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Department of Balkan, Slavic and Oriental Studies

Department of International and European Studies

University of Macedonia

**Queer migrations: Gender(ed) identities and  
belonging in the cinema of Serbia and Greece**

**by Aikaterini Zacharopoulou**

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Thesis Supervisor: Sideri Eleni

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To my dad

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## **Abstract**

The thesis will study with the representations of queer desire and Westward transnational mobility as they appear in the cinemas of Serbia and Greece. Against the historical background of the post-socialist transformations in the Balkans, the political upheavals and the transition to neoliberal structures of nation-states, reconfigured with cross-border flows of capital and human mobilities, the paper aims to trace how narratives of queer intimacies are fused together with migrants' sense of precarity and search of belonging between borders and within geopolitical locations. Do these queer representations question, disrupt and/or (de)stabilize the cultural-political meanings of the modern heteronational identity? Queer cinema will be the ethnographic fieldwork for the research question and more specifically Serbian and Greek films from 1995 to 2005 to contextualize the analysis around the ways the films engage with the theoretical and political shifts that mark the decade in the transitional post-Yugoslav era, with the formation of capitalist ethno-national "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1999). They will allow me to find connections and contradictions in the cinemas of a post-socialist country and the one nation in the Balkans not to fall under communist control and examine how they employ the queer figure and acknowledge queer desire, migration and the cinematic border crossing both in narrative and in production. Therefore, building on LGBTQ+ and migration scholarship, queerness and migration scholarship will be the vehicles to theorize borders –geographical and political, but also sexual boundaries- and address hierarchies including gender, sex and nation in their journeys of queer (im)mobility.

**Key words:** queer cinema, migration, identity, postsocialism, Serbia, Greece

## Prologue

In the 1990s, radical political changes shifted the history of the Balkan region; the breakup of Yugoslavia, the geopolitical changes in the former socialist world and the flow of Eastern European migrations that arrived in the south, with Greece being in the limelight. Migrants lost their homes and attempted to form one in a country that was not that willing to let them in. Significant shifts pertaining to the economic crisis of 2008 would follow, but for now, the country was trying to make sense of the transformations it was witnessing. In the same time period, a new radical paradigm was produced in film too, offering a counterpublic space for queer representation based in the exchanges between filmmaker and audiences, labeled “New Queer Cinema” (Rich, 2013). The term queer in cinema is located at points where heterosexuality is threatened, criticized, bypassed or presented (Kiriakos, 2016), informing the local cinematic productions which were already dealing with social themes and inspired by the political shifts and migration flows of the decade.

My research is found at the crossroads for the political and cultural shifts that migration brought and the negotiation of the stability of heterosexuality. The purpose of my study is to examine the representations of queer desire and transnational mobility towards the West, as they appear in the cinemas of Serbia and Greece.<sup>1</sup> The films will allow me to find connections and contradictions in the cinemas of two Balkan countries, which were in opposite sides of the spectrum. Serbia was a country of emigration and Greece a migrant-receiving country, one was a post-socialist country and the other was the one nation in the Balkans not to fall under communist control. More specifically, my study aims to problematize the following questions: Do these representations of queer migration question, disrupt and destabilize the cultural-political meanings of the modern heteronational identity? Do they reinforce hierarchies including gender, sex and nation in how they handle queer mobilities narratively and cinematically?

The first chapter discusses the theoretical conditions under which the present study starts. It addresses the two theoretical pillars of the thesis: queerness and migration. It historicizes the concepts, starting from the feminist and anthropological research of

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<sup>1</sup> The terms “Serbian” and “Greek” cinema refer to films which were either exclusively created or co-produced from Serbian and Greek directors and companies and/or which portray Serbian and Greek protagonists.

the 1970s. It explains the intersections of decolonization and post-colonial theory and their influence in destabilizing the concept of nation-state and solid territorialized identities. Then, we discuss the rise of new models of belonging and the new ideas around sexual and national identities that were formed during the passage from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> wave of feminism, as migrant communities leave their homelands, due to the political transformations in Eastern Europe, to make permanent new homes. Emphasis is given to the cultural and political shifts in the make-up of Greece and Serbia, the countries in question in my research.

The second chapter analyses the queer and migration cinema of the Balkans, answering questions, such as if there is a unified European cinema and what defines a queer and/or migrant film. It also demonstrates the methodology used in the study, with regard to the tools and methods used to carry it out: the anthropological approach of cinema as a field of cultural technique, the importance of “queerness” as an analytical category and why 1995 to 2005 Greek and Serbian cinema were chosen as the field for conducting my research.

In the third chapter, I take a close reading of the three Constantine Giannaris’ films chosen as research sample, namely, *A Place in the Sun* (1995), *From the Edge of the City* (1998) and *Hostage* (2005), which focus on the interrelatedness between queer desire and ethnic and national belonging in the New Queer Cinema of Greece. The unapologetic exploration of issues of the homosexual experiences, influenced by the fact that sexual orientation is a constitutive element, not only of the characters, but also of the director himself, comes into contact with the position of the migrant other. It explores the tensions and conflicts that come when interacting with the Greek homosexual man, the mechanisms of cross-border violence imposed by the media and the state authorities and the destabilization of gender roles and national identification in a country that can be interpreted as a newly “queered space-off” (Papanikolaou, 2008, p. 185).

My fourth chapter develops a discussion of two Serbian cinematic productions: *Marble Ass* (1995) by Zelimir Zilnik and *Take A Deep Breath* (2004) by Dragan Marinković. In the wake of radical social transformation, ethnic conflict and post-war trauma, the films offer vastly different queer representations, shaped by the particularities of their immediate situations and communities. They examine trans



identities and wounded masculinities, the search for queer and ethnic belonging in the influence of complex familial dynamics and the desire to migrate by characters who are doomed to stay frozen in place. I also survey the directorial influences that played a crucial role in how queerness is presented.

Finally, the fifth chapter provides, as a conclusion, the comparisons between the Greek and Serbian cinema of the time and relates them to my initial research questions and previously done research. I find connections and discrepancies in how conceptualizations of migration and non-normative identities look like in each national context. Lastly, I investigate how the categories of ethnicity, sexuality, class and race become the criteria for who can belong to the nation and examine the ways in which local visual documentations can enhance our understanding of wider queer and migration issues.

## **Chapter 1: Theoretical background**

In this chapter I will attempt to postulate the theoretical, historical and epistemological framework that constitutes the bedrock of this research paper. The first subsection is a discussion around the historical evolution of the concept of queerness, its integration into feminist and anthropological discourse, and its intersection with issues of space and decolonization. Gender, queerness and migration are analyzed separately and then fused together to understand the physical and emotional conditions of queer migrants and their identity formation. Lastly, I provide a short historical overview of the political events and influx of migrants in the Balkans, and particularly, Greece and Serbia.

### **Queer anthropology**

Sexuality has historically, culturally and ethnographically been a point of contestation and research in the social sciences and cultural studies, starting from homosexuality becoming an object of anthropological study and being interpreted as a cultural construct (Weston in Walks, 2014, p. 13). Ethnographers mapped out different historical and geographical contexts and, according to their academic interests, examined same-sex sexuality, transgendered practices cross-culturally and third gender identities. However, through the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, early American anthropology played into colonial discourses of the primitive, unrestrained promiscuity of said individuals, looking at the Other through the lens of Western ideas and morals, or retained an air of ambiguity and were expressed with a level of judgment similar to mentions of homosexuality in the prevailing Western discourse (Weston in Walks, p. 14). In addition, female homosexuality remained more or less unexplored, with the reason being that it was not deemed legit for male ethnographers. On the other hand, when it was documented, it was expressed because they were deprived of men. For example, Middle Eastern harems and polygynous households showed examples of same-sex practices, but females were assumed to engage in these relations only because they had no access to men, thus projecting their own fantasies of “the Orient” on Eastern women (Blackwood and Wieringa, 1999, p. 41). In other interpretations, homosexuality, be it male or female, Western or Eastern, fell under the same universal category, without situating it in their historical and cultural contexts. Ethnographers researched same-sex practices among men and transgender or

third-gender identities, like the Two-Spirit, formerly known as *berdache*, among indigenous groups in North America.

Essentialist approaches to sexuality were unsettled by the feminist theories that emerged in the USA in the 1970s, forming a social constructionist approach. Feminist scholars became interested in the historical and cultural contexts that influence sexuality. Against the idea that sexuality was a biologically formed and naturalized category, they theorized about the role that gender played in shaping sexuality and the role of “the social” on sexual identities and desires (Wierringa and Blackwood, 1999, p. 8) American anthropologists took on this approach, forming what would be thought of as gay and lesbian anthropology and examined the symbolic and embedded significance of sexuality and emphasized the difference between female and male homosexual acts, as Rich stressed in her work, where she discusses the examples of social controls (clitoridectomies, female infanticide, child marriages etc.) that are there to enforce heterosexual relationships (Blackwood, 2002, pp. 71-72). In another example, anthropologist Gayle Rubin, influenced by the ideas of Marx, Freud and Levi-Strauss, expanded their ideas and spoke of the “sex/gender system”, stressing that sexuality and gender are two distinct concepts that can be analyzed separately from each other and highlighted women’s oppression in systems of kinship, with women becoming a type of commodity for men who had rights which were not granted for women (Wieringa and Blackwood, 1999, p. 9).

Gender then,<sup>2</sup> as is understood in feminist theories, is a complex structure that encapsulates the ways in which cultures give cultural interpretations on biological differences, to distinguish between different areas of activity, different times and spaces. Gender, in a Butlerian understanding,<sup>3</sup> is a performative process directly linked to the conditions in which it is socially constructed (the templates made by various practices, clothing, media representations, bodily gestures), thus creating

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<sup>2</sup> It should be clarified that “gender” is never used synonymously with “sex” in this discussion. While sex serves as a variable of the different biological and physiological traits of the assigned sexes (male/female), gender refers to the ways in which cultures give meaning to constructed discourses and practices and attempt to mark out how individuals need to perform, be it in their behaviors, spaces they occupy, dress codes, activities etc.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Butler has made some of the most relevant contributions in the field of queer and gender studies. Being critical of renowned theorists’ perspectives, such as Foucault and Beauvoir’s, on the concept of gender, she develops and describes different ways of viewing gender and sexuality, disowning the binary system of gender identities which further naturalize the traditional class division, instead of investigating why such systems are constructed and exist in the first place (Butler, 1990, p. 9; 42).

gender identities and ideologies that are not fixed and stable (Butler, 1988, p. 519). Gender is also the system of social practices that, in creating and manipulating gender categories, organizes and distributes regimes of power (Ferree in Vaiou, 2009, p. 22). Conceptualizing gender as both a process and a structure produced by social relations, family, education, economy and the state, helps to survey the various hierarchies of power and privilege that work together and make note of all the ways that they have conditioned gender to be understood in specific ways (Pessar and Mahler, p. 814). In acknowledging gender as a human construct, we can begin to see how gender identities and relations are indeed fluid and not predetermined.

Consequently, the encounter of lesbian and gay studies with the term “queer” was made possible thanks to early 1990s and deconstructivist theories which objected to all forms of pre-determined categories about sexual and gendered identities, enriching the research on sexuality. While some have utilized it as a replacement for the LGBTQ+ acronym, short for the collection of sexual and gender identities, I choose to follow the pathway of contemporary theorists who understand the limitation of that perspective and instead place “queer” in “the radical requirement to question normativities and orthodoxies, in part now by rendering categories of sexualities, genders and spaces fluid” (Browne, 2006, p. 886). By critiquing normative dichotomies of man/woman and heterosexual/homosexual, queer explores how artificial the boundaries around genders and sexualities are and how these categories have been transformed by multiple and intersecting regimes of power (Luibhéid, 2008, p. 170). It insists on the need for consistent reformation and redefinition of what it means for an individual to define themselves along a spectrum, rather than exclusively by heterosexuality or homosexuality. Queer allows us to talk about expression, sexual subcultures and transgender identities in terms of many possibilities, to move about and experiment. Thus, as Nast proposes, it challenges both heteronormativity, the naturalness of heterosexual relationships, coexisting with pre-existing race-based and class relations, and homonormativity, defining it as “the normalization and hierarchisation of particular forms of homosexuality within particular sexualized, classed, gendered and ethnic norms” (in Browne, 2006, p. 886).

Queer, therefore, does not struggle for the replication of institutions and norms that are already in place, such as marriage, employment and the carceral state, in order to gain acceptance, and for the assimilation of non-heterosexuals into the heterosexual

mainstream culture and diverges from “conservative social projects aimed at assimilating gays and lesbians into the mainstream life of the nation” (Halberstam, 2003, p. 314). It does not aim only to include white gay men and in this way to continue to reproduce other forms of privileged identities and just add “gayness” in the mix. Rather, queerness seeks to “radically reformulate” the status quo and challenge the beliefs around equality and inclusion which are established on heteropatriarchal and capitalist principles, which might exclude individuals based on their migrant, class or HIV status (Jackson and Scott in Browne, 2006, p. 886). To give a more concise definition of the concept, Pasquino very eloquently explains how queer as a category

addresses all sexual subjects caught between binary categories, hybrid subjectivities and bodily margins: transsexuals, transgender, transvestites and transvestites, intersex, androgynousness, etc. More generally, the term ‘queer’ indicates otherness and outlines the contours of a precarious, fluid, mobile subjectivity, which summarizes the struggles of those who fight against every binary opposition (Pasquino in Masullo & Ferrara, 2020, p. 35).

If queer understands the constructed assumptions of sexuality and gender and the need to shatter the dichotomies of man/woman, hetero/homo, then it allows for the production and visibility of fluid and hybrid gender expressions and sexual desire. Queering explores new ways of thinking about otherness and, as Browne inquires, includes “radical (re)thinkings, (re)drawings, (re)conceptualizations, (re)mappings that could (re)make bodies, spaces and geographies” (2006, p. 888).

Mikdashy and Puar pose the question of what queer theory would look like if it wasn't centered around “Euro-American histories, sexualities, locations or bodies (Queer theory and permanent war, p. 215). How do queer individuals in non-Western parts of the world make sense of themselves and experience their non-heterosexual identity, when “othering” processes and racialization take place? The “nesting orientalisms” that Bakić-Hayden describes explain the hierarchical ranking that has been constructed to stereotype and evaluate cultures and the way that anthropologists projected their sexual fantasies of “the Other” or “the Orient” onto their examination of female homosexuality; it starts with Asia as the most Eastern or “other”, followed by the Balkans, then Eastern Europe, only to end with the West as the center (in

Sólveigar- Guðmundsdóttir, 2018, p. 32). However, decentering the discussions around sexuality from the West and refusing to reinforce ideas around East's backwardness is necessary to not reproduce "global hierarchies of value" and generalize the lives, practices and experiences of queer communities (p. 33).

