

The Greek American Image in American Film: Creation of a Filmography

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A central concern of Greek American Studies and diaspora specialists in Modern Greek Studies is how mainstream Americans viewed Greek immigrants and the communities they created. Although there are numerous specific accounts of incidents, comprehensive statistical data is sparse and is often compromised by not accounting for differing regional, class, religious, and urban-rural factors. One aid in dealing with these complications that is rarely used in a systematic manner is how Greek immigrants and their offspring are presented in American film. The period of the 1930s-1960s is particularly crucial as that was an era in which movies were the major popular entertainment in the United States and a time when movies were made by a handful of studios.¹

Each of the major studios designed films that it wanted to market to all regions of the United States. Even when films were a genre such as romances, westerns, musicals, comedies, and mysteries, the audience sought was always national. The business plan of the studios also sought to fashion as many films as possible that simultaneously appealed to all ages. The film audience was perceived to be the “average white American,” meaning there was no effort to appeal to specific racial or ethnic groups. Elements that might be offensive to any region or audience were excised. The major exception to concern about audience sensitivities related to African Americans. Offensive language and stereotypes regarding African Americans did not change significantly until the civil rights era.² African Americans were also considered a population that did not go to the movies regularly. Immigrants from Asia and the Middle East were similarly regarded. The consequence of these perceptions was that films were made to

please, not change, what was regarded to be the dominate culture. Some movies, of course, challenged one or another established value but rather than cultural breakthroughs, they were conceived as being on the cutting edge of changes already in progress, making them possible winners at the box office. The long-term outcome of this approach was that most films unabashedly reflected the values of American mainstream society.

Only a few historians of ethnic groups in America have used the trajectory of Hollywood films as an indication of the evolution of how the group under study was viewed by the dominant culture. In contrast, considerable work has been done to trace the changing image of African Americans and some outstanding work has been done regarding Asian American³ and Arab images.⁴ Studies tracing the changing images of European immigrants have been less systematic. Just a handful of essays deal with how films have depicted Greek Americans.⁵

What is more common in ethnic studies are extended analysis of a given film to show how it embodies the mainstream culture of the moment. Such work can be quite useful as case studies but unless placed in a broad historical context tells little about the cultural image of the group being examined. Any given film may just be the product of a headline story or it may reflect an influential director's or writer's sensibilities. Sometimes a hit film immediately produces similar films from other studios hoping for the same payoff. These bursts rarely indicate a basic change in the flow of the industry's orientation. Given this pattern, making generalized theoretical or historic judgments based on the particulars of a given film are invalid, even if it is a commercial hit. Individual films, however, popular might not reflect changes in American culture. An example of this phenomenon is *Norma Rae* (1979) a very pro-union film that was a box office hit.⁶

Norma Rae garnered a best actress Oscar for Sally Field and nominations for best picture and best screenplay. In the context of Hollywood's total output of labor films, however, *Norma Rae* is in a small minority of pro-labor union films scattered over different time periods. Far more numerous are films about corruption (*Hoffa*, 1992) or worker violence (*The Molly Maguires*, 1970).⁷ Rather than signaling a change in Hollywood's basically negative depiction of unions, *Norma Rae* was an exception of a kind repeated in *Silkwood* (1983), which was based on an actual person and a recent strike.⁸ Or the film's appeal may have had less to do with labor organizing than showcasing a powerful woman of humble origins. This brief consideration of

Hollywood's labor films indicates how the analysis of any given film relating to an ethnic group might be quite accurate and artistically interesting, but may not necessarily reflect mainstream culture or the direction in which that culture is moving.

Greek American Images

Following the fabulous commercial success of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2003), Dan Georgakas, an innovative figure in Greek American Studies and an editor of *Cineaste* film quarterly observed that the number of films featuring Greek American characters was not known.⁹ He proposed to colleagues the project of creating a filmography or database that could be utilized when considering how mainstream American cinema depicted Greek Americans. The filmography would be exclusively focused on Greek Americans, not films about overseas Greeks such as *Zorba the Greek* (1964) or the raft of films about ancient Greeks. Many of the latter were sword and sandal films that were a genre of their own while others such as *Alexander the Great* (2004) and *Ulysses* (1955) dealt more seriously with historical figures or Homeric characters.

