what happens, for instance, when Ari, after a brief sexual encounter, goes into the backroom of a Greek coffee shop and becomes the object of the gaze of several of the men who play cards there. Because of Ari's wider role within the narrative, the viewer is meant to question the homosociality of these extremely masculine places. What are these men looking at and for? And how much of this is shared by an audience that has already seen Ari masturbating naked, or having brief and intense sexual encounters? If the Greek men's gazes on this occasion do not produce anything significant, on another occasion, in a Greek bar, Ari is being looked at by an older bearded man. The scene begins with an exchange that seems to be about the mutual recognition of members of the

same diasporic community, but ends as a cruising scene with Ari performing oral sex on the older man in the backyard.

If Ari's body acts as a catalyst to uncover the queer corners of the traditional Greek diasporic space (because the body, one feels compelled to add here, is also a space), on other occasions queering the diasporic space seems to be a conscious gesture made by the characters. Transsexual Johnny/Toula's room, for instance, acts as a queer refuge hidden within a working-class flat. Crammed with camp, colourful decoration, Toula's room is in dramatic contrast with the rest of the house, the latter's gloomy interiors dominated by a violent, drunk, homophobic and possibly incestuous father. It is interesting that, in terms of decoration, Toula's room looks more like the interior of a taxi in which Toula and Ari share a joint with the Turkish driver, before being stopped and arrested by the police. In the police station, as they wait to be interrogated in a white holding cell, Toula will keep discussing and measuring space by walking around and touching the walls in a desperate effort to alter the oppressive dynamics of that place as well.

As it undermines the way place contains and narrates identities, *Head On* does not simply queer the two-ness of Greek Australian experience. Nor does it simply provide a kind of triple consciousness of being Greek, Australian and queer. Instead, it suggests, as does *From the Edge of the City*, that all consciousness is formed by our being many things at the same time – trapped and mobile, narrated and uncontainable, in the closet of identity and close to its leaking corner.

In and out of the frame: a new queer(ed) Greece

So far, I have shown how both *From the Edge of the City* and *Head On* manage to use a New Queer filmic vocabulary in order to subvert already existing narratives of national and cultural belonging. Both films seem to reject the idea of 'an essential gay sensibility' and to fall, in their different ways, into this 'Homo Pomo' style which involves 'appropriation and pastiche, irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind' (Rich 2004: 16). What they both also share, it could be argued, is an attempt to screen Greeks who perform unconventional and sometimes queer identifications. The Pontic Greek adolescents of *From the Edge of the City* (most of whom do not identify as homosexual), or the Greek Australians Ari and Toula in *Head On* (who similarly, shy away from any sexual categorization), are in every respect queer subjects that negotiate their own uneven urban reality with the fictitiously homogeneous Greek (or hyphenated Greek) Self. Their migrant identities are seen to be engaged in a constant dialogue with their own queerness and the queerness of other subjects they are in contact with, including, especially in the case of *From the Edge of the City*, that of the director. It is, therefore, worth noting once again that both films use their New Queer framing in order to stage an assault on a series of other constructions, most important of which are the stable ethnic and/or national identity, and the diasporic identity.

Something that looks puzzling in the beginning is that in both films there are scenes where ethnic, national and local identities are played out, negotiated and exchanged, while the characters are filmed in moving cars.

Riding fast cars, we see Sasha and his friends exchanging crude jokes about national identity, Sasha having a fight with a xenophobic taxi driver, Greek and Pontic pimps having an argument about local identities, Ari shouting abuse at groups of Asian immigrants, or Ari and Toula joking about their Greek heritage with a Turkish taxi driver ('your great-grandfather raped my great-grandmother' says Toula and they all burst out laughing). The main point of the films is encompassed, in such scenes, where people are seen to be constantly longing for stories of stable identity, while caught in the representational paradox of a closed space that changes position, that moves through and suggests modern mobility.

In a way similar to what they say about desire and sexual identity, both films suggest that national identity and ethnic belonging are also fluid categories of identification, even if they sometimes seem to offer the solace of stability. Both films show their characters' multiple and changing identifications and invite multiplicity as the privileged spectatorship strategy. Yet in order to take pleasure from these stories one has not only to accept multiple identifications, but also to realize that these identifications are never unproblematic. As I have pointed out at various stages, both films seem to privilege a post-normative gaze in terms of sexuality, and in an analogous way, invite a post-national gaze as a privileged viewing position. However, in both cases, complete fluidity of identification is seen as impossible. What is offered instead is a constant play of identity positions that crucially includes a movement between positions that are asserted, played with, exchanged and changed.

In a classic article on 'queer viewing' Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gamman have argued for a model of the gaze that is itself queer, with viewers 'ready to occupy several I [and eye]-slots', playfully asserting how historically constructed and interchangeable these positionalities may be. This strategy may be best understood as 'genderfuck', a deliberate 'play and performance which destabilize[s] subject positions' (1995: 49). As I have shown at different points in this article, *From the Edge of the City* and *Head On* invite genderfuck not only as a position the characters adopt, but, crucially, as the privileged viewing position of pleasure. I suggest that what they also crucially do is to propose 'nationfuck' as an I/eye slot both adopted by some characters and offered as a privileged viewing position to viewers of the films. Traditionally, national identity positionings are stabilized by stories of migration and diaspora that posit an essential national identity connected to an originary place, and theorize movement as an after effect. Nationfuck in this instance has to be understood as the deliberate play with different positionalities, the introduction of movement into the stability of national and ethnic belonging, the conceptualization of national and diasporic identity and movement within the context of a series of 'identifications which are multiple, contradictory, shifting, oscillating, inconsistent and fluid' (Evans and Gamman 1995: 45).