### **Anthropology of space and connections to queer migration**

The 1970s theoretical developments of second-wave feminism in the anthropological discourse intersected with the "cultural turn" of the 1980s, when humanities and social sciences made culture their theoretical focus. Instead of making universal and objective truths, they argued about the significance that culture plays in the construction of identities, in how someone makes sense of the world and how they define their values and who they are. Anthropologists started to regard social phenomena, as visual and discursive texts and simultaneously moved away from the classic anthropological idea of a "shared and consensual" culture towards highlighting particularities, inconsistencies and cultural change (Donnah and Wilson in Kurki, 2014).

The contemporary epistemological interest in space and place proved to be another influential element. Drawing from geography, political theory and philosophy to name a few, anthropology inquired about the understanding and production of spaces. New theories recognized that spaces and places can be used to convey cultural meaning about the world, but that they are also complex systems under constant construction, an outcome of social, aesthetic, political and economic relations between people and institutions (Aucoin, 2017, p. 396). Works like that of Marxist thinker Henry Lefebvre who argued about the political and strategic essence of space and of Gupta and Ferguson's accounting for the relations between power, spatial movement and cultural displacement heightened the interest in space, borders and identity (Kurki, 2014, p. 1063). The latter challenged the belief that cultures were spatially fixed, linking it to the challenges of people living in borderlands who are (re)shaped by political, economic and social influences and interactions in a transnational and globalized world.

The shifts in the discussion of space in relation the anthropological paradigm, were particularly reflected in works, such as those of Arjun Appadurai with regard to the cultural production of globalization in the era of "disorganized capitalism" (2014, pp.

32-34). In discussing space, he describes the movement of global cultural flows by using the term “-scape”. In this way, his terms “ethnoscapes” or “mediascapes” are used to describe perspective-dependent constructs, influenced by historical, linguistic and political positioning of actors, such as nation-states, diasporic communities, subnational religious, political or economic groups, or even groups of interpersonal intimacy, such as villages and families. These actors are, according to Appadurai, “eventually navigated by agents who both experience and constitute larger formations, in part from their own sense of what these landscapes offer” (p. 33). With the above in mind, we can reflect on the anthropological perspective of the study of space, discerning the problematization with migration through the “ethnoscape”, as these communities and individuals become an essential global feature and even in the relatively stable communities and networks they make, it is always permeated with the realities of having to or fantasizing of wanting to move.

Therefore, anthropologists’ interest in space/place increased during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, in response to the global economic shifts and migration flows, which have challenged the established notions of the stability of the people they study in specific sites; the fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent formation of independent nation-states offered a great such example. The process of bordering had so far mapped the lines where a “state” begins and ends, and thus delineated who is allowed to cross its territorial boundaries, be included/excluded, as well as how its people understand constructs of community, belonging and representation (Newman in Kurki, 2014). In other words, the borders of states embodied the distinctive culture of the people within them and showed who is deemed desirable and acceptable to pass through or migrate into regions. However, with their view not as a mere concept of territorial understandings, but as a constructed cultural phenomenon, the analysis of borders through nationalistic discourses decreased and the link between place and cultural subjects was weakened.

Poststructuralist and queer theory since the 1990s became interested in theorizing space, which was embodied in notions as postmodern hyper-space and borderlands, and how its people understand constructs of identity and belonging (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992, p. 6) Borders were not theorized as mere meeting points of ethnic and linguistic communities, but as “hybrid spaces, spaces of flows – borderland cultures in their own right”, where cultural identities can be formed unbounded to specific

territories and places (Gupta and Ferguson in Kurki, 2014). More specifically, the anthropological and cultural approaches to the study of bordering processes focus on “metaphorical borderlands of self and group identity”; firstly, on transnational people, migrants, workers and refugees who decide to move and secondly, on all sorts of borders who may take the form of cultural, social, political, sexual, racial or psychological crossings (Donnan and Wilson, 2001, pp. 9, 35).

Perhaps these various ways of understanding who we are and what shapes us, more specifically our sexuality, our ethnicity, our cultural background are not opposing and separated to each other, but intersecting labels through which we can understand how power hierarchies and the idea of difference are employed to differentiate rather than unite us. Contemporary binary contrasts that are reproduced within structuralist anthropological studies are rather well-known to us: self/other, male/female, traditional/modern, West/East operate within cultures to make sense of everything around us with the first term of the binary being the privileged and prioritized one which enforces dominance over the second term, the subordinate and undesirable one. Discourses on power relations from post-structuralist theorists like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida critique these dichotomies and help us understand them as violent hierarchies to be unmade and reversed (Derrida in Tentokali, 2005, p. 4) and analyze modern power as a pervasive and continuously shifting set of relations which is not only producing realities and rituals of truths, but producing individuals “as subjects by subjecting them to power” (Allen, 2021).

The idea of binary being oppressive by nature influenced theorists towards intermeshing sexual and queer subjects with race, social class and mappings of nation and diaspora. This highlighted the further discrimination experienced by migrants who are female or queer and sparked works speaking of the experience of being at the “border” of cultural belonging. For example, Anzaldua speaks of the “border woman” and examines marginalized voices living in borderlands, be it on a physical (the frontera of U.S. Southwest and Mexico), psychological or sexual level of understanding themselves (Anzaldua, 1987).

Influenced by her work, Lugones proposes a feminist decolonial thinking, with decoloniality working as resistance to coloniality, grounded on a radicalized distinction and an objection to the “dichotomous human/non-human, colonial, gender



system” (2010, p. 749). To decolonize then is to redefine the sense of self by embracing multiplicity in gender expression and sexuality. Echoing Anzaldua’s liminality of the border as an in-between space and a borderlands, where indigenous people can embody an active subjectivity that resists the violence of colonialism and patriarchy (2010, p. 749-753), queer migrants both in the US and Europe can establish new ways of understanding their sexual and ethnic identity as they are not bounded by where they grew up, but attempt to create new, permanent homes. The above sentiments are critical for attempting to observe and understand the cinematic subjects of my thesis. I aim to examine if and in what ways Albanian migrants in Greece or Serbian queers manage to come to terms with their own ethnic and sexual expression, in their original and new homelands, and also to see if these very same expressions can work as a form of resistance to oppressive patriarchal and colonial values in the national contexts of Serbia and Greece.

### **Locating gendered migration in the Balkans**

This discussion lays the groundwork for understanding the physical and emotional conditions of queer migrants, who will be theorized about in this study. The globalization of the modern world has formulated new ways of understanding societies, one of the most visible parts of it being the intensification of migration flows in Europe with people moving within and across borders. Approaches on migration slowly start to shift with issues like capitalist structures, push and pull factors as driving forces for migrants, national politics and inter-state agreements being raised during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Vaiou, p. 17). Men had predominantly been the central subjects inquired about, and more specifically, the young, solo traveler, the “working man” who, in the newly developed world is considered the epitome of labor migration (Green in Vaiou, p. 17-18). The research that focused on men on the move as its subjects connected them with the industrialization and urbanization in northern Europe. Migration flows were interpreted in the context of capitalist development of the country of destination where migrants’ role in the financial making of the state is raised.

As a result, gender issues in relation to mobility and different models of migration flows, like those of the stories about the industrialization of southern European countries, had been widely neglected. The mainstream approaches of migration seem

to ignore both female researchers studying female migration in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and statistical data regarding the presence of women in migration flows. Even when women did appear in research, it was always in context with family migration, since it was assumed that women and children “migrate to accompany or to reunite with their breadwinner migrant husbands” or with the image of a poor, uneducated and unskilled female, outlining a very limited and homogeneous image of female migrants (Mahler and Pessar, 2006, pp. 27-28; Vaiou, pp. 17-18).

The concurrent development of feminist theories and their contestation of older views on gender take interest in the experiences and practices of mobile people. Migration is viewed as a gendered phenomenon (Mahler and Pessar, 2006, pp. 32-33), and gender is discussed within migration scholarship as “a set of social relations that organize immigration patterns” (Pessar and Mahler, 2003, p. 814), while also witnessing how “the age of migration” plays a significant role in the construction and remaking of sexual identities and cultures (Luibheid, 2008, p. 169). It becomes clear that women were dependent family members moving to reunite with their husbands, but also independent economic migrants (Pessar in Vaiou, 2009, p. 20). Based on a gender analysis, the household as a single unit with common aspirations is deconstructed and the exploitation of women within the context of family, labor and reproduction is brought to attention. A methodological shift is noticed in scientific fields too as oral history, life interviews and the grounded approach on the study of gender in migration showcased the voices of female migrants in social sciences.

Various challenges of migration and displacement, such as remittances, the job market and the changes in immigration policies in the European Union, were revisited through a feminist angle. Simultaneously, however, in the 1990s, the research on migration is examined together with theoretical approaches about transnationalism in order to understand contemporary migration processes. The collapse of the Eastern Bloc was the pinnacle of the revolutionary changes and neoliberal reforms happening in Eastern Europe in 1989, which generated an unparalleled mobility of persons thanks to the precarious living conditions and poverty of the time. The post-socialist phase in the Eastern part of Europe meant that people were freely able to move to the West, but also come back (Morokvasic, 2004, p. 8). Mobility does not mean going forever as freedom of circulation now becomes possible and transborder, short-term

migrations for work and trade have become one of the most typical forms of movement in recent times (Wallace and Stola in Morokvasic, p. 8-9)

In the context of Eastern European migrations, the Balkans entered a new period as well, with major political transformations and mobility of persons. During the early 1990s, the breakup Yugoslavia after a series of political conflicts, the fall of communism in Albania, the independence of Bosnia and Herzegovina from the constituent states of Serbia and Montenegro all result in a turbulent Balkan scene. Greece, together with the rest of Southern European countries, Portugal, Italy and Spain, has been transformed from an emigration country into a country of immigration since the 1980s, with an arrival of legal and illegal migrants (Karakatsanis and Swarts, 2003, p. 240; Vermeulen et al, 2015, pp. 17-18). Thousands crossed the borders of Greece from various countries in Southeastern Europe, especially from neighboring Albania, and the Middle East. As the Schengen area strengthened its controls on visa and immigration requirements, only highly skilled individuals could legally enter the borders; thus, many entered the country illegally or were recruited seasonally in the field of agriculture (p. 18).<sup>4</sup> The image of the “dangerous Albanian” was constructed in the media after the mass migration of male Albanians in December of 1990. The Greek police responded with a wave of expulsion of undocumented immigrants, otherwise known as *skoupa* (broom). In actuality, it was often the case that individuals had to be sent away multiple times through the same deportation system. Many Albanians sought out to be captured in *skoupa* operations in order to get a free ride back home, a “form of circular migration”, as Reyneri proposes (in Vermeulen et al, p. 19). Border crossings continued all throughout the decade, with men travelling across the mountains and women with children arriving through smuggling, and even trafficking, or the purchase of underground visas from the Greek consulate in Tirane (p. 21).

Therefore, migration is simultaneously a gendered phenomenon, as women are the ones that feel the impact of the economic transformations in the post-socialist space and the resulting unemployment, looking for better living conditions in the South. The Soviet world is dissolved, but the role of women in the labor market is passed onto and incorporated into the new neo-liberal structures, resulting in them becoming

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<sup>4</sup> The exact population number remains unknown, but is estimated to have exceeded 200.000 in 1991 alone, reaching 700.000 by 1997 (Fakiolas and King in Vermeulen et al).

breadwinners and finding ways to secure their survival through resourcefulness and flexibility (Hess in Sideri, 2015, p. 69). Greece is one of the countries absorbing the large number of travelling women, mainly in unskilled labor and the informal sector, and the sex trade, especially ones from Albania, Poland and the Philippines (Karakatsanis and Swarts, 2003, p. 241).

Simultaneously but a bit further in the north, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia falls, resulting in political upheavals and violent civil wars which instigated massive movements from, within and across regions. By 1995, 350.000 Croatian Serbs moved from Croatia, 3.8 million people left Bosnia and the same pattern is witnessed for ethnic Albanians fleeing to Albania, Montenegro and, after 2001, to Kosovo (in Vermeulen, p. 18). Migration defined the area as the 1998 civil war that begun in Kosovo between Serb and Albanian Kosovars caused hundreds of thousands of people to escape either as internally displaced persons or refugees. When peace was finally reinstated in 1999, people returned home in Kosovo, while Serbs and Roma who had escaped to Serbia and Montenegro had to be repatriated.

While research, scholarship and statistical data have extensively accounted for male and female migration both within and outside Europe, studies on queer migrants are sparse. How can we approach mobility in terms of sexual and non-normative subjectivities, when migrants are viewed as heterosexuals and queers as citizens? (Luibhéid, p. 169). There have been stories and available statistical data by institutions in the European Union to number European asylum seekers and refugees in the past years which recognize their status and give them the, albeit slim, possibility of being granted asylum if they prove that they fear persecution because of their sexuality. However, we are not interested in numbers, but rather in queer stories and experiences which specifically take place during the spatiotemporal period that is of interest in this paper, the 1990s up until the early 2000s in the Balkans, a time when queer migrants still exist in the margins both academically and socially.

I have already discussed about the various vectors of oppression that are imposed on migrants who identify themselves or are identified by others as queer. Highlighting these issues and answering to the questions why people migrate, Manalansan argues that queer migrants do not enter new nation-states to begin processes of assimilation, but to continue to interact with power regimes in their place of destination. Migrants

are not liberated once they move, but they are simply faced with “restructured” freedoms and inequalities (in Luibhéid, 2008, p. 170-171). Furthermore, emotional reasons relating to gender and sexual identity, apart from economic ones, are an important motivation for migration, according to Gorman-Murray. He distinguishes between “coming-out migration” for queer people who move to express sexual desires, “gravitational group migration” for queers looking for like-minded peers and wanting to live in an area with a dynamic gay community<sup>5</sup>, “relationship migration”, where people move for queer relationships and, lastly, a migration rooted in the desire to enjoy sexual citizenship rights (Mole, 2021, pp. 4-5).

How can we take persons who have historically lived in the margins and make them and the reasons for moving visible? Luibhéid insists on “recovering, theorizing, and valorizing histories and subjects that have been largely rendered invisible, unintelligible, and unspeakable”, without, however, universalizing their experiences and encouraging the formation of a generalizing and Western-driven gay identity (2008, pp. 171-172). In favor of “fractured continuities” between the past and the present and the histories that have shaped queer migration into what it is today, my research looks back at the decade of 1995 to 2005 to examine how queerness and migration are presented in the cinematic representations of the Balkans, at a period of continuous differentiations and transformations. More specifically, I will attempt to map and showcase how Serbian and Greek films make visible and speak about sexual migrants, as will be explained at length in the next chapter, the methodology of this research paper.

