

The academic study of Greek television: Mapping a scattered field

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Introduction

An assessment of the status of Greek television in scholarship would greatly benefit from a distinction made in Jonathan Gray and Amanda D Lotz's *Short Introductions: Television Studies* regarding what kind of study qualifies as belonging to the field. In the first pages of the book, it is argued that the field of 'television studies' is associated with a particular set of methods and theories which assign the medium some sort of specificity, while 'studies of television' employ approaches 'outside of those that tend to characterize the mainstream of television studies' (2012: 4). Overall, it could be argued that the majority of studies of Greek television fall under the latter category, as they prioritise a sociological understanding of the medium, rather than contributing to the prerequisite of conceptual specificity which defines the television of television studies (Brunsdon, 1998). The present review constitutes a first – and in no way exhaustive – attempt at providing an overview of how Greek television has been addressed as an academic object of study, and it includes both Greek- and English-language publications. The first part of the overview constitutes a presentation of the main themes that have attracted scholars' attention, indicating at the same time sub-areas of study which remain covered in scholarly silence. The second part provides some supplementary remarks meant to provide both foreign and Greek scholars with insights that exceed the mapping of existing literature.

Bright signposts: Dominant themes in existing literature

History and periodisation of Greek television

The history of Greek television, including the conditions surrounding the introduction and development of the medium, as well as the technological, political and sociocultural readings of its trajectory in Greece, maintain an important force in domestic scholarship. Texts that emerged while Greek television was still in an embryonic state during the 1960s, such as the works of theatre and television critic Giorgos Karter, the so-called 'registrar and historian' of Greek television, have been established as pioneering

works of local media scholarship and inspiring examples of television criticism. His more recent *Ελληνική Ραδιοφωνία Τηλεόραση: Ιστορία και ιστορίες/Greek Radio Television: History and Stories* (2004) stands out as a representative synthesis of the experiences of a person who, by combining insights from his years of working in the television industry and admirable writing skills, delivers an account of well-known events and lesser known stories associated with the arrival of television in Greece.

The paradigm of the historicisation and periodisation of Greek television has been evident in many other cases, suggesting a strong interest in understanding what kind of impact the various historical conditions have had on the medium itself. It is worth mentioning that scholars seem to agree on the division of the life of Greek television into four main periods:

- 1967–1974: Broadcasting under military dictatorship;
- 1974–1981: Broadcasting after the regime change (post-polity);
- 1981–1989: Television in the hands of the socialist governments; and
- 1989–to date: Deregulation and free market domination.

While this kind of periodisation occurs repeatedly in the writings of Greek scholars – see, for example, Giorgos Dampasis’ *Την εποχή της τηλεόρασης/In the Era of Television* (2002) –, each attempt to discuss television and historicity sheds light on different aspects of the medium’s significance. Stathis Valoukos’ *Ιστορία της Ελληνικής Τηλεόρασης/History of Greek Television* (2008) employs a historical perspective for the study of television and constitutes an account of key moments in the history of Greek broadcasting, including chapters on the early stages of television broadcasting, the experimental phase of television, the years under the military junta, post-polity television, television after the deregulation of the local media landscape and the subsequent bloom of commercial television. Similarly to an earlier publication of his from 1998 – *Η Ελληνική Τηλεόραση (1967-1998)/Greek Television (1967-1998)* – Valoukos includes in his book an impressive catalogue of the production of Greek television fiction between 1969 and 2007 by means of an extensive guide that covers information such as title, genre, average duration of episode, premiere date, main credits and plot summary as well as – occasionally – providing critical commentary about programmes that were available to Greek viewers during these years. Grigoris Paschalidis’ (2005) historical overview of the development of Greek television succeeds in enriching existing knowledge with detailed references to the legal framework that characterised the function of both the state-owned and the deregulated media landscape. No big arguments are presented in the text, but it is evident that Paschalidis supports the idea that television has had a dominant position in the public life of Greece and explains that the amount of criticism Greek television has received throughout the years is also an indication of the high expectations people have/had from the medium. The text is rich in numerical data such as ratings and costs from the production of TV programmes; it also contains a classification system for the content of Greek television and some observations concerning the role of advertising.