It follows from these ideas that what these films also present us with is not a parade of New Queer *Greeks*, but rather a New Queer *Greece* as the collapsing framing of identity positions that are both interchangeable and stubbornly stuck. Both films remind us that stories of migration and diaspora normally inculcate in their telling a naturalized space-off: the country

of origin and/or return. The complexity of the interplay between the phantasmatic presence of the country of origin and stories of diaspora and migration develops in a way that is analogous to the relationship between space-off and frame in cinema. An idea of Greece becomes in these films a space that works alongside the narration and gets redefined by it. It becomes, in a sense, a conceptual space-off – the space which is not visible in the frame but inferable from what the frame makes visible. As one can argue after Teresa de Lauretis, instead of erasing space-off by the cinematic rule of narrativization as classic commercial film does, new cinemas can show ‘the space-off to exist concurrently and alongside the represented space [. . .] and to include not only the camera (the point of articulation and perspective from which the image is constructed) but also the spectator (the point where the image is received, re-constructed, and re-produced in/as subjectivity)’ (De Lauretis 1989: 26).

The radical dimension of *From the Edge of the City* and *Head On* is therefore also to be found in the way they queer exactly those spaces that are metonymically assigned the role of the space-off in the weaving of stories of diaspora and migration: the stable and official narrating viewpoint, the diaspora community places, the topography of the motherland, the nation’s official representations. It is precisely because these films problematize aspects of identification and pleasure that can come out of watching them, that they also problematize the idea of a single, homogeneous and heteronormative Greek community as a natural point of reference. *Greece is not one* – neither as it shapes the identity positions of those shown in these films nor of those seeing them. Greece is not the origin or the utopian return destination of an idealistic migratory journey, but *a Greece* is posited as the radically altered point of reference. It is, subtly, surreptitiously, magnificently, a new *queer(ed) Greece* that emerges to frame these films.

In both films a new queer Greece is invited to watch and be watched and to provide the outside for new framings of stories of migration. A dislocated fantasy of origin in *Head On*, and an uneven topography looked at from the *Edge* and heard from outside the frames in Giannaris’s film, Greece appears in both films to assume the role of a queer space-off, an originary question which relies on the spectator in order to be re-framed as subjectivity, and thus a place where all identities are at stake, constantly reframed even though somehow out of frame.

Acknowledgement

Thanks to William McEvoy, Derek Duncan and the anonymous *New Cinemas* readers for their comments and suggestions on an earlier draft, and to Vanya Murray for all her support in the Taylorian Library of Oxford.

Works cited

- Aaron, M. (ed.) (2004), *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Arroyo, J. (2000), ‘Review of *From the Edge of the City*’, *Sight and Sound*, 10: 3, pp. 43–44.
- Bell, W., P. Dodd and S. Field (1992), ‘New Queer Cinema’, *Sight and Sound*, 2: 5, pp. 30–9.

- Benshoff, H. and S. Griffin (eds.) (2002), *Queer Cinema, The Film Reader*, New York: Routledge.
- Betsky, A. (1997), *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire*, New York: William Morrow.
- Bordwell, D. (2002), 'Intensified Continuity: Visual Style in Contemporary American Film', *Film Quarterly*, 55: 3, pp. 16–28.
- De Lauretis, T. (1989), *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction*, Basington: Macmillan.
- (1991), 'Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities', *Differences*, 3: 2, pp. iii–xviii.
- Edelman, L. (2004), *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- (2007), 'Ever After: History, Negativity, and the Social', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 106: 3, pp. 469–476.
- Evans, C. and L. Gamman (1995), 'The Gaze Revisited, or Reviewing Queer Viewing', in P. Burston and C. Richardson (eds.), *A Queer Romance: Lesbians, Gay Men and Popular Culture*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 13–56.
- Hall, S. (1996), 'Who Needs Identity', in S. Hall and P. Du Gay (eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity*, London: Sage, pp. 1–17.
- Jennings, R. and L. Lominé (2004), 'Nationality and New Queer Cinema: Australian Film', in M. Aaron (ed.), *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 144–154.
- Mini, P. (2006), 'A Life and Identity in Flux: Young Pontian Greeks in Konstantinos Giannaris's from the Edge of the City', *Ariadni*, 12, pp. 215–228.
- Rich, R. (2004) [1992] 'New Queer Cinema', in M. Aaron (ed.), *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 15–22.
- Thanouli, E. (2008), 'Narration in World cinema: Mapping the Flows of Formal Exchange in the Era of Globalisation', *New Cinemas*, 6: 1, pp. 5–16.
- Tsiolkas, C. (1997), *Loaded*, London: Vintage.
- Voutira, E. (2006), 'Post-Soviet Diaspora Politics: The Case of the Soviet Greeks', *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, 24: 2, 379–414.

Suggested citation

- Papanikolaou, D. (2008), 'New queer Greece: thinking identity through Constantine Giannaris's *From the Edge of the City* and Ana Kokkinos's *Head On*', *New Cinemas* 6: 3, pp. 183–196, doi: 10.1386/ncin.6.3.183/1

Contributor details

Dimitris Papanikolaou is University Lecturer in Modern Greek Studies at the University of Oxford. His research is interdisciplinary and his main interests are in Modern Greek, Cultural Studies and Gender Theory. He has published the monograph *Singing Poets: Literature and Popular Music in France and Greece* (Legenda, 2007) and is currently writing a book titled 'The new Phase of Eros': C.P. Cavafy and the Writing of (Homo)Sexuality. Contact: Faculty of Medieval and Modern Languages, University of Oxford, 47, Wellington Square, OX1 2JF, UK.
E-mail: dimitris.papanikolaou@stx.ox.ac.uk