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<sup>5</sup> Mole explains that the sole act of coming out and being accepted by your social circle may not be reason enough to stay grounded in a place, as you might still not be able to meet and form relationships with queer peers, if there isn’t an active community or queer-friendly spaces in your town or area. The lack of queer opportunities can be the reason why someone relocates, but also influence the area one chooses to move to. One such example is the large Latin American queer community in London, the urban “gay haven” (Mole, 2021, p. 4; 52).

## **Chapter 2: Queer migrant cinema in the Balkans & Methodology**

This chapter investigates the cinema depicting queerness and migration in Europe, to discuss and draw conclusions about the culture of queer/migration cinema and its evolution, together with the in situ sociopolitical conditions that affect it. Interpreting film as a cultural text, the discussion will then particularize the above themes spatiotemporally, looking into the cinematic representations of the Balkans, to explain and justify why the need of questioning preexisting norms and the significance of producing and denominating queer artworks influenced my ethnographic interests and my decision to research 1995 to 2005 Serbian and Greek cinema to add it in the list of queer and migration cinema of Eastern Europe.

### **2.1 Is there a European cinema?**

What exactly is a European cinema after all? Can we demarcate its borders and create associations and links between various film productions of the area, creating a – perhaps problematic- list of the queer and migrant cinema of Europe? The previous chapter concluded with the discussion around fractured continuities and discontinuities of the histories of queer migration and the opposition to the practice of universalizing the experiences, desires and formation of identity of queer migrants, in favor of a non-Western discussion around the topics of sexuality, migration and queer representation.

Is it possible to locate such a European cinematic form, with such different territories, and therefore, different subjectivities and cultural practices? Griffiths argues that this exact nature of indefiniteness, of the “multiple, unstable and perpetually changing” “identity” of Europe and its cinemas is what enables a queer reading and exploration of sexuality and cinema in multiple ethnocentric modes of representation (Griffiths, 2008, p. 14). Academic analyses of what is considered a European cinema, he supports, have been heterosexist in nature, when it comes to which films are examined and how they are read, in the past decades, with LGBTQ+ and queer productions being more or less invisible, despite the fact that they did exist and influence, albeit conspicuously, the evolution of international cinema (p. 15). Affected by post-structuralist discourses of Europe, from the 1990s onwards queer studies have slipped their way into the academic theorizing and analytical methods of film studies, by presenting human identity as being socially constructed and fluid. Simultaneously, the

changes in the geo-political and socio-economic makeup of the continent, with nation-building in Southeastern Europe after the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the concurrent mobility of persons, have brought new questions around viewership and filmmaking and allowed the shift of interest from the Western European context to the national cinemas of the East. Queerness, then, works as the unifying category within which we can group filmmakers whose creations create a space to address previously unexplored issues of sexuality, belonging and nationhood, from the first steps in representing gay and lesbian or migrant characters to more recent ones (Griffiths, pp. 14-15). With that in mind, cinema, as Dyer proposes, becomes the space to do just that, the “mode of communication, expression and entertainment – the ‘signifying practice’” through which to contest or reestablish positions on identity and film (in Griffiths, p. 15).

This chapter’s objective is to provide a backdrop of the films produced and consumed until the early 2000s that address or portray queerness and migration within them. To see if and how in a decidedly “unqueer” and hostile to migration time and space, filmmakers choose to navigate these issues and portray characters that struggle with their national and sexual identity (Dawson, p. 2015, p. 186). I do not propose that there is one uniform pan-European aesthetic or cinematic language, but rather I aim to trace the sporadic representations that spring up throughout Europe in national cinemas, as sexuality, nationhood and belonging shift and take up new meanings from what they had in the past.

## **2.2. What is a queer and/or migrant film**

Before mentioning the genealogy of films centering around our main subject, we should first consider what the main elements of a queer and/or migrant film are. As far as queer cinema is concerned, studies on sexuality in cinema examine how and why the fluidity of sexual identities is connected to the production and reception of films, often highlighting traditionally censored and overlooked queer characters. According to Konstantinos Kiriakos, the term “queer” can be used to describe a very distinctive voice, a character, a mode of writing and/or the various marketing tactics of promoting a film (2016, p. 11). Therefore, film creators and the audience can be characterized as queer, without it being necessary for them to be homosexual, as the study and history of queer films often traces hidden overtones and details of homosexual interest in filmic subjects. He emphasizes that queer, then, points to the

moments when heterosexuality is threatened, challenged or presented in unpredictable, performative ways.

More specifically, Kiriakos lays out the basic criteria through which a movie may be defined as queer. These are a) whether it presents and is about queer characters, b) whether these characters deviate from traditional gender roles and their representations object to derogatory, stereotypical portrayals, c) whether the movie is a product of queer directors or includes lesbian or gay actors, containing thus a “queer sensitivity”<sup>6</sup>, d) if the movie is addressed to and watched by a gay, lesbian or queer audience, and e) if it is created through innovative and alternative, low-budget modes of production, which negotiate issues of sexuality with an “aesthetic boldness”, contrary to the dominant Hollywood model (pp. 14-17). Dawson echoes similar sentiments when analyzing LGBTQ films and queer space and place, by examining films across the spectrum from “low culture”<sup>7</sup>, such as pornography, to “high culture”, such as arthouse films<sup>8</sup> (p. 196).

As for what is considered a movie about migration and/or a transnational movie, the concept of transnational cinema is an established study area which has made its appearance in the academy to illustrate cross-border connections and understand various filmmakers and film cultures “against the local/global interface” (Kinder in Higbee & Lim, 2010, p. 8). More specifically, Higbee and Lim list three different approaches that have been applied in film studies concerning the conceptual

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<sup>6</sup> When speaking of a “queer sensitivity”, Kiriakos refers to the subliminal essence that a queer actor or director can convey in a film. In many cases, no direct references to queer culture or characters appeared, as they were not allowed to, but they still managed to take a stance on gender or sexuality through a disguised “homosexual subtext” in films now seen as “precursors” to gay depictions (2017, p. 18). Such examples would be Giannis Dalianidis’ works in the ‘60s, which have an underlying eroticism, with their emphasis on male bodies and physical intimacies of subjects who adopt a full-of-guilt-and-pessimism stance on their intimate relationships, struggling to rise up and resist (p. 36; 68-71).

<sup>7</sup> The concept of “low” culture (otherwise “popular” or “mass” culture), stemming from the connection between technological progress, changes in class and gender relations in the Industrial Revolution, is used to describe the art easily and widely available to audiences, or rather, the working class. (Shiach in Sieburth, p. 6). In the eyes of the then dominant class, low culture was not concerned with abstract ideas, but with common familial problems, and linked to corruption, cultural decline and a threat to social control, while “high” culture was synonymous with authenticity and purity. Of course, it has been stated that the high/low division has been blurred in postmodern times with popular culture being a valuable sphere of cultural analysis, but when talking of “low” or “popular” cultural texts, we typically think of reality television, tabloid magazines, sport, shopping, punk, horror movies and pornography (Brottman, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Arthouse films, or simply, art films, are independent artistic works with low production budgets that are not intended for a mass market audience, e.g. Hollywood blockbuster films. Instead, they are aimed at a cult or niche market and they are often screened at theaters and film festivals.



framework of “the transnational”. The first approach includes a film’s production, distribution and exhibition (i.e. “the movement of films and film-makers across national borders and the reception of films by local audiences outside of their indigenous sites of production”); this approach sees the national and the transnational as a binary, often concealing the various economic, political and ideological power imbalances in this transnational exchange by, for example, overlooking migration and diaspora issues (p. 9). The second approach sees film as a regional phenomenon, which investigates “film cultures/national cinemas which invest in a shared cultural heritage and/or geo-political boundary”. The third approach refers to work on diasporic, exilic and postcolonial filmmaking, which aims, “through its analysis of the cinematic representation of cultural identity, to challenge the western (neocolonial) construct of nation and national culture and, by extension, national cinema as stable and Eurocentric in its ideological norms as well as its narrative and aesthetic formations”. The final approach is influenced by postcolonial theory, cultural and globalization studies, and examines filmmakers who are aware of the power relations between centre/margin, portray issues of migration and displacement through identities that contest the fixed concept of the national (pp. 9-10).

Higbee and Lim do not shy away from questioning the broadness of these approaches, however, and noticing their limitations. They argue that the prolific and “potentially empty” use of the term “transnational” may lead to a concealment of aesthetic and political implications, when it is used solely to describe a transnational collaboration between film crews from different parts of the world. Additionally, they highlight that there is the risk of displacing “the national” entirely from research, when we view the transnational cinema as simply defining an international or supranational film production. However, the theorists argue that the national continues to exist and still exerts its influence in transnational modes of film-making, suggesting a need for “critical transnationalism”. This approach involves examining how film-making activities interact with the national, encompassing cultural policy, financial sources, multiculturalism, and the nation's self-image. The analysis of cross-border film-making remains vigilant about postcoloniality, politics, power dynamics, and the potential emergence of neocolonialist practices within popular genres or auteurist aesthetics. Additionally, it emphasizes the often-overlooked question of the audience,

exploring how local, global, and diasporic viewers decode films as they circulate transnationally, whether in cinemas, on DVDs, or online (p. 18).

Taking the above into account, it is evident that my examination of what a queer migrant cinema is, or that is, what films fall within this category should consider both visible and hidden interactions; characters and narratives that represent queer migrants on screen, the aesthetic choices of the filmmakers as well as their off-screen production processes, and also the interpretation and reciprocation of the audience.

### **2.3 Queer migrant cinema in Europe**

Bearing the previously mentioned definitions in mind, this section will briefly trace representations of queerness and migration in cinema that spring up across Europe. I have chosen to focus on films that address both subjects simultaneously, avoiding an exhaustive list of works mentioning either queerness or migration to align with the main objectives of this paper.

In the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a new cinema under construction is present in Europe, which has a long tradition of homosexual filmmakers and queer films, to which an audience interested in issues of migration and queerness can turn to. There are numerous depictions of LGBTQ+ characters on screen in the cinemas of Germany, France, Italy and Turkey, to name a few.<sup>9</sup> However, movies that portray queer migrants do not seem to be so many, in comparison. Moving way back in time to very early genderqueer performances in film, Marlene Dietrich's 1920s and 1930s works represent early instances of transnational cinema. Dietrich, a German-American actress, following the footsteps of many directors and actors who fled from the National Socialist regime (and, thus, kickstarted a long history of cinematic collaboration between the two countries) broke gender boundaries in films like "The Blue Angel" (von Sternberg, 1930) and "Morocco" (von Sternberg, 1930), where her image of an "androgynous" female coupled queer gender expression with sexuality (Dawson, p. 187).

More recent films, before the turn of the new millennium did the same, when it comes to the representation of lesbian and gay relationships. the 1991 film "Salmonberries"

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<sup>9</sup> For an extensive list of the queer films of Europe, Leanne Dawson's article "Queer European Cinema: queering cinematic time and space" and the book "Queer Cinema in Europe", edited by Robin Griffiths, provide an excellent summary of productions from all across Europe, as well as analyses on queer identities, aesthetics, spaces and performances on the big screen.

by Percy Adlon features an androgynous character played by k.d. lang, exploring the relationship between a male miner and a female exiled immigrant from East Germany. Foreign directors often worked and lived in Germany, resulting in productions that focused on more positive and parodic representations of immigrants, challenging the somber and victim-like portrayal of migrants by German directors in the 1980s (p. 189). For instance, the 1999 film "Lola and Billy the Kid" by Kutluğ Ataman delves into the sexuality of Turkish immigrants with the protagonist submerging himself in the subculture of drag queens, trans people and "rent boys", ironically referencing the history of Turkish-German worker migration (Hamm-Ehsani, 2008, p. 370). With the film finding success both with German and international audiences, the film weaves the stories of Turkish-German queer communities with the history of migration and Turkish diaspora in Berlin (pp. 371-372). However, it should be noted that reception in Turkey was not so favorable. The premiere of openly homosexual Ataman resulted in negative press and death threats, leading the director to move to London.<sup>10</sup>

The 2000s saw on-screen relationships involving migrants too, such as in the 2003 film *A Little Bit of Freedom* by Kurdish director Yuksel Yavuz, depicting the gradual transition from friendship to love between two illegal immigrants in Germany, while, five years later, *My Friend from Faro* by Nana Neul sees a teenage girl called Mel assuming the identity of a Portuguese boy in order to court Lucy, after the latter mistakes her for being male (Dawson, p. 189). Belgian film also began to delve into the normalization of queerness and cross-cultural relationships. However, it would do so around the 2010s, with films like *Soundless Wind Chime* (Hung Wing Kit, 2009), a transnational co-production, and *Mixed Kebab* (Guy Lee Thys, 2012) portraying the experiences of a Belgium-born, gay Muslim with Turkish background (pp. 190-192).

Italian film also pushed the boundaries through openly gay filmmakers who explored the social issues of post-war Italy and depicted stories of fascism, homosexuality and the working class (pp. 192-193), as seen, for example, in the Italio-German production *The Berlin Affair* (Liliana Cavani, 1985), where a Nazi diplomat and his wife are infatuated with the same man. A film made in Italy would directly address transnational and migration issues several years later; *Ciao Bella* (Mani Masserat-

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<sup>10</sup> Another film by Ataman that focuses on queer, and more specifically, trans identities is the 2001 film *Never My Soul*, which is about a Turkish trans woman who works as a sex worker in Switzerland (Dawson, p. 189).

Agah, 2007) centers around an Iranian immigrant in Sweden, who becomes a football player, but is driven to pass as Italian for a romantic relationship (p. 195).

This summary provides a glimpse into the diverse representations of queerness and migration in European cinema, laying the groundwork for further analysis within the context of the thesis. It also tried to show how queer cinema has accentuated the visibility of Other sexualities, even in difficult contexts, such as migrant communities, since the 1990s.

#### **2.4 Queer migrant cinema in the Balkans**

In together with the theme and moving towards Southeastern representations, how did the cultural and political landscape of Eastern Europe affect the ideologies on homosexuality and migration? Back in 1959, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, formed in 1943, officially criminalized homosexuality. While the Republic of Croatia decriminalized it in 1975, other regions did not follow suit until after the collapse of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Bosnia in 1994 and 1998 respectively), leading to decades of cinematic productions with a severe lack of lesbian and gay representation. Contrastingly to Western Europe, the emerging cinemas were hesitant to explore queer romance, contrary to other social issues, such as alcoholism, domestic abuse, racial inequalities and drug addiction that surfaced into mainstream culture, seeing as “the Communist societies were generally subjected to one, ideal, one model of appropriate living. Everything else was deviation and not acceptable” (Griffiths, pp. 129-131; Stroehlein in Griffiths, p. 130).