It is important to note here that no Greek scholar has ever delivered a comprehensive history of Greek television; rather, existing literature often includes a historical approach, which – combined with other theoretical angles – manages to illuminate aspects of the unknown national past of the medium. The latter pattern is evident in the meta-history of Greek television as it is narrated in Ioanna Vovou's *Στοιχεία για μια μετα-ιστορία της ελληνικής τηλεόρασης. Το μέσο, η πολιτική και ο θεσμός/Elements for a meta-history of Greek television: The medium, the politics and the institution* (2010b), which is defined by the combination of a historical and social approach. Here, the author is interested in disclosing the dynamic and diverse nature of the medium across time and invites scholars to disengage from a normative understanding of an ideal role of television for contemporary societies; instead, she suggests steering towards understandings of how the medium 'has functioned in the past and how it functions diachronically in its various expressions' (p. 93). Thus, she challenges an ontological understanding of the nature of the medium and she focuses on its relationship with the political conditions that surround its operation; for instance, she speaks of the propagandistic use of television during the years of the military dictatorship or the political controversies surrounding the process of deregulation. Through a focus on specific genres (e.g. talk shows) and aesthetic shifts, Vovou describes Greek television as an expression of a given society, registered within a specific historicity, while at the same time taking into account the economic factors that affect the trajectory of the medium and its content across time and space. Angeliki Koukoutsaki-Monnier's *Ελληνικά προγράμματα μυθοπλασίας: Διαχρονική εξέλιξη και τάσεις παραγωγής/Greek television fiction: Diachronic development and production tendencies* (2010), included – together with Vovou's piece – in the collective volume *Ο κόσμος της τηλεόρασης: Θεωρητικές προσεγγίσεις, ανάλυση προγραμμάτων και ελληνική πραγματικότητα/The World of Television: Theoretical Approaches, Analysis of Programmes and Greek Reality* (2010a, edited by Ioanna Vovou), makes use of the same periodisation in order to illuminate a different area of study, that of production patterns of indigenous television fiction. Through a close monitoring of television fiction broadcasts between 1970 and 1997, paired with 43 interviews with television professionals and analysts, the chapter does not only provide a detailed survey of dominant production logics and patterns, it also undertakes the task of attempting an ideological reading of the programmes that were available to Greek audiences in different time periods.

It is worth mentioning that despite their omissions or selective, rather than comprehensive, focus on aspects of the history of Greek television, the above cases constitute a decent body of work able to provide researchers with a compass that can guide them through the past of Greek television.

Television and Greek society

This very broad category is indicative of the dominant approach that has been employed by Greek scholars for the study of television, that is, a social sciences perspective that seeks to understand the sociocultural role, function and effects of television on Greek society. However, as we will see, works that assign some sort of conceptual specificity to

the study of Greek television exist too, but it would be undue to argue that these have managed to establish a discipline specifically dedicated to this particular aspect of cultural production.

A characteristic example of publications with an evident social sciences orientation is *Τηλεόραση και Ελληνική Κοινωνία/Television and Greek Society* (2004) edited by director and film scholar Diamantis Leventakos. This collection of essays is primarily interested in addressing the question of how Greek society integrated the medium of television and how the latter interacted with and shaped aspects of Greek society and culture (p. 9) by means of exploring the bidirectional relationship between television and a number of other significant discourses such as politics, education, family and economy, but also cinema, sports and the press.