Among the first collaborators on the project were Vassili Lambropoulos of the University of Michigan and Steve Frangos, long-time columnist of the *National Herald*. Lambropoulos had one of his students do some preliminary research and he maintains the filmography, which is updated annually on the U of Michigan website.¹⁰ Frangos shared the considerable film data and perspectives on popular entertainment he had accumulated over decades of writing about Greek American life. Over the years, more than a score of scholars and filmmakers have subsequently contributed items and otherwise assisted in the project.¹¹

A complication that became apparent from the onset was whether to limit the filmography to Hollywood films or to include independent films, films made for television, and films of the silent era. Independent films were judged to be a must. Most were made by Greek Americans and were often conceived as correctives to Hollywood myths and stereotypes. Films made for television often get shown in theaters or festivals and many are available as DVDs. Films enjoying such wide visibility had to be included, particularly with the decline of the studio system and conventional film distribution. Silent films were a different matter. The bulk of them have been destroyed. A few that have been seen or written about are included in the filmography but silent era films with Greek American themes remain largely unexamined territory.

Finding the most appropriate format for the filmography was of critical importance. It needed to serve the needs of scholars of Greek America and related study areas while being useful to the general public. Given that a simple listing of films would be of limited use, it was decided that each film in the filmography would get a narrative sketching out its plot, principal filmmakers, and some production details. Actors who played key roles are listed as are directors, scriptwriters, and producers. Citing the director is an obvious need, but script credits can be just as important. Is this an original screenplay (*America America*, 1963), a remake (*The Postman Always Rings Twice*, 1981), or an adaptation from a literary source (*A Dream of Kings*, 1969)? Has the director co-scripted (*A Perfect Couple*, 1979)?

The production credits in the filmography are less useful in the new era of multiple producers of a single film and the practice of major studios distributing films made by others. Another weakness in the producer credit is that the name of the individual producer is sometimes used but other times there is just a studio's name. Date of the release of the film sometimes varies from source to source, as some cite the year of production and others the year it went into general distribution. This usually involves a few months which is not relevant in the broader project of ascertaining the status of Greek Americans. Moreover, given that film rights are sold and resold, the producer of a DVD might be different from the producer of the original film. The DVD version may also alter the original, usually with omissions, but sometimes with additions. The most differences from the original film usually stem from using a director's cut that differs significantly from the studio cut.

The films are presented in alphabetical order, but this is to be augmented with a supplement that list films chronologically.¹² All entries are written by Georgakas but edited, fact-checked, and reviewed by Lambropoulos, Frangos and others.¹³ Each film is given a G (for Greek American) ranking based on the criterion of how important the Greek American characters are to the film. The rankings do not indicate a film's esthetic merits, the accuracy of images, the public response, or critical reception.

A ranking of GGGGG indicates a film whose major narrative focuses on Greek American characters. Few Hollywood films fit into this category while there are numerous examples post-1960s of such films, almost always made by Greek Americans. An example of a GGGGG Hollywood film is *Beneath the Twelve Mile Reef* (1953). This film focuses on the Greek sponge

divers of Tarpon Springs and a romance between a Greek and a non-Greek that ultimately resolves the stormy relations between the local Greek and non-Greek communities. Two other examples of GGGGG Hollywood films are *A Dream of Kings* (1969) and *The Glory Brigade* (1953). Two independent films in this rank are *Dark Odyssey* (1954) and *Astoria* (2000). To date, the Greek American Filmography has 22 films in the GGGGG category. This is the smallest category of films as might be expected. An interesting aspect of this category is that the bulk of the films are made-for-television films or films made by independents, not films by Hollywood's major studios. Georgakas and other compilers of the filmography doubt there will be any other major Hollywood films to be discovered in this ranking.

A ranking of GGGG indicates a film with a major or minor character whose Greekness is integral to the film, but not its central concern. An example of such a film is *City Hall* (1986), which features Al Pacino as a Greek mayor of New York City whose Greekness only surfaces occasionally. His most Hellenic moment is a memorial speech in which he cites Pericles on the nature of an ideal city. Three other examples are of GGGG films are *The Arrangement* (1969), *Destination Tokyo* (1943), and *A Perfect Couple* (1979). The total sum for the category is 24 films.

A film with a major or minor character who is clearly identified as a Greek American, but whose ethnicity is not vigorously explored is ranked GGG. This category is the largest with 53 films. An example of the GGG film is *Mr. Lucky* (1943) in which Cary Grant plays a Greek American gambler. A letter from his mother in war-time Greece alters his life. Three other examples of a GGG film are *Callas Forever* (2002), *Crime School* (1938), and *The Deep End of the Ocean* (1998). Some of these films could arguably be ranked GGGG.

The third largest category with 31 films is GG which indicates the film has at least one Greek American character whose ethnic identity is often only indicated by character's name. An example is found in the entry for *Milk* (2008). In this film, Art Agnos, a real-life Greek American politician who became mayor of San Francisco has a momentary spotlight in the film's plot, but he is a Greek-identified only by his name. Three other examples of a GG film are *Battle: Los Angeles* (2011), *Charles Wilson's War* (2007), and *Double Indemnity* (1944).