Since the fall of the Iron Curtain and during the period of significant transitions, the cultural and geo-political shifts in the region, the urge to go against the ingrained beliefs and regimes of the communist era developed, together with fundamental economic and sociocultural changes, defined by capitalist penetration and democratization processes (Lykidis, 2015, p. 352). The post-Yugoslav developments are not linear in nature, however, and while the rhetoric around an “inclusive new Europe” was brought forth by looking to Western models of nationhood, the area could not easily escape its Ottoman influence, or the traits “perceived as such that are mostly invoked in the current stereotype of the Balkans (p. 353; Todorova, p. 162). Caught in the intermediate space between East and West, Europe and the Balkans, the area’s emerging nationalisms had to negotiate perceptions about the

newly formed states and the various national, ethnic and/or religious conflicts that were revealed, for many of which populations of the region were still unprepared (Griffiths p. 130). Many subcultures that emerged and attempted to make themselves visible, such as the queer ones, were ignored, met with disagreement or “caricatured as an invasive and insidious consequence of such unpoliced border crossings and the erasure of old barriers” in cinematic productions.

The Balkan construction of sexuality might partly be understood through discourses around Balkanism. Todorova analyses Balkanism as another form of Orientalism, with the difference lying in considerations of gender. While the Orient was a place of riches and femininity, where one could search for sexual experiences with men and women unperceived in Europe, the Balkans were “a male world of brutality and primitive barbarism” (Todorova in Moss, pp. 357-358, 2002). Therefore, while homosexuality was attributed to non-Western cultures, as imagined by the West, Yugoslav sexuality wished to separate itself from queerness, feminine Europe and the urban and instead attach itself to masculinity and violence. This is evident in the different beliefs about homosexuality in ex-Yugoslavia. Slovenia hosted the first gay and lesbian festival of Eastern Europe in 1984, something that Serbian nationalists employed to spread anti-Slovenian sentiments; Slovenia organized its first gay pride parade in 2001, but Serbia’s first gay parade in the same year was outnumbered by anti-LGBT protesters, screaming “Serbia to Serbs, out with fags!” (Blagojevic in Moss, p. 357). Homosexuality seems to be promoted as a European import and used to instill hostility to national and ethnic others (p. 359).

That is not to say that gay culture did not exist in the region. Gays and lesbians not only existed in the 1980s and 1990s Yugoslav space –albeit only occasionally in public life-, but self-organized and formed anti-war and anti-nationalist activist groups (Bilić, pp. 64-67).<sup>11</sup> Refugees, lesbians and homosexuals co-existed and shared spaces, organized workshops with the support of other international groups and even

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<sup>11</sup> Such a notable example is Arkadija, the first lesbian and gay human right group in Serbia, founded in 1991 to lobby the decriminalization of homosexuality. Even during the war, the group kept anti-nationalist principles, excluding members who were, for example, against Gypsies or Albanians. Unfortunately, lesbophobia and homophobia, in general, was witnessed within and across activist groups. The Project for Helping Refugees protested against Arkadija’s meetings in the Centre for Women’s Studies, even though many of its members were refugees themselves. (Bilić, p. 63)

published in 1995 the first lesbian magazine in the Yugoslav space, *Labris newspaper* (p. 68).<sup>12</sup>

Thematically, Balkan cinema shared many similar features in themes and styles, with problems regarding violent politics, marginality, the Ottoman legacy and Orientalism being felt across borders (Iordanova, 2001, p. 3). Many cinemas paid close attention to village life and the communal organization of the 1950s (p. 6). The cinemas of the 1970s portrayed the influence of the industrialization of the past two decades, the desertion of villages and the rural to urban migration that ensued, with “migration cycle films” created in Greece, Albania and former Yugoslav countries.

The “national cinemas” of the Balkans were influenced with anxieties about the nation, but some film-making did emerge which re-viewed and addressed motives related to the changes of identity, such as gender, ethnicity, memory and nostalgia and “otherness” (Leković, p. 239). In the early 1990s *Virginia* by Karanovic and *Marble Ass* by Zelimir Zilnik depicted transgendered protagonists and simultaneously tackled issues of prostitution, war and violence (Moss, 2002, p. 347). Between the years of 2002 and 2005 Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia had their first gay films debut, featuring lesbian or gay main characters mostly separated from queer communities. It should be mentioned, however, that they were all directed by straight directors and screenwriters and not particularly popular within the local queer audiences, seeming to mix issues of nationality and homosexuality, to liken the homosexual to the ethnic other (Moss, 2012, pp. 352-353).

During the 1990s, the turbulent political events of the Yugoslav space dominated the cinematic interests of the region. Former Yugoslav states, such as Croatia and Slovenia were gradually building their national identities, while Serbia’s and Montenegro’s cinemas, still being officially FRY, were ruled by the war, the rise of Serbian nationalism and Yugo-nostalgia<sup>13</sup>, wavering between the old Yugoslav identity and a new Serbian one. No matter the genre, be it comedies or historical dramas, the films dealt with the visual representation of national identity and looked

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<sup>12</sup> Lesbian activists were generally much more active in Serbia, due to both the impact of the Yugoslav feminist movement and the influence of the patriarchal beliefs and militarized masculinity that affected gay men throughout the time of war (p. 67).

<sup>13</sup> Broadly speaking, Yugonostalgia is a political and cultural phenomenon referring to nostalgia for the Socialist Federal republic of Yugoslavia under the rule of Josip Broz Tiro until 1980, grief over the ensuing war and dreams over it uniting again.

at the war as a human tragedy and a Balkan curse, with political reasons or simply fate being the culprits (Iordanova, p. 9; Cruz, 2008). Serbia became an important hub for film production which followed certain cinematographic patterns (Goulding, 2003, p. 74). War and historical films were a significant regional trend, with pivotal films like *Pretty Villages, Pretty Flame* (Srđan Dragojević, 1996) which tackled friendship and the opposite sides in an ethnic conflict. Tito's regime became another cinematic trend, in war and historical films, but particularly in comedies. For example, Zelimir Zilnik made use of satire in his mock-documentary *Tito Among the Serbs for a Second Time* (1993), having Tito walk around Belgrade and talking to people on the street. He meets Churchill, Stalin and the pope, among others, and discusses the war and living in Serbia.

The conflict is utilized in different ways in another genre of Serbian cinema. More specifically, a high percentage of Serbian films could be regarded as "urban films" (Cruz, 2008), in which, while the conflict is omnipresent and always exists in the backdrop, it is not shown on screen. The microcosm of life in modern Belgrade was showcased; a state in crisis, violence, brutality and crime were running themes. Narratively the films showed the Serbian character trying to rebuild their lives and having to face the psychological and financial effects of the time, as in Goran Paskaljević's 1998 film *Powder Keg* and Zilnik's *Marble Ass*, and as the decade came to an end, so did the fixation on painful representations. The directors began exploring other stories and representations both geographically and thematically.

Greek cinema engaged with the cultural representation and discourses related to queerness and migration. While in the 1970s and 1980s Greek films mostly focused on issues of exile and displacement, influenced by the junta years and the political exclusions of the Civil War, as in Angelopoulos' 1975 film "The Travelling Players", 1990s cinema began to represent immigrant experiences and issues related to the emerging multiculturalism of Greek society, triggered by the influence of the post-communist Balkans and the growing wave of immigrants in the country (Papanikolaou, 2009, p. 257; Lykidis, p. 346). The interest in the representation of migration out of Greece gave its place to immigrant characters, in line with European diasporic filmmaking of the time which tackled immigrant subjectivity to critique the xenophobia of European nationalisms (Nacify in Lykidis). The supposed progression from narratives of Greek emigration and repatriation to the representation of new

immigrants of the 1990s seems to be supported by cultural, state-supported events like the “Immigration in Greek Cinema, 1956 – 2006” program of the Thessaloniki Film Festival, however Papataxiarchis (in Papanikolaou, 2009, p. 258) supports that such efforts might shield the “defensive nationalism” in the Greek media, which stems from xenophobic attitudes and is defined by the need to be hostile to and protect “Greekness” against everything that might threaten it. The negative representations range from the figure of the illegal migrant without papers to the difference in usage between “Voreioipeirotēs”/Albanians and “Pontioi”/“Rossopontioi” according to if their identity as ethnic others wants to be emphasized (Papanikolaou, pp. 258-259).

In a somewhat similar chronological fashion, before the decade of the 1980s, the expression of homoerotic desire and the existence of non-stereotypical queer characters is a rare finding in Greek cinema. That is the period when the formation of sexual identity coincided with the formation of national identity, the acceptable and exemplary model of Greek masculinity and femininity (Kiriakos, 2016, pp. 17-20). The majority of cinematic productions of the 1950s and 1960s use stereotypical and homophobic representation of characters, depicting them comically or showing their struggle to escape and their defeat from oppressive social realities, as in the movies *Koritsi me ta Mavra* (1956) and *Alexis Zorbas* (1964). Simultaneously, camp theorization gradually emerged as a method of satire of hyperbolic characters and heterosexual romantic storylines and became interested in the over-the-top performance of “natural femininity”. Films of production companies of Finos Film and Karagiannis-Karatzopoulos and actors like Vougiouklaki, Vrana and Sapountzaki were used within the queer community as a secret queer code and a way to recognize themselves through these characters.

Queer filmography shifted away from the period of concealment and queer coding in Greece in the start of the 1990s, as a wave of productions is created which is heavily influenced by the “New Queer Cinema” movement of Europe and the US.<sup>14</sup> Objecting

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<sup>14</sup> New Queer Cinema is a term created by B. Ruby Rich to define a new movement consisting of films of various themes and styles, influenced by the Gay Liberation movements of the 1970s and 1980s. These films appeared in North America first, but slowly made their way into the European cinema too. They include three shared characteristics: they are queer films, created by queer artists, and showcase a freedom from previous constraints and conventions, such as portraying positive and revolutionary representations of homosexuality.



to the demonization of gay communities and the panic of the AIDS outbreak in the public space during the past decades, these films center the homosexual experience in their narrative and express a non-apologetic discussion of the sexual preference of the characters. A catalyst for this is the people behind the camera, the directors who directly convey facets of their own sexual identity (p. 236). Some of the most important ones are Konstantinos Giannaris, Alexis Mpistikas, Christos Dimas and Panos Koutras, to name a few, creating low-budget films with little-known actors. Most of these films highlight the courage and strength of being different and address the search for pleasure and for romantic partners, the acceptance of sexual difference and the repercussions of AIDS and globalization in relation to migration (p. 238). Kiriakos explains how migration becomes a qualitative trait of the New Greek cinema through:

“the entrance of the directors into the typically unknown world of economic refugees, without traces of melodrama and moralization, resulting, on the one hand, in the rethinking of the meanings of the term "margin" (identity crisis, desire to break free from the situation of their filmic starting point) and, on the other hand, in their emergence as eroticized figures. By investigating the identity characteristics of the male characters, we come across intellectuals ... hunted illegal immigrants... and lumpen prostitutes” (pp. 240-241).

In the context of this newly emerged cinema, representations of ethnic and sexual others cross paths. Elements such as encounters in the crossing of urban and rural spaces, the contact with the “other” and the characters’ search for belonging permeate the filmic narratives, while an undercurrent of cosmopolitanism also characterizes their modes of production, resulting in the driving force and backdrop for my research interests in this paper.

## **2.4 Methodology**

The research effort of this thesis begun as an attempt to examine the adoption of queer migrant identities in the cinemas of Eastern Europe. Thus, queerness was one subject area, and simultaneously, a narrative element and a criterion for categorizing the movies of a much wider period which I had to narrow down.

Since my objective was to investigate the more recent cinema, I had to define the exact period of study. My primary data includes Serbian and Greek films made in the

period between 1995 and 2005, in light of the fact that, as I proposed previously in this chapter, a new season of films with unique characteristics emerged within this time frame, leading to what recent studies and film festivals have called the “new wave” of Greek cinema, with productions that involve issues of migration, queerness and belonging. The list of films was collected by reading articles and books on queer cinema and migrant and/or diasporic film in Europe, looking for the nature of films that fall within my interests. All films were obtained and watched to figure out if they are relevant for the purposes of this thesis.

*A Place in the Sun* (1995), *From the Edge of the City* (1998) and *Hostage* (2005) by Constantine Giannaris are all pertinent here as they tackle immigration in modern Greece either be it returnee or migrant characters and simultaneously portray homosexuality or eroticize the male body. Films featuring Serbian characters were harder to find, but the two films chosen are *Marble Ass* (1995) by Želimir Žilnik and *Take a Deep Breath* (2004) by Dragan Marinković.

The formation of film studies as a scientific and ethnographic field became possible when the popularization of cinema and its “lived” essence were explored and turned into categories of social and cultural meaning, disregarding, firstly, its categorization as a form of “low” art and, secondly, the study of cultural dualism where ethnography examines the “ordinary” and arts the “artistic” (Williams, 1958, Barthes, 1962 in Sideri, p. 108). As a result, it provided legitimacy to the study of media and its societal influence as a field of study. Subsequently, the focus moved away from scrutinizing the author whose contribution enhanced the allure of the artwork, and instead, shifted attention towards the filmic text, treating it as a self-contained system where individual creation, form, and artistic worth were interdependently shaped within the distinct codes of production (Benjamin, 2006; Dyer, 2000 in Sideri).

Considering this, the anthropological involvement of the paper is not to merely situate the films historically and theoretically within film studies debates or to produce universal truths about the queer migrant subjectivities of Serbia and Greece, as if these artworks offer truthful historical representations. The anthropological approach of cinema as a field of cultural technique is employed and, according to this methodological choice, the films become my ethnographic fieldwork. They are employed as a tool, rather than a passive act of consumption, sensitive of “the

context” (local constructions of meaning, power and politics) and their “analytical value (cultural embeddedness) and for their dialogue with the audience” (Fischer, p. 51; Gray in Sideri, p. 109, 2016). I enter into the world of these films looking at them as a field where local, national and transnational contexts are constructed, interconnecting different systems of production and consumption of images, words, sounds and interactions (Sideri, p. 107). Treating the films as an ethnographic field meant that during the screenings I kept notes on what I saw, heard and noticed on screen. These notes later became my basis to process, analyze and deduce the data of my research.