The works of Stelios Papathanassopoulos deserve a special mention in this subsection. Papathanassopoulos is a prolific author and close analyst of the deregulation process of the Greek media landscape. While his books do not necessarily focus on Greek television, he always includes chapters that provide useful insights into the local television industry. In *Απελευθερώνοντας την Τηλεόραση/Liberating Television* (1993), he maps out the process of deregulation and the introduction of the first commercial channels in Greece as well as issues of power and ownership. In *Η Δύναμη της Τηλεόρασης/The Power of Television* (1997), he attempts to register the effects of television on Greek society by having a closer look on specific aspects of the medium and its content. He writes, for instance, about the specificities of commercial ('private') television and the ways that the commercialisation of the local media landscape was affected by the logic of the market (advertising, news, talk shows as well as an extended study on violent content on television). In *Η τηλεόραση και το κοινό της/Television and its Audience* (2000), he sheds light on additional aspects of the Greek media landscape, including viewer behaviour and ratings as well as a whole chapter on viewers' responses towards the content (including television fiction, satire, etc.) of commercial channels from 1989 onwards. One of the strongest aspects of Papathanassopoulos' research is the fact that he incorporates interesting statistical data and other information (for instance, the costs of television programmes and their ratings) as well as attempts at categorising Greek entertainment television content. Last but not least, in *Η Τηλεόραση στον 21ο αιώνα/Television in the 21st Century* (2005), Papathanassopoulos dedicates a chapter to the deregulation of the Greek media landscape, the domination of television and its effects on other media, such as radio and print press. All in all, although Papathanassopoulos is somewhat repetitive across his body of work, his name has been associated with the study of television in Greece, and his publications (he has also written several journal articles in English) report on the effects of television on Greek society, not in an abstract manner but by means of presenting valuable statistical and other data from different stages in the development of commercial television in Greece.

Moving on to a different theorisation of television, two noteworthy publications deal with the complex relationship between television and identity. Mirca Madianou's *Έθνος, ταυτότητες και τηλεόραση στη σύγχρονη Ελλάδα: Μελέτη πάνω στη θεωρία της διαμεσολάβησης/Nation, Identities and Television in Contemporary Greece: A Study on the Theory of Mediation* (2005) investigates whether 'the media, and especially television,

function as catalysts for the feeling of belonging to the nation' (p. 13). Through an ethnographic study focusing on the reception of television content by people with different cultural and ethnic backgrounds living in Athens, Madianou challenges the two dominant perspectives (powerful media/weak identities, weak media/powerful identities) for understanding how the media contribute to the feeling of belonging; instead, she suggests conceptualising the relationship between media and identities as a complex process whose study requires a close monitoring of all involved factors. Having a similar point of departure, the collection of essays entitled *Ταυτότητα και ΜΜΕ στη Σύγχρονη Ελλάδα/Identity and Media in Contemporary Greece* (2007), edited by Maria Kontochristou, explores the role of media for the shaping of collective identities, and although television is not its exclusive focus, it includes chapters that emphasise its contribution to the construction of social reality and the negotiation of the notion of identity.

Finally, if we were to decide on one publication that consciously and actively takes on the task to ascribe some sort of conceptual specificity to Greek television, then the aforementioned edited volume *Ο κόσμος της τηλεόρασης/The World of Television* (2010a) would stand out. The volume covers an impressively wide spectrum of topics, including the historical and institutional framework of Greek television, issues of television reception, television's relationship with other media as well as the study of a variety of televisual genres such as newscasts, children's programmes and fiction. It could be considered as a very serious attempt at addressing the specificities of Greek television as an area of research, inextricably linked to its social and cultural parameters as well as the economic and technological context; the contributors refer, among other things, to the identity of the Greek professional journalist, the impact of the tension between tradition and modernity on television news, the conditions that affected the production of local television drama and the relationship between television and Greek cinema. The volume, albeit quite massive and diverse, manages to balance close readings of smaller areas of the field which disclose the specificities of the Greek television context with the cultivation of a more general conceptual (re)consideration of television, one that breaks free from unproductive biases regarding the cultural value of the medium, a recurring theme in local journalistic criticism.