A ranking of G indicates a film with a very minor character who could be of any ethnic heritage and may not even have a speaking role. The designation is also used to indicate films based on another medium in which a character who was originally Greek has been given a different ethnicity identity. An uncharacteristic and unexpected entry in this category is *A Streetcar Named Desire*. (1951). This theater/film classic set in New Orleans inexplicably contains a line of Greek spoken by a supposedly Hispanic character. Three other examples of a G film are *Sunday* (1997), *Men of Respect* (1998), and *Never So Few* (1959). There are currently 15 films in this ranking, but there are still numerous others with uncredited Greek characters yet to be cataloged.¹⁴ These characters are often nameless gangsters, waiters, and diner operators.

A film that ranks as a GGG film may be as significant as a GGGGG or a GGGG in what it reveals about the image of Greek Americans in popular culture. The GG and G films are mainly useful in showing the marginality of many Greek American images on film or the introduction of Greeks into genres like westerns where they would not be expected. In that sense, the filmography is important in identifying not only what is in films but what is not. The filmography is not conceived as an end product but as a resource to be utilized by ethnic scholars, journalists, film scholars, film buffs, and others.¹⁵ Not least of its importance is that it is a corrective or statistical reference point that lessens the scholarly or journalistic cherry-picking of films to prove a pre-determined view.

To date, 145 films with Greek American characters have been identified with 31 other films in the process of being listed. If this list of total films were doubled due to films still not known, the total number of American films with Greek American characters made in the era of talking pictures comes to little more than 2 per annum. Given that tens of thousands of films have been made in this time frame, the scant number of Greek American characters would seem to reflect minimal mainstream interest in Greek American culture.

¹ The major studios were 20th Century-Fox, MGM, Paramount, RKO, Warner Brothers, Columbia, United Artists, and Disney. Much smaller studios such as Republic and Monogram specialized in grade B genre films.

² Thomas Cripes. *Slow Fade to Black* (NY: Oxford U Press, 1977) offers extensive coverage of how the image of African Americans changed in the wake of the civil rights movement.

³ Roger Garcia (ed.). *Out of the Shadows* (Locarno, Switzerland: Olivares/Asian Cine Vision, 1999).

⁴ Jack Shaheen. *Reel Bad Arabs* (Northampton, MA: Interlink Books, 2001).

⁵ Two examples are Dan Georgakas. "Ethnic Humor in American Film: The Greek Americans," in *A Companion to Film Comedy* edited by Andrew Horton and Joanna E. Rapf (Chichester, UK and Newark, NJ: Wiley –

Blackwell, 2013) and Yiorgos Anagnostou. "When 'Second Generation' Narratives and Hollywood Meet: Making Ethnicity in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*," *Melus* V. 37, No. 4 (Winter 2012) pp. 139-161.

⁶ An informative essay on the history of this film, its factual base, and its long-term impact can be found in Robert Brent Troplin. *History by Hollywood* (Urbana: U of Illinois Press, 1996), pp. 203-255.

⁷ William J. Puette. *Through Jaundiced Eyes: How the Media View Organized Labor* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press of Cornell University, 1992).

⁸ A guide to hundreds of labor films can be found in M. Keith Booker. *Film and the American Left: A Research Guide* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999).

⁹ Interview with Dan Georgakas regarding this essay was done on Aug. 31, 2016. He first voiced a need for ethnic filmographies in Dan Georgakas, "My Big Fat Greek Grips," *Cineaste* V. 28, N. 4 (Fall, 2003), pp. 36-37.

¹⁰ Isa.umich.edu/modgreek/windowtogreekculture/cultureandmedia. The list is also available on the Queens College website. Earlier versions can be found on commercial websites.

¹¹ These include: Elaine Thomopoulos, Anna Moniodis, Tassos Rigopoulos, Maria Kassaras, Charles Stathis. Yiorgos Anagnostou, Richard Porton, Vras Karalis, Fondas Ladis, Spiro Taraviras, and Yiorgos Kalogeras,

¹² For a chronological listing of the films go to Smyrna Press at smyrnypress@hotmail.com.

¹³ Elaine Thomopoulos did a fact check on the list as of 2015.

¹⁴ Costas Stathis has identified numerous films where Greek American characters have no dialog or only speak a line or two.

¹⁵ Films keep being added to the filmography. Georgakas notes, however, that it is the films of the twentieth century which are most significant in seeing the change in the image of Greek Americans in the United States. Since the 1970s, Greek American images have been stable and seem likely to remain so. He believes younger scholars need to determine whether it is useful to continue updating the filmography.