It is important to note that integrating queerness as a category into the methodology of watching films is a deliberate and conscious effort to challenge preconceived norms and broaden the scope of analysis. The point of a queer methodology is to assert and celebrate the fluidity, diversity, and heterogeneity of sexualities and ethnicities and question normativities and rigid categories (Browne and Nash, 2010). Therefore, I do not intend to draw conclusive endings on one assumed lived experience, but to provide some insight into the specific lives of the queer migrants in question. This approach involves recognizing and questioning the "given" or established norms regarding sexuality, gender and identity that may be ingrained in societal, cultural, or cinematic contexts, thereby introducing a critical perspective that questions established frameworks. Not only that but it also emphasizes the need to explore how queer identities intersect with national formations. By acknowledging queerness as a dynamic and challenging category, the research aims to unravel the complexities of post-socialist and non-communist Balkan nations' cinemas in portraying and negotiating queer migrant subjectivities, and therefore, making possible (dis)connections between artworks, which might not have been seen together before.

In exploring the chosen films, I aim to understand how the tendencies of each queer migration cinema correspond to the specificities of each national context and the cinematic paradigms that the films establish. After an in-depth analysis of the Serbian and Greek cinemas separately, I hope to look at the two filmographies jointly and comparatively in order to recognize convergences and divergences in the handling of the queer migrant both in and across the cinemas of a post-socialist country and the one nation in the Balkans not to fall under communist control and examine how the

formation of the contemporary sexual identity coincides with the formation of the national one.

### **Chapter 3: Homoeroticism of migrants in the subcultures of Athens**

Having defined and discussed queer migrant cinema in the Balkans and having laid out the methodology of the paper, the chapter that unfolds next concerns itself with the film analysis of the Greek productions that have been chosen as a research sample. The films that are grouped together in this section, in conjunction with the development of queer studies that allows for new readings of the sexual heterogeneity and diversity of the period, are characterized by the unapologetic exploration of issues of the homosexual experience, based on the fact that sexual orientation is a constitutive element, not only of the characters, but also of the director himself. Critical reception and research endeavors have thoroughly examined the inclusion of the films in the New Queer Cinema genre; what my attempt will be here is to interpret how the representation of different versions of stable sexual identities interrelate with representations of the migrant other –in the context of Greece, the relationship of the illegal immigrant, mainly from neighboring Albania, with the homosexual Greek man- and how that affects or (re)forms the idea of national identification and belonging.

The present film archive includes three productions by Constantine Giannaris. The director has linked himself with queer filmography, and more specifically New Queer Cinema, from his time in the United Kingdom in the 1980s, such as his 1991 film *Caught Looking* or his participation in a collective documentary on the lives of gay and lesbian teenagers, while, on the southern side of Europe, filmmakers in Greece were still problematizing the realities of the post-Junta era. His active involvement in Greek productions began in mid-1990s, as, seeing the social and cultural shifts taking place in a country that was attempting to redefine itself in post-modern/Western terms, Giannaris fell in love with the Athens of the era, the new possibilities it brought forth and the old clichés that were dying in it. He was simultaneously witnessing the unavoidable effect of immigration on the political landscape of the country and grew fascination about the urban Athenian setting and its stories that remained untold. With his focus on wanting to move away from the cinematic motifs that his counterparts

employed, namely describing them as “obsessive in [their] pursuit of the past, of history, of the left” (Pappas, 2013), he set forth to challenge what stories can be shown on the Greek screen and to create a film which would allow him to explore sexuality and migration, dimensions of the body and ethnicity. I propose that the three films under discussion, albeit having noticeable differences, are similar in that they all depict the image of the foreigner, of the stranger who, in Simmel’s terms, doesn’t come today and leave tomorrow, but he stays (Simmel 1971, p. 143). Therefore, I am searching for examples of the dynamism of new queer film aesthetics in peripheral cinematographies, and tracing this aesthetics in relation to migration, national identity, and how their reshaping of stable gender and sexual identities may or may not affect the views about Greekness.

### **3.1 A Place in the Sun**

While still travelling back and forth from London to Athens, 36-year old Giannaris created *A Place in the Sun* in 1995, a 40-minute short film about a man falling in love with an Albanian immigrant in Greece. He made an entrance into the world of Greek film at a time when said cinema became interested in the representation of frustrated social and political identities. With his first contact into the world of Greek cinema, his project won the Best Film Award and the Best Balkan Film Award in the Drama Short Film Festival’s national and international competition respectively (Mini, 2006, p. 215).

The film begins with a love letter towards the city of Athens from the protagonist. We learn that he was born and grew up in it. He hates the city by day, but is enamored with it by night, with its magical, sensual and almost foreign atmosphere. The character directly references the historical changes of the city due to the arrival of migrants. “Poles, Romanians, Albanians, Kurds, Turks, Iraqis. Refugees, poverty, quarrels, war. The usual stuff, the Balkans” the hero narrates. Young people of various ethnic backgrounds inhabit the city in the changing cityscape of Athens. He correlates the political shifts and migration flows with the country’s Balkan identity, not a progressive multicultural Europeanized outlook.

In the 90s, a new format of homosexual relationships is formed which has to do with male prostitution of impoverished Albanians. The image of renting young migrant men for the night in brothels or out on the streets is typical cinematically, but is

destigmatized by queer cinema (Kiriakos, pp. 250-251). Representatives of the genre shift the approach, revealingly and non-discriminatorily showcasing the spaces of queer contacts of Greeks with Balkan identities, the image of the foreigner and the processes of redefining their identity. This can be corroborated by a scene of the male hero picking up a Romanian on the streets of Athens, where the migrant does not speak fluent Greek, but is assured that they do not need to talk. The character relishes his contact with sex workers, picking them up in the night, but never bringing them in his home, not letting them enter his space. He interacts with them in hotels, or the hustlers' place. In the film, the city has a prominent cinematic role. Narrative scenes are intertwined with frames of the Athenian landscape. Sudden fast cuts of the lively streets in yellow color or television images of a journalist proclaiming "the city is not just what you are seeing today" create a stark contrast to the otherwise black and white film. A scene is dedicated to Omonia square, a central space of erotic transactions. The "glory of the past" as the protagonist puts it, the Greek soldiers and countryboys are gone and their place has been taken by foreigners. He is like a hunter looking for its prey, looking around for his next "victim", with the camera zooming in on his wondering eyes, finding it in the Albanian boy. They come into contact through the offering of a cigarette, the object exchanging hands and setting the exchange's erotic gravity. The audience learns that the Albanian comes from North Epirus, his family living back in Albania and his sister having migrated and married in Germany. He loves the city, working as a painter. This is where we learn their names, in the 12-minute mark, our main heroes are Ilias and Panagiotis. The lovers' affair ensues, by showing Ilias caressing Panagiotis' back and lips, with the camera zooming in on this act of intimacy. The sensual snapshots highlight and fetishize male beauty.

But Ilias' declaring of his infatuation with Panagiotis is followed up by Panagiotis asking him "why can't you be a transvestite?" and telling him that he is only staying in the city for a few days. The scene that follows shows Ilias bending the codes of masculinity by putting on lipstick:

*Panagiotis: What's up, man? Are you Albanian?*

*Ilias: Like me now?*

*P: You're not a chick.*

*(scene changes, showing Ilias putting on socks and talking to the camera)*

*I: It's not that he wanted me to be a woman. This way it was easier for him to get with men. His real desire.*



*Figure 3.1.1: Ilias caresses Panagiotis*



*Figure 3.1.2: Ilias tries lipstick on*

Ilias looks at himself in the mirror with lipstick on, seeming to consider his image this way. He reiterates “love demands sacrifice”, hinting at the fact that he would compromise if Panagiotis asked him to wear it, not minding to shed his masculine identity, to attempt different gender expressions for the sake of his lover, if that is what he asked for. In another scene, Panagiotis praises the hero for not being like other “faggots”, telling him he likes and misses him and that he wants to move to America. Life without money and a work permit has difficulties, addressing the migrant problems in the Greek national space.

The love affair, however, does not last for long. Panagiotis disappears, pimps himself to men in the streets of Athens, turning to impersonal queer sexual intercourses which will earn him a living. Queer expression is acceptable there. There is no emotional connection and connotations for one’s sexual identity when it is disguised under the premise of financial strife. Nevertheless, Ilias finds him out late at night, and they end up home together. He wants them to make love, but Panagiotis’ indifferent gaze freezes him in his place. The film slowly comes to a close, learning that the migrant stabbed a man to death, leaving him dead in a bathtub and is soon running away, leaving for America on a ship. Panagiotis asks our hero not to rat him out to the cops and in a manipulative move asks him if he loves him. The scene cuts to a similar close-up of the bathtub, but this time, Ilias is the one drowning in it. The audience can

understand the hurt that he feels in being used, hinting at his own psychological death in the hands, or rather, the words of Ilias.

The last scenes are shot in color. Ilias assists Panagiotis in illegally migrating to the US, saying goodbye before he gets on the ship. The camera pans around them as the two embrace in a hug full of desire and longing, conveying everything that the two men can't bring themselves to say out loud. However, the Albanian economic migrant's dream for a better future in the land of opportunities is never fulfilled. An after-credits scene informs the viewers that two men were caught and sent to prison, one in Athens and the other in Crete. No matter the ending, the two lovers do not end up together, being punished for their economic state and their desire to help each other by the Greek state, the one that put them in that position in the first place.

In *A Place in the Sun*, Giannaris does not present social issues of migration, violence and queer desire lightly. He bestows on the subject a political gravity in a fresh way compared to other contemporary cinematic productions which mostly focused on Greek repatriation. Giannaris does so by shedding light on sexual and racial intersections by showing the connections between sex for money, romantic love and a migrant's search for better living conditions. Would their love affair end differently if Panagiotis' illegal status and his precarious existence in the country was not an issue for him? Queer desire is expressed in the aesthetics of an international queer cinema, being linked to internalized homophobia, the struggles of illegal migrants in a rapidly changing, more culturally diverse but deeply conservative Greece.

### **3.2 From the Edge of the City**

His first feature-length attempt after moving back to Greece, and one of his most well-acclaimed pieces of work thus far, happened with *From the Edge of the City*.<sup>15</sup> Initially starting as a documentary and evolving into a narrative film, this project centres around an ethnic Greek minority youth, the Pontian-Greeks who were displaced because of the minority policies of Stalin and settled to Greece after 1985, as the Greek state awarded them with full citizenship based on the strong ethno-cultural bonds with the minority. Originally from Sohum in the former Soviet Union

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<sup>15</sup> The film was highly regarded by critics and audiences alike. It received the second place for Best Feature Film at the 1998 Thessaloniki Festival, only a few votes behind Angelopoulos's *Eternity and a Day* (both films discussing immigrant lives in Greece from different perspectives). It also won the Best Greek Film and Best Direction awards (Mini, 2006, p. 216)



and now living in Menidi, in the ghettos of Athens, they go into pimping, gambling, and construction jobs to make a living, coming into contact with Greeks solely for illegal or low-paying jobs. They work and interact in a city in transition, in landscapes of urban stratification, like Omonoia, Vouliagmeni and the northern suburbs of Athens (Kiriakos, p. 256)

Giannaris' camera drops the audience into the frantic world of the film from the get-go. With fast motion cinematography and dynamic club music, we are introduced to 17-year old Sasha and his friends, as the group roams the streets of Athens at night, attempting to steal a car. Throughout the film, the camera shows them taking drugs, selling their body to wealthy female and male clients, getting into fights with each other, and making easy money. As viewers, we can construct the boys' worldview and their characterization in the film, seeming to abide by the norms that masculinity requests. For instance, they might have sex with men, but they differentiate themselves from "faggots", or at least Sasha does; they have to be insertive, the "tops" in sexual intercourse, as to top is to take the more traditionally masculine and dominant position, assuming the role that they would take in a heterosexual affair. It becomes a point of disagreement in a scene between Sasha and his friend, Panagiotis:

*Sasha: [Nikos] told me that you're a good boy.*

*Panagiotis: Don't they say the same for you? Why don't you get fucked? I ate dick and got 40.000 drachmas. Good little day's work.*

*S: You're a hustler, not a faggot to be fucked.*

*P: Get off of me. You either fuck or get fucked. Isn't it the same for you?*

*S: The faggots will prey on you.*

*P: Nikos is not like the others.*

*Sasha: You fell for him, huh? Hard.*

Both Sasha and Panagiotis have the wealthy Greek Nikos as a customer, but the second boy has fallen for him, allowing himself to enjoy sexual intercourse in a different way than a male sex worker having sex with men should. Echoing Butler's terms about gender performativity, these young men strive to maintain their manhood, to fit the hyper-masculine expectations of their underground culture. They decline to

be thought of as queer despite engaging in queer relationships or criticize men who do so, be it while working in brothels and Omonia, or the upper-class world of Glyfada. These contradictory efforts for consolidating their sexual identity is one of the core issues running throughout the film, seeing them trying to fit in the sexual and ethno-national categories of the Greek state.

It is important to note that the mixing of narrative techniques that Giannaris employs also comments on the struggle for self-identification. Firstly, the director assigns most of the main roles not to actors, but real Pontian Greek migrants with little to no acting experience. He even goes as far as keeping some of the boys' real names for the characters. Giannaris describes a broad spectrum of queer behaviors, focusing on Sasha's friendgroup, but also extending it to Gioura, the boxer who is shown half-naked in gym and boxing locker rooms in scenes of everyday action and, other times, in a ritual-like fight between shirtless male bodies; the director who seems exasperated by Sasha's answers about male prostitution (Kiriakos, 2016, p. 256)<sup>16</sup>. Choosing amateur actors who worked as dancers in Athenian nightclubs translate to a focus on the actors' physique and possibly seeks the reinforcement of the fetishization of their bodies. After all, a dancer and a boxer both fully identify with their bodies and ascribe to it much greater value than it is originally imbued with (Oates, 1985; Wacquant, 2004); the teenagers create the conditions for their pimping and try to keep up with the physique that a masculine body is conditioned to have, according to how gender and sexuality are formulated in very specific ways (Pessar and Mahler, p. 814).