The value of publications such as the above lies in the legitimisation of Greek television as an interesting and relevant field of academic study, amenable to flexible theoretical and methodological approaches, and at the same time rich in conceptual specificities. It could also be argued that the works mentioned are indicative of the trajectory of the study of television in Greek academia (created through various interactions with different fields, such as media and communication, anthropology, cultural studies) on its way towards its establishment as a self-standing academic discipline (a work still in progress).

Television fiction

Apart from the above sociologically oriented studies of Greek television, existing scholarship can also demonstrate texts that prioritise the study of specific shows and genres, rather than provide commentary on an abstract notion of television. Two

contributions in a volume dedicated to popular television in authoritarian Europe engage with iconic television programmes produced and broadcast during the Greek dictatorship. Grigoris Paschalidis (2013) explores how entertainment television was conceptualised in the light of a specific (authoritarian) ideological project but at the same time illustrates how the popularity of programmes such as *Ο Άγνωστος Πόλεμος/The Unknown War* (YENEΔ/YENED, 1971-1974) and *Η Γειτονιά μας/Our Neighbourhood* (YENEΔ/YENED, 1972-1977) influenced the way the commercial model of television was developed later in Greece. Christina Adamou (2013) delivers an account of another popular series of the same period, *Εκείνος κι Εκείνος/This One and That One* (EIPT/EIRT, 1972-1974), through an ideological analysis based on the historical and political context of the time as well as on an evaluation of the power of the newfound medium of television.

Apart from the study of specific programmes, Koukoutsaki's study of the production context of Greek television fiction (2003), based on a quantitative analysis of Greek television fiction between 1970 and 1997, remains until today a noteworthy attempt at shedding light on the production culture of Greek television and the professionals' incentives. The study follows the evolution of genres in Greek television fiction and, combined with interviews with television professionals, enriches our knowledge of the legislative, technological, political and financial framework of the production of Greek series and serials. Last but not least, Greek scholarship has also included the study of an emblematic foreign drama which made its appearance on Greek screens in 2005; Ioanna Vovou's *Οι διάτρητοι καθρέφτες της τηλεόρασης/The Perforated Mirrors of Television* (2009) focuses on the case of *Τα σύνορα της Αγάπης/Yabancı Damat* (MEGA channel, 2004-2007), the first Turkish drama ever broadcast on Greek television, and delineates its symbolic function in an era of reconsideration of the relationship between the two neighbouring countries.

Again, this is a sub-area characterised by plenty of space for more research. The study of domestic programmes, genres or thematic trends that have appeared on Greek television fiction throughout time, despite the degree of popularity that locally produced programmes enjoy, remains limited. This could partly be because of obstacles posed by voices which doubted Greek television's cultural value (an issue that forthcoming publications on the topic of Greek television seem to be eager to address, according to what was argued in a recent conference – see below); it could also be connected to pragmatic difficulties (e.g. access to the material).

Moving the debate further

Questions that remain unanswered

It is often the case that 'invisible' television cultures, to use Brett Mills's term (2010), require some sort of empowering rhetoric in order to attract scholarly attention, to find their way into visibility and to claim their place on the map of global television studies. Most often, it begins with the insightful perspective of passionate television scholars who manage to identify significant gaps and to prescribe interesting paths to their peers

and students. This was the case, for instance, with Canadian television and the work of Mary Jane Miller, who – after having reviewed the status of critical writing on Canadian television – paved the way for a stronger engagement with the field by identifying scholarly omissions (1987: 4). It could be argued that such an approach is relatively absent from the context of studies of Greek television and a more systematic record of what kind of gaps characterise the study of Greek television would greatly benefit the field. One can hope that such an endeavour will be undertaken sometime in the near future. For now, it could be helpful to offer some preliminary *topoi* whose investigation could shed even more light on the current status of Greek television as an academic object of study:

- What are the conditions that promoted the study of television primarily from a sociological point of view? Or alternatively, what are the conditions that impeded the development of Greek television studies?
- What is the status of Greek television in international scholarship? How can it acquire a more extrovert profile? How can it increase its relevance for an international readership?
- How has the question of accessibility to the audiovisual material affected scholars' interest and the quantity of contributions?