The employment of underground and amateur actors, the boys' clear awkward line delivery, coupled with the fact that the action in the film is interrupted by interviews of Sasha, played by Stathis Papadopoulos, blurs the lines between fiction and documentary film, cinema and reality. In the interviews, Sasha always looks directly at the camera and converses with an interviewer whose face we never see, the voice of Giannaris himself. Through the inserted excerpts we learn about the protagonist's past and Greek present. They talk about Nikos, the male client who is enamored with him and who Sasha fucks, but "is never fucked by". Sasha describes the quiet family life

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<sup>16</sup> In most occasions in the film, young males are represented as shirtless teenagers with tight jeans and athletic and flexible bodies. They showcase their abs at construction sites, whilst in plenty of instances, their svelte bodies are reflected in glass surfaces.

he lives and discusses why he never became literate like his dad did back in Kazakhstan, but shots of his father beating him up are interjected, when he learns that Sasha has stopped working in construction. The audience learns the truth, with the interviews and the narrative being able to convey the character's full story. In addition, he talks about with the interviewer the disgust he feels when gay men think he is one of them. About him becoming a dancer, after the army, so that "all of this can stop". Or about if he could ever fall in love, with the boy never actually providing an answer.



Figure 3.2.1: Sasha, tightly framed, being interviewed



Figure 3.2.2: Giorgos washing Sasha in the showers of the boxing gym

As a result, a pseudo *cinéma vérité*<sup>17</sup> is created, because the characters are trying to work out their identity for the multiple gazes in the process of cinematic representation; the looking gaze reproduced by the camera and the gaze embodied by the clients and peers of the protagonists (Papanikolaou, 2008, pp. 186-187). The combination and blurring of these gazes create the feeling that these people are trying to negotiate who they are, by looking and being looked at both narratively and cinematically. For example, the camera takes an active role and the docudrama aspect of the film is highlighted in a scene where Sasha is hit on by a couple in the bathroom of a nightclub, while sniffing drugs together. The man comes closer and seductively caresses his cheek, hinting at a proposal for a threesome. In that moment, Sasha turns around and knowingly stares at the camera, as if the camera or the hidden interviewer is there, becoming another character in the film. In another scene, Sasha and his friend Giorgos are hanging out in the showers of a gym, discussing the arrangements for Natasha's trafficking deal, who the protagonist slowly falls in love with. Giorgos suddenly approaches and starts scrubbing Sasha's back, with the camera focusing in

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<sup>17</sup> *Cinéma vérité*, or cinema of truth, is a French style of documentary filmmaking originating from the 1960s, which shows unscripted, every-day situations with authentic dialogues by non-actors, with the filmmaker observing rather than directing the narrative.

close-up shots on their naked bodies, their feet and the dripping water. It makes the male bodies the subjects of visual pleasure, akin to the dynamics observed in homoerotic pornography.

Therefore, through the mixing of the narration and the interviews, the use of camera and the blurring of fiction and reality, the audience can gather information and piece together the stories about immigrant exclusion, repatriation and the historical Greek context. We learn that Sasha and his family moved from Kazakhstan when the hero was ten, linking it to the ethnic Greek diaspora of the Soviet Union, which returned to Greece after the dissolution. We are shown their home in Menidi, one of the suburbs where the minority group presence was strong at the time.

Language also plays a significant role here and represents one of the issues resulting in the social isolation of migrants. In the film, Anestis, one of Sasha's friends, cries out "How can you be something when you don't speak the language?", seeing as he understands but cannot speak Greek. He feels out of place, not finding a place for him in what was supposed to be his lost homeland. His way of coping with reality, with his existence in "the edge of the city", is the injection of drugs in his system. While almost every boy of the group experiments with weed or cocaine, Anestis's alienation and risk-taking proved fatal. Similar sentiments are echoed in another scene where Sasha and Natashas are in a taxi on their way to Menidi, in order to escape from Giorgos and his plan to sell Natasha to a trafficking ring. A short scene of young boys is shown, running happily in a golden field, with the audience inferring that these are idealic Kazakhstani images. Seconds later, in a short-lived joyful moment of the couple speaking in Russian about how the girl will meet the male hero's parents, the taxi driver asks them if they speak Albanian. He "is not a racist of course", but the place is full of foreigners. "You can't find a Greek girl to fuck in brothels, they're too expensive" are the echoed sentiments.

Neither his speaking in Russian nor his Greek, in a foreign accent, allow Sasha to blend in. Nostalgia for home and immigration exclusion are accentuated and their confrontation with restructured vectors of oppression and inequality as migrants can be witnessed, as the characters are alienated from the state they are living in, not being seen as a Greek and being ostracized for not succeeding in doing so (in Luibhéid, 2008, p. 170-171). The scene reaches a climax when the taxi driver makes a comment

about Natasha, triggering Sasha to get out of the taxi and beat him down, leaving him on the floor with his face covered with blood. The motives of the act seem to be dual; first, lashing out for hitting on his girl, taking on the masculine role of the protector and second, for viewing them as strangers polluting the Greek national space.

Not only in this specific scene, but in the entirety of the film, Giannaris directly discusses Pontian Greek's past and their Greek present, inviting audiences to consider the group's quest for belonging, the social and cultural issues that affected thousands Pontian migrants in a new "home" that labeled them belittlingly strangers and "Russian-Pontiacs". The director had spoken of the fact in an interview in 1999: "Think of these kids from Kazakhstan.... one foot in Greece, their new homeland, but also their aboriginal land, and the other in their past, Kazakhstan, their country, where they grew up, where their memories were born" (Giannaris in Mini, 2006, p. 222) The Other in Giannaris' cinema is forming interpersonal and subnational communities, but interacts with the local and the realities of having moved in an ethnoscape where they are a victim of racism, a prostitute enjoying gay sex, but body trafficking other prostitutes, working in construction sites, stealing, doing drugs (Appadurai, 2014, pp. 32-34). The director goes against normative storytellings of diaspora and repatriation, according to which Pontic Greeks are integrated in their new land, and separates his queer perspective from contemporary film narratives like *A Touch of Spice* (Boulmetis, 2003) and Angelopoulos' *Eternity and a Day* (Papanikolaou, p. 188-189). His queer migrants attempt to create a unique Kazakhstani subculture in the urban scape of Athens, which goes against the sexual and national Greek identity (Maronitis, 2007, p. 389). Through the narrative and the queer longing gaze of the camera, *From the Edge of the City* portrays migration stories in unexpected ways for the time period, with desire (queer or not) becoming a driving force both for Ilias and Sasha and a vehicle to search for a personal identity and a home where there seems to be none.

### **3.3 Hostage**

In May 1999, Albanian Flamur Pisli hijacked an intercity, nine-passenger bus in a village close to Thessaloniki, while possessing two grenades and a Kalashnikov. Pisli used a hostage's mobile phone and got in touch with the Greek media (and security forces), demanding a ransom of 50 million drachma, three Kalashnikovs that he claimed were planted in his house by the police and unobstructed, free entry to

Albania. He accused the Greek police and some locals of having set him up and wrongly sending him to jail on the account of false weapons possession, assuring that he does not want to harm any bus passengers and that he simply wants to recover his honor. According to Pislis's testimony, while being at the detention centre, he was tortured and sexually assaulted. With the police and Greek media following behind the bus, once the vehicle crossed the Greek-Albanian border, the Albanian police shot Pislis and Giorgos Koulouris, one of the hostages. Despite footage clearly showing the police officer killing the two men, Albanian authorities and the Albanian Telegraphic Agency (ATA) stated that the hijacker was the one who fired and killed Koulouris.

Politically, the incident created tensions between the Greek and Albanian governments, re-instilled the fear of Albanian violence and formed a wave of anti-Albanian, anti-migrant attitude and operations. Greek news outlets covered the incident in a sensational manner, focusing on the death of the Greek hostage, raising the national security threat that migrants posed and pathologizing Pislis, speaking of him being a disturbed individual in the safe haven of Greece. The incident, then, seems to have been used as a validation for the anxiety and dangers of migrant crimes, something corroborated by the fact that the contemporary prime minister Simitis reinforced the border police and started a massive *skoupa* operation and a deportation of illegal Albanian migrants. (Celik, 2015, pp. 76-78)



Figure 3.3.1: Elion's mother learns about the hijacking in Tirana



Figure 3.3.2: Elion sees the bottle in the detention center

*Hostage*, the 2005 documentary drama film by Giannaris, co-produced by a Turkish company, was based on the real-life events of the bus hijacking. To present it realistically, he did archival research and reconstructed the scene from inside the bus based on the chronicles of two hostages. He never uses footage from the actual television news, intending to show what the journalists missed. The handheld camera spends most of its time inside the bus, using deep-focus shots to create the feeling of proximity to the hostages and the protagonist. Our *mise-en-scène* is the moving bus, complimented with documentary-style shots when it shoots outside the bus. The story is complimented with darker-lighted flashbacks of Elion's past in Greece and brighter-lighted scenes in Tirana, giving us access to Elion's personal world and reality.

We can understand what Giannaris has set out to do through the opening titles in the first twenty seconds of the film, where a quote from Sophocles' *Aias* appears: "A man should have a life of honour or die with honour". The director utilizes the ancient myth to talk about Elion's struggle to restore his masculinity and lost honour but is instead stuck between two homelands and two Balkan societies. The *Aias* of this tragedy, as Giannaris explains in an interview in 2004, is an anti-hero living through tremendous historical changes, namely, "the collapse of civilization, borders and myths" (*Ta Nea*, 2004). Elion's own words corroborate this when he speaks with the police to make his requests, saying in a childlike manner that he is good and asking for his honour back for what they did to him.

The film opens with a close-up shot of the protagonist, Elion, laying down on a bed and a monologue of his mother speaking in Albanian. In her letter, she reiterates how she cannot get a Greek visa or illegally cross the borders and asks her son to come home, to get away from the "foreign country that devours you down to the bone". The

camera pans to Elion working out, zooming in on his naked body parts in the shower. They never show his full body, with the extreme close-ups suggesting a state of claustrophobia and imprisonment. Simultaneously, through his mother's voice, we learn about his family, about how his brothers have already relocated to Italy. She has saved money for an unknown man named Florian to transfer them to Italy, finally giving them the chance to be together. In the first minutes, we are already getting personal with our main character, we have learned about his psyche and motive, about his version of reality, before he quickly exits the door and quickly heads to the intercity bus. Anxiously looking around, the camera sees what he sees, as he takes a seat in the back of the bus. The predominantly Greek passengers chatter and sing, while workers outside harvest crops in the torching sun. In that moment, Elion stands up holding a rifle and a grenade asking for the bus to stop and go back to the village, unraveling the main events of the story. The feeling of claustrophobia continues as the bus forces the camera to shoot everything in close-up shots, showing us his interactions with the hostages, but almost always keeping Elion in frame.

Elion, similar to Aias, is isolated and ridiculed. Often times he feels more like victim than the perpetrator, as he stutters, showing glimpses of what his tragic back-story entails, hinting at his sexual abuse (“these that cannot be said”, “they did what you do not do to a man”, “no one will ever fuck me up again”). In contradiction with the recounting of the real events, in flashbacks, we learn the truth. In the final flashback of the film before his execution in Albania, Elion is raped in the detention center by police officers. They interrogate him about the Kalashnikovs and insists that a policeman set him up, because of the affair Elion had with his wife. The motive becomes clear when the men say:

*Police officer 1: “Nothing good can come from this. Fucking a guy’s wife is bad enough, but fucking his wife and being a foreigner and all, it’s...*

*Police officer 2: Like cutting the guy’s dick off in his own home. Are you thirsty? (to Elion) Want a soft drink? There is regular and light.*

*Elion: Regular.”*

Elion is punished for having the audacity to have an affair with a police officer's wife, while being a migrant. In that way, Elion has emasculated or metaphorically castrated



the character that is associated with an oppressive, overwhelmingly masculine institution that often enacts violent acts on non-Greek citizens.

After that, the guards come back with a bottle, the instrument of rape, as if to win the power back, setting the scene with an aerial shot of the interrogation room. During the act, all the audience sees is Elion's face, protecting his privacy and highlighting his struggle, showing him screaming in pain. The audience is meant to feel for the subjective suffering of Elion through the affective power of the scene, materialized by the image of the instrument of rape (Scarry in Celik, 2015, pp. 86-87). The same happens with the seven hostages who get to know Elion throughout their journey, view the burns on his naked body, even supporting him to the police: "Elion just wants to go home. He wants to say what he went through". They understand Elion's motives, leading them to open up about their own sufferings: drug addicts, black people. His face in the rape scene and his background story showcases that simultaneously with the violence that Elion enacts, violence has been enacted on him.

The violence perpetrated on the migrant's body and the results of it are some of the core topics of the film. Elion's pain, his conflict with the police and the media become a mirror for the violence and hostility of the Greek state. The police decide to rape him, when they realize that he has crossed the borders illegally, but perhaps most importantly, because he has "symbolically violated the national border" by having sex with a married Greek woman, the wife of one of their own, of an officer of the state (p. 87). Giannaris dramatizes a violent media event and manages to replicate the violence of the hijacker, the police, the society, symbolizing how the sensationalized telling of border crossings in the media dehumanize and violate the migrant's body to preserve the purity of the Greek state.<sup>18</sup> All that is supported cinematically by the tragic ending of the film. The bus reaches Albania, and as Elion and his mother finally reunite, she screams in agony for her boy to come out of the bus. "Nothing will happen to you. They gave me their word" she promises to him, and Elion is suddenly shot to the heart<sup>19</sup>. Elion is a representation of the "dangerous Albanian" who crosses

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<sup>18</sup> "My intention is neither anti-Greek nor anti-Albanian. I was interested in showing the personal tragedy of a person who lives through momentous historical changes: the collapse of civilisations, borders, and myths. It is not a film about an Albanian, but about Greece". Interview of Giannaris to E. Kanellis. (in Kiriakos, 2018, p. 242)

<sup>19</sup> Elion's murder by police is foreshadowed in an earlier scene of the mother being driven by an Albanian police officer, where they talk about how the Greeks always shoot, they never ask. He

the border illegally (Reineri in Vermeulen et al, 2015 p. 19). so when he does so, he is killed in his homeland by Albanians, tasked by Greek police.

*Hostage* draws on the road movie genre, by being shot inside a bus. It is used as a site of transnational migration between Albania and Greece and discusses national and sexual identities. By the end, the film's cinematic narrative raises questions about relationships between men, transnational and national state violence, Greece's deportation policies and relations with Albania. It shows Elion existing between two places, that of expulsion and reception, with the hijacking producing ethnic categories of "us" and "them" and representing a transnational practice as an escape from the established categories of nation, class or gender (Papailias, 2003, p. 1063). Elion's story, and Elion and Koulouris's "national deaths" worked as an allegory for the contemporary experience of Albanian migrants in Greece and the exploitative relationship of Albania with Albanian migrant workers, such as the legal and cultural necessities for acquiring citizenship and the asymmetries that the institutional violence in the Balkans created (pp. 1060-1070).

Greek and Albanian audiences regarded the movie as a dramatic re-enactment of the incident, rather than a fictional story. What made matters worse was that it centered on the death of the migrant, instead of foregrounding the point of view of the murdered Greek hostage and the national security concerns that this supposed danger of the migrant criminal, like Greek news media did at the time. It led to a huge outcry from ultranationalists who protested outside the cinemas to oppose the film, together with the father of the murdered hostage Koulouris, and/or left bomb threats in some cinemas (Pappas, 2013). The unforgiving portrayal of the Greek state as a racist and patriarchal nation made the film a box office failure, gathering 50.100\$, despite its success in film festivals, as its Greek theatrical release was cut short very quickly (Phillis, 2017, p. 14). Giannaris has admitted in an interview the negative comments he received for focusing on an Albanian's point of view: "*Hostage* had a personal cost. My longtime relationships with friends and coworkers dissolved because they could not confront the theme with the earnestness I expected. They told me

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declares: "the prisons are full of Albanians. In order to pass the borders, they have to fuck you up first", hinting at the ending of the film.

disdainfully: “C’mon, you will make a film about an Albanian?” ... And we are talking about progressive, intellectual people” (Celik, 2015, p. 81).

To conclude, Giannaris’ filmic subjects in all three films exist in the center of multiple conflicts and negotiations. They clash with each other and their previous stable sexual identity when trying to negotiate their queer desire. The migrant forms relations with the locals, but ultimately clashes and is violated by state authorities, as they are suspended between past and current homelands. The queer migrant might have already crossed the border of the nation-state, but still, within the Greek cityscape, is allowed to exist in the periphery. By conceptualizing the migrant as a “border subject”, placing him in between geographical and/or symbolic borders, which serve as a physical and metaphorical space of otherness, as Hamid Nacify discusses in *Accented Cinema*, the film-maker aims to take a critical stance against these mechanisms of violence. Using Papanikolaou’s notion of the “queered space-off”, I propose that throughout the queering of dominant migrant motifs, narratives and behaviors, the films depict Greece as a new queer space, challenging conventional notions and destabilizing the perceived solidity of national identity, ethnic belonging and gender roles (2008, pp. 184-185). The characters exist both in the periphery, in the suburbs of Menidi, in closed-off and hidden spaces like brothels and dark rooms, but venture out in the public realm too, in Omonoia square or by seizing control of an entire bus, making hidden queer pasts of Greek culture visible and offering new ways to interpret migrant stories.

#### **Chapter 4: Longing for queer love and ethnic belonging in Serbian film representations**

Between 1995 and 2005, former-Yugoslav states released major feature films which were considered the first gay films of said countries. As mentioned in previous chapters, in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, countries freshly establishing themselves after inter-ethnic conflicts, straight directors and screenwriters created works tackling homosexuality, which were vastly successful with mainstream audiences, but, interestingly, not with local queer communities (Moss, p. 2012, p. 352). With homosexuality being decriminalized in the same time period, are these films steps towards increasing acceptance of queerness, an attempt to follow the footsteps of Western Europe’s cinematic productions in the tackling of the subject

matter, or something else entirely? This chapter will focus on cinematic productions of Serbia, namely, 1995 *Marble Ass* by Zelimir Zilnik and the 2004 film *Take a Deep Breath* by director Dragan Marinković. With the first in the start and the latter towards the end of the study's time frame, it will be interesting to see how these cinematic productions portray constructions of sexuality and national identity, as the socio-political context is vastly different from that of Greece. Both are facing radical social transformation in the makeup of its communities, with Serbia, however, processing post-war trauma, its transition from a socialist to the capitalist system of a nation-state and massive protests against Milosevic's regime.<sup>20</sup>

#### 4.1 Marble Ass

This 1995 production first premiered at the Berlin Film Festival, receiving the Teddy Award and becoming the first film from former Yugoslavia to openly depict queer lives. It was funded by the profits of Zilnik's most recent film in 1994 *Tito among the Serbs for the Second Time*, but this time the war is the backdrop of the story. The director, spanning works of half a century, began his career by making experimental short films in the 1960s and working as an assistant director in Dušan Makavejev's feature productions, an important director of Yugoslav Black Wave. In the late 1960s and 1970s, Yugoslav film studios were regionalized. In contrast to other Eastern European countries, Serbian productions were not located in capital cities, but in various different republics (Mazierska, 2013, p. 136). Its filmmakers then were self-managed and had much less financial freedom than the rest of Eastern Europe, but much more political freedom, despite the existence of censorship. Thus, Yugoslavia's Black Wave was characterized by extended independence and an opposition to the state-funded and conformist Partisan Films. Black Wave films blurred the lines

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<sup>20</sup> Slobodan Milosevic gained power in Serbia in the late 1980s, becoming its president in the aftermath of the rise of nationalism in the nation-state. Following the advent of the first multi-party elections and the breakup of nation-states, political dynamics shifted towards an emphasis on ethnic identity, rather than personal political agendas (Calic, 2019, pp. 273-281). Milosevic capitalized on Serb national interests, like the perceived threat to the Serbian minority in Croatia, invoking the legacy of the notorious Ustasha regime from World War II. Exploiting ethnonationalism, he mobilized the Yugoslav National Army and Serbian minorities of Bosnia and Croatia, leading offensives in the early 1990s that plunged the post-Yugoslav space into conflict marked by war atrocities, including rape, genocide and ethnic cleansing. Needless to say that not everyone was enthralled by the myths and nationalist propaganda that Milosevic used, many people having a double identity, being Croatian, Serb or Macedonian, and simultaneously Yugoslav, but his actions brought economic hardships and negative portrayals of Serbian society in international media. Protests and demonstrations were held by trade unions, women's and youth organizations in 1990, as well as in the winter of 1996 and 1997, when student and civil protests (with participants reaching up to 550.000 in total) (Prosic-Dvornic, 1998, p. 120). A few months after the end of the protests, Milosevic would resign from office, only to become the president of the Republic of Yugoslavia, from 1997 to 2000.

between documentary and feature film much more, as filmmakers switched to hybrid filmmaking forms when they could not find sufficient funding. They shot on location, employed amateur actors to play themselves and utilized documentary styles by having people look into the camera (p. 136-137).

Zilnik had an extensive career in film, spanning across countries, as his award-winning *Early Works* was banned for challenging dominant Yugoslav nationalist ideologies and the director was forced to emigrate to Germany to be creatively and politically independent. He made a series of documentaries about migrant workers and Germany's history there, only to come back to Yugoslavia in the 1970s, when he worked in documentary production<sup>21</sup> and television, where funding allowed far more artistic options (p. 143). From the 80s, he made his comeback to fiction films, but the breakup of Yugoslavia resulted in strict controls from the neoliberal regime and cut-down production budgets. Despite everything, Zilnik continued to make an independent cinema that is authoritative and politically engaged (p. 142), through the creation of the docufictional *Marble Ass*.

It centers around a male to female transgender woman, Merlin, who works as a prostitute. She is the first character the audience sees, laying naked in an outside bed, with a friend of hers, Sanela, massaging her with oil. The sexual nature of the film is presented from the start, with a close-up shot of Merlin's backside being caressed. She speaks with her about the weapons a woman can have and how dangerous it is to own a knife or a gun, as it is not worth it to spend one's life in prison over a man. In another scene, shortly after, Merlin is working in the streets of the Belgrade with two other trans sex workers, her place of work for the past five years. The scene is contradicted with shots of a man running. Is he running to or from something? He is then seen in the back of the car, ripping a car seat open with a knife and hiding a gun inside. In the first few minutes, weapons are mentioned and seen twice, asking the audience to keep their role in the film in the back of their minds.

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<sup>21</sup> A great example of the limited funding with which Zilnik created his films is the production of *Intentory* (1975), about a group of people living in one apartment bloc. He critiques the assimilation of foreigners from Greece, Turkey and Yugoslavia in 1970s Germany. The adult actors he employed were paid with bottles of beer and children were given soft drinks, while several members of the crew participated in the film for free, with the hopes of being paid with the revenue the movie would make after its release (Mazierska, p. 141).

The man is revealed to be Johnny, Merlinka's ex boyfriend who returns from war. He is an angry, aggressive man obsessed with the war and making money. He moves into Merlin's house and scams by cheating at pool to make a living. They live in the same house, but view the world from different sides. Merlin is a pacifist, against the war, caring for magazines, makeup, making love for money and looking young. She constantly rejects Johnny's violent nature, telling him to put himself together as this isn't the war, when he pulls a gun on her. Merlin and Sanela's world is one of elevated eroticism and domesticity, abiding by codes of femininity, in contrast to Johnny's violent hyper-masculine nature. The only time in the film where one of the girls handles a weapon is when Salena takes Johnny's bow and decides to put it up on the wall as decoration or give it to her future son play with. A tool of brutality and violence is re-envisaged, being given a more feminine-like quality, being "queered" by Salena.

Transgenderism is a running theme in the film, but is never contested. Merlin and Sanela discuss the latter girl's plans to transition and her future consultation with a doctor. When Ruza, a biological woman who knew Merlin when she was going by the



*Figure 4.1.1: Merlin teaches Ruza how to put on a condom*



*Figure 4.1.2: Johnny cries in the arms of Merlin and Salena*

name of Dragan, becomes part of the story, she deadnames her, calling her by the name she would use in the past. Merlin is affectionate, lovingly bringing Ruza into her world, showing her how to act as a woman, how to dress and pick up clients. When Ruza reverts back to the domestic role of the housewife by cooking, Merlin uses the rolling pin to show her how to put on a condom, sexualizing a tool used in domestic affairs. The two women reenact sexual intercourse with it with Ruza holding the pin between her legs, pretending to be a man, while Merlin shows her how to act. Therefore, Merlin never denies her feminine side, even when it is being challenged.

In another scene, when Johnny talks about the people he scams, he allegorizes it with the war, with men cutting off their dick, putting on a skirt and calling it a day, a comment that Merlin does not appreciate. She says “if we were to cut off our dicks, I’d be the first to do that” and that “everybody knows I’m not a woman, but this is show business. I’m not gonna get killed for this, but you will”. The heroine is aware of the performative nature of her gender identity. However, the discomfort of the film concerns neither the gender nor the sexuality of the heroine, representing it openly and unapologetically. The wartime ideology, its violence and effects are the point of contestation and problematization for Zilnik.

In gendered terms, Yugoslav feminists named the connection of men with anti-modernity the “new patriarchy” (Blagojevic in Moss, pp. 356-357). Stemming from the wartime ideology in the country, the principles of the patriarchal village were

glorified in the media over modern cosmopolitan values, resulting in a reversal of the Western correlations between nature and woman, culture and man. In contrast, woman is linked to culture and men become natural. Serbian masculinity is linked to machismo, the battle, the rural and the Balkans, while femininities, represented by the trans protagonists in our case, with the urban, civilization and a feminine Europe (p. 357). To be a man, you have to prove yourself through violence and battle; that is the ideology that Johnny represents. To be a man, you have to join the war and whoever does not is labeled a “homosexual” and should “get their bums and asses ready”, a slogan of Serbian soldiers in the 1990s reads (Moss p. 357). Serbian nationality is partly constructed by discourses around sexuality; it is male and heterosexual. Actually, this construction of Serbian sexuality supports Todorova’s Balkanism analysis, with how the West imagines Balkan sexualities as brutal and primitive. The film criticizes this attachment to Serbian nationality, with the two contrasting characters seemingly getting the ending they deserve. Merlin survives and continues her ways, even thinking of finding a boyfriend to move abroad and start a new life, perhaps in Italy where men are “strong, muscular, well-hung and kinky in bed”. They discuss their wish to migrate because of how Belgrade has been filled with enemies, hinting at the millions of migrants from former Yugoslavia who relocated to escape conservative policies and nationalist violence. Johnny is killed with a knife and his body is put on fire on his own pool table. Merlin might be a witness to it, but the only thing she can bring herself to say is “Ah, men” and goes on with her day. Despite it being the death of her ex-lover, she makes fun of the violent and nationalist tendencies of men nonchalantly, not being surprised in the slightest by the climactic and inhumane turn it has taken.

The docufictional narrative of the film should be mentioned. The film exists because of the accidental meeting between the trans actor who stars in the film, Merlinka, and the director, one night on a train station in Belgrade. Merlinka approached the director, asking him to spend time with her, but declined as he was waiting for his train to arrive. She revealed herself to be someone the director knew in the name of Vjeran Miladinović, an actor whom Zilnik had worked with in 1986 for the film



*Pretty Women Walking Through the City*<sup>22</sup>. Merlinka took him to meet her trans and gay group of friends and fellow sex workers at a nearby cafe.

What sparked the creation of the film is a comment Merlinka made: “Belgrade is so crazy these days that we are now the most normal people in Belgrade” (BBC, 2022). Zilnik echoed the same sentiments, showing that in the midst of the boiling obsession of Serbian men with violence and the war, Merlin and her friends were the most normal of them all; hence, he chose to shoot a film to reverse the Yugoslav “new patriarchy” and critique the militant and patriarchal Milošević regime, where warring is unconventional and the sensual and filled-with-love world of Merlinka and her friends is the alternative, the hope for Serbia’s restoration (Prejdová) It started with the idea of creating a documentary in which the director would secretly film her interactions with clients. In one of these filmings, in which Zilnik and his cameraman were shooting behind a car, they made an accidental noise. The customer turned around with a gun in his hand and starting to shoot at their direction. A big percentage of Merlinka’s clientele consisted of gangsters and individuals with political connections, who would be opposed to the recording of activities deemed unpatriotic and going against Serbian nation’s ideals. Thus, the documentary was changed to a narrative film very loosely based on an actual script. It tells a fictionalized story of Merlinka and her friend, hinting at its previous documentary structure by keeping the heroine’s name the same. The film takes an anti-war and anti-nationalist stance, subverting the idea of what identity should be deemed natural and normal. By constantly representing the trans sex workers’ performative and constructed nature of their own gender, willing to showcase and embody it unashamedly, every portrayal of a fixed gender, national or ethnic identity is destabilized.

“We had a feeling that we were somehow helping some niche of free expression” the director says in an interview discussing the reception of the film and the challenges of making it, finding it difficult to even find Beta cameras to shoot during the war (BBC, 2022). In the premiere of the film, there was an atmosphere of anger with some audience members shouting “lie, that is not Belgrade” and throwing eggs. Zilnik asked for trans, lesbian and gay attendees to come on the stage, with around 400

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<sup>22</sup> Merlinka’s life sadly ended in 2003, when she was assaulted and killed in Belgrade, and no one has still been charged for her murder, making her the victim of transgender and gender non-conforming violence. The Merlinka film festival was created in her honor in 2009. (BBC, 2022)

people getting on, overturning the initial negativity and witnessing the support of the film by the Serbian queer community.