These questions should only be taken as preliminary work which could lead to a more extensive evaluation of the past, the present and the future of the study of Greek television. It is obvious that the endeavour described above is an ambitious one. It requires a deep understanding of the intellectual past of television within Greek academia, a historicised understanding of the relationship of the medium with local society, a close (and even emotional) engagement with television genres and programmes and a sensitivity towards grasping the pulse of the medium today. It remains to be seen whether Greek scholars will take on this challenge.

Other paths

Another path that exceeds the scope of this overview but could lead towards shedding more light on the above questions, as well as the status of television studies within the Greek context, concerns the teaching of television in Greek universities. While television-related modules are offered in relevant departments such as the Department of Mass Communication and Media Studies at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, the School of Film Studies and the Department of Journalism and Mass Media Communication at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and the Department of Communication, Media and Culture at Panteion University, it does not seem that Greek students have the opportunity to specialise in and to acquire a respective degree in television studies at undergraduate or postgraduate level. An additional aspect of this investigation should include the literature used for the training of students of television in Greece. It could be worth investigating whether more examples that include

television-related methods in their toolbox, other than Yannis Skopeteas' recent textbook (2015), exist.

Last but not least, it should be noted that the above overview has only covered the area of academic publications. However, journalistic and semi-academic writing often provides supplementary discourses about the status of the medium of television in Greek society. Along these lines, one particular journalistic work stands out as worthy of reference. Denis Antypas has, since 1995, been publishing a yearly almanac containing important information about each season's programmes. Antypas' work is multifaceted, containing statistics (advertising revenues, ratings, production costs for TV fiction), commentary from prominent television professionals (most often journalists), lists with important events of the season as well as significant archival material (e.g. posters and photographs) and detailed descriptions of all television programmes that were aired during the particular season. These kinds of publications, albeit not academic, constitute important resources for general audiences and scholars alike, as they gather important information and observations about each year's production. As far as semi-academic or popular academic writing is concerned, interested readers can benefit from the *Medianalysis* website (<https://medianalysis.net/>), which publishes reports and opinion pieces specifically akin to developments and changes in the Greek media landscape (unfortunately only in Greek). What is more, *Critical Studies in Television online* (<http://cstonline.net>) occasionally features reports from journalist and scholar Katerina Serafeim, which keep the international readership updated on Greek television by discussing topics such as the controversial television licencing competition that recently took place in the country.

The future of Greek television as an academic object of study

Before concluding this brief report on the status of Greek television as a scholarly object, a view towards the future is in order. The conference '50 years of Greek television' (Thessaloniki, 9–11 December 2016), organised by the Laboratory of Cultural and Visual Studies of the Department of Journalism and Media at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, confirmed a rejuvenated interest towards a better understanding of the role of television diachronically and an assessment of its potential in the digital era. Apart from a number of established scholars, the conference featured presentations by a younger generation of researchers/PhD candidates (based both in Greece and abroad) who include Greek television as a central or peripheral interest in their doctoral dissertations. Dimitra Karantzeni (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki), for instance, studies the different levels of perception of political power by Greek audiences through foreign political TV series – both American and European – viewed on Greek television during the period 2000–2013. Spyros Chairetis (University of Oxford) examines Greek TV comedies, released during the 1990s and 2000s, in order to make a claim for the study of television's (a)sexual politics in Greece and beyond. My own research (University of Gothenburg) focuses on the representation of moments of heightened societal tension in private Greek television fiction from 1989 onwards. One final remark concerns Vassilis Vamvakas and Angeliki Gazi's recent publication entitled *Αμερικανικές*

σειρές στην ελληνική τηλεόραση/*American Series on Greek Television* (2017), an indication of the gaps that Greek scholars are slowly starting to fill with original contributions.

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