Instead of the homophobic narratives of his time, Zilnik creates a film with positive representations of non-normative identities. The playful energy of the trans characters and their camp style, the unapologetic showing of sex work and the satire of war-obsessed and ethno-nationalist ideologies subverts the ideas of what a natural Serbian and sexual identity is. The film can be interpreted as being anti-nationalist, as despite the setting in urban Belgrade and the ongoing war in Bosnia, the director creates a space where ethnic hatred and hegemonic culture are weakened, and non-normative identities and shameless sexual intimacy thrive in film. The fate of the actress Merlinka, the murder of the first trans woman to live publicly in Serbia a few years after the release of the film, shatters the idyllic state of the trans protagonist at the end of the film. Unbeknownst to both, perhaps Zilnik created for Merlinka a fictional world and a normalcy that she did not manage to have in actual life. In Zilnik's words, Merlinka and him were the only normal ones in the country and potentially that is the normalcy that he strived to create for her in the film, something that the crazy and suffocating time of the war and the transphobia in Yugoslavia could not provide (Vijesti, 2021).

#### **4.2 Take a Deep Breath**

Nine years later, the first lesbian film of the country is released, directed by Dragan Marinković. *Take a Deep Breath* was promoted to audiences as being “the first Serbian LGBT feature film”, even if the director viewed the generational gap in modern family dynamics being its core issue and did not view his creation as a lesbian film (Moss, 2012, p. 366). Perhaps the spectacular and out-there feeling that the slogan gives could work better to collect audiences in the theatres, however it should be mentioned that the film was not popular with queers in the country. According to the director's words, the film lacks politics and is an “urban tale”, with “urban” being interpreted as “modern” and “Europe” when it comes to Serbian values (Blagojevic in Moss, p. 365). Indeed the film shows no war. Its premise is that Sasa, still studying Law in university, informs her parents that she and her boyfriend are planning to migrate to Canada. Her father, Milos, is a conservative judge, who interrogates Stefan, while her mother, Lila disapproves of her daughter's rushed decision. The relationship

between the family members is tense, the parents find nothing to say to convince the rebellious and stubborn Sasha.

That same night, though, the couple gets into a serious car accident. They both wake up in the hospital, and that is where Sasa meets Stefan's sister, who has come home from working as a photographer in Paris to take care of her brother. She wakes up from the flashes of her camera taking a picture of her. While Sasa is alright and permitted to leave, Stefan has to stay in hospital to recover. Going back home to rest, the camera pans to Sasa's body and ends up in a tightly-framed shot of her sleeping while tightly hugging a book about Canada, as if, no matter if she is awake or not, the character still clings to her dream of leaving, despite the unfortunate obstacle. Canada encapsulates all her imaginations of what the West is and has to offer. In a later scene, with the couple laying in the hospital bed, they go through the book together, looking at pictures of what their future in faraway land will look like.

The girls leave the hospital together and get to know each other, discussing their family dynamics and proclaiming how both do not feel like they belong with them, with the old, crazy generation. After leaving Lana, she faces consecutive revelations about her family's secrets. She runs into her mother in the arms of another man, realizing that she has an affair, while right after that, the camera shows Milos clutching his heart and falling down from exhaustion. This is how Sasa learns about her father's health problem, the heart murmur that the doctor found. Lila's secret is revealed to her father too, because of the two women coming to head, when Sasa confronts her. Her family is a constant chaotic element in the heroine's life.

Later, the girls get more intimate. Lana reveals how she was molested by one of her mother's boyfriends, when she was eleven. They lay down on the couch, Lana revealing that Sasa is the only one of Stefan's girlfriends that is her type or how Sasa seems like she wants to be seduced. The erotic atmosphere of the scene is heightened. The girls take off their clothes to clean the running water coming from the bathtub, only to get in it afterwards. It feels almost pornographic in the way it is shot, as the girls get closer, the camera does the same, with the girls reaching each other inches away from kissing and the camera objectifying their bodies.

The girls spend more time together. They go out clubbing, where Lana sings to Sasa. In that moment, a look of realization appears on Lana's face, acknowledging the way

she feels. At the end of the night, they go back to her place, where they kiss for the first time. Again, there are slow-panning shots of their naked bodies, seeing a Sasa that feels the passion that she previously claimed to not believe in in her relationship with Stefan. In the morning, Lana is in the kitchen, when Milos comes in, feeling confused by who she is. She presents herself as “Lana, Sasha’s girlfriend”.

Sasa is furious by Lana having outed her to her father, revealing not just that she is cheating, but the fact that it is with a woman. The dialogue that ensues is full of spite, anger and panic, in which Sasa denies her non-traditional sexual identity:

*Sasha: This is not Paris, Lana. We don't tell our parents who we fucked the previous night.*

*Lana: If you did, maybe you wouldn't be so fucked up. Maybe your folks would still be together.*

*S: Leave my parents alone. You don't know me, and you can't talk to me like that.*

*S: I am Stefan's girlfriend, okay? And I am not gay, do you understand?*

*L: Then you have perfectly faked that orgasm last night. Call me when you are not mad anymore.*

Sasa’s reiteration of being with Stefan, making it impossible for her being gay is directed to Lana, but perhaps also, to herself. Belgrade is not the city for one’s sexual liberation. You have to adhere to the codes of sexuality that the country and your family supports. Milos slaps her, saying that he will fix her and that everyone will respect him. He feels as if he has lost control of his family and he is desperate to bring normalcy again, have everything be like it was. Where will Sasa go without any degree and support from him? “I will start breathing” is what she replies. She wants to get away from the reigns of her father and her family’s chaos. Nevertheless, she does not shy away from going after what she wants. She reveals everything to Stefan and later on, to her mother and she unapologetically continues her relationship with Lana. Her mother is leaving, relocating to Vienna with Sinisa to build a life for herself. Sasa’s coming out to her mother is far more accepting and loving. Lila professes an

intimate moment she had with one of her gymnastics friends when she was young, wondering what could have been, if she hadn't pulled her hand away.



*Figure 4.2.1: Lana sleeps with a travel book about Canada in her arms*



*Figure 4.2.2: Milos peeps at a naked male body in the gym showers*

Simultaneously, Milos bumps into a man from his past. Mickey knows him from their time together at an orphanage. A tattoo on the man's arm sends Milos back in the past he was hiding. Through a flashback, we see a young Milos who is being approached sexually by teenager Mickey. The film insinuates at what followed, but does not show it, protecting the character's privacy. After the meeting, there is a scene of Milos in the communal showers. He seems to be in disarray, as he secretly looks at Zoran's naked body while he showers, hinting at the father's possible homosexual desires he has suppressed. Not being able to withstand everything, the destruction of his family, the trauma of being sexually assaulted, his wondering homosexual thoughts, he finds it difficult to breathe and falls down. The effects of the pills he has been abusing for months to get Lila's attention are finally shown.

According to Moss, male rape is a powerful symbol in the local Balkan constructions of masculinity. He sites Borneman's anthropological study of traditional masculinity in Mediterranean villages, where men will "top" but never penetrated themselves in anal sex, in fear of being feminized and actually feeling pleasure from the act (2012, p. 358). It is thus a heterosexual desire to penetrate, not a homosexual fantasy, that differentiates themselves from the man being penetrated. Male sexual violence was actually also performed in prison camps. During the act, prisoners or family members of the victims were there to witness the act and the homosexualized status of the victim and at times, guards and family members or prisoners have sex with each other to heighten the stigmatization from the act (Zarkov in Moss). How can Milos come to terms with his sexual assault, then, if that means him having to not only embrace his trauma, but his homosexualized and feminized position in the exchange?

Will the girls have a happy ending, despite all the hardships and Stefan being in the middle? Apparently not, as Lana comes to terms with how complicated their relationship is and breaks up with Sasa. Milos, seeing how much he has suffered because of a queer desire he never acted upon, wanted to protect his daughter by sending Lana away, in order for her not to go down the same tragic course of self alienation, of feeling estranged from her own sexual identity.

In the end, almost every character ends up alone. Lana, the only exclusively lesbian character is sent back to Paris and Sasa, the queer protagonist of the story is stranded in Belgrade, with her father having passed away and the rest of her loved ones (her mother, her friend and ex-boyfriend) having left, looking for something better outside of Serbia.

Does the film take a critical, political stance on queer sexuality or migration? It seems to avoid making political comments. The two women are the only queer characters in the film, but never call themselves gay, bisexual or queer, even going as far as denying it. There is no evidence of a lesbian or gay community, and the director often shoots the girls in their moment of intimacy in a hyper-sexual way, playing erotic music in the background. In addition, the heroine, whose wish was to migrate away, breaking free from the reigns of her family, is the only character who stays, being stranded and left alone by the end of the plot, as if the film ostracizes her for her non-conforming sexual identity. When the queer characters of the film do not get a happy ending and instead are sent away or isolated by the end, it seems as if the director's employment of lesbian desire in erotic scenes is more objectification, rather than positive queer depictions. *Take A Deep Breath* is about "not-sexual orientation", just as it is a "not-war" or "not-ethnicity" film (p. 365), as it does not aim to challenge any positions on identity and sexuality, in the way Zilnik does in *Marble Ass*.

Apart from the film's narrative handling of queerness, it should be noted that the actors themselves repeatedly reiterated their straight identity in the media. Diklic, who played Milos commented that all beings are looking for love, no matter which place they end up finding it, but follows it by stressing that he says it as an observer and not a participant (Njezic in Moss, p. 356) Similarly, both the actresses of Sasa and Lana emphasized that they only play lesbian characters, and that it is safer to share a kiss with a girl on screen, as there is no possibility for growing an attraction, as is with

men. The actors aim to distance themselves from any narratives attempting to hypothesize about their sexuality, about being anything other than straight.

To conclude, *Marble Ass* and *Take A Deep Breath* offer very different queer representations. While both include non-normative sexualities which dream of moving away from their oppressive environments, Marinković 's characters are not able to escape the hegemonic culture's expectations. Sasa is left alone, Milos dies when the truths about his possible homosexual tendencies are revealed and Lana is gone, being forced to go back to Paris, a Western city that can accept and embrace queer sexualities better than the Balkan homophobia and misogyny of Belgrade can. On the other hand, Zilnik's film destabilizes the very idea of what both gender and national identity are, creating a safe space for Merlin and Salena to perform their identities and live how they want.

## Chapter 5: Comparisons and conclusions

My dissertation attempted to examine aspects of migration in the Balkan area. It focused on the intersection of migrant narratives with gender and sexual identity categories. The fact that it focused on Greece and Serbia and that its ethnographic field of work became the queer cinematographies of these countries provide an initial pool of information with regards to cinemas that are not often joined and mapped out together, especially when looking at the wider spectrum of international global queer and migrant bibliographies. With the Balkan affiliations of both cinemas, we get a clearer sense of how cultural productions from these regions present the various challenges of migration and displacement, the local discourses of gender and sexuality, which in turn help us bring together the two analytical categories, migration and queerness, to map out the expressions and dynamics between sexual, ethnic, national and cultural belonging.

Apart from looking at how queer cultural productions (de)stabilize dominant national narratives of the regions, the thesis also concerns itself with the role that Eastern cinema can have in how academic work can study queer migration without reenacting colonial and oriental power dynamics and instead approach them ethnographically to understand their specificities and not generalize or reenact West/East dichotomies. Thus, I interpret a specific fraction of the queer cultural history of Serbia and Greece and focus on what the chosen films have to say about being queer and/or a migrant around the 2000s. For example, I make note of the limit in examining only Giannaris' works when it comes to Greek cultural productions, as he was the only one during that time to directly reference the two analytical categories together. This does not mean that other directors did not attempt to portray queer characters or stories of migration.

How do the cinemas of Greece and Serbia compare? The worlds Giannaris recreates are dark storytellings of migration in the political landscape of Greece. Either when he references real events of a bus hijacking by an Albanian immigrant in *Hostage* or semi-fictional narratives of Kazakhstani teenagers in *From the Edge of the City*, the heroes are deeply troubled by their positioning in the country. They are forced to live in the peripheries of the capital and search for low-income illegal jobs to support themselves. They clash with the police, with the media, the border guards and most are violated or punished for it, leading to traffic endings to their stories. Sasha and Elion are killed and Panagiotis is imprisoned for attempting to illegally cross the



Greek borders. Wishing to take a critical stance on the topics he portrays, as Giannaris has mentioned in interviews, he makes statements about the violence and hostility of the Greek state, which might have become at the time a safe haven for migrants from former-Yugoslavia, but attempts to push them on the brinks of society.

However, his characters do not go down without a fight. They try to create a home in their new environment. Sasha and his friends form unique communities in the spaces they occupy; in Menidi, in the brothels they work at or in Omonia square where they pimp themselves and look for customers. Elion wins the sympathy of the Greek hijackers in the bus, who are able to see who he is, despite the intensity of the situation. They might not be accepted ethnically, but the denial of an ethnic belonging is counteracted by the homes they themselves try to form with each other. They also express their homosexual desire, no matter if internalized beliefs around how a man should love and have sex sometimes hold them back. They make love, they fall in love without apologizing for it. They overtake public spaces and “queer” them by using them for coming into contact with other queer men, like public bathrooms, clubs, Omonia square or the docks of a port. The director queers migrant stories and the Greece of his movies by the behaviors of the characters and the longing gaze of his camera, creating a representation of a Greek culture which is influenced and cannot deny its multicultural and non-normative character any longer.

On the contrary, Serbian representations are a bit more inconsistent when compared to the Greek cinematic productions and with each other. Each director seeped their influence on the stories they portrayed. Zilnik’s *Marble Ass* better follows the patterns of Giannaris’ films, where queer existence is portrayed unashamedly and characters are not afraid to show non-normative depictions around love and gender. Merlinka and Salena dress up, wear make-up and express their feminine side, even if other characters might not be used it. They work as sex workers, selling their bodies in the streets of Belgrade, just like Panagiotis, Sasha and his peers work in the streets of Athens. This can help us understand and make some interpretations of the systemic and institutional exclusions trans and migrant individuals face in the Greek and Serbian national contexts and the spaces they are allowed to occupy, resorting to sex work to make ends meet. In addition, Zilnik’s characters are not afraid of being anti-national in a time when Serbia was overruled by patriotic and nationalistic rhetoric. They oppose themselves to ethnic hatred, to wars, to weapons, with the only usage

that they can have being decoration on the wall or to crack an egg. Just like Zilnik's heroines take a stance against the violence of the war, Giannaris' protagonists go against the violence of the Greek state and police, both taking a stance against the local "defensive nationalisms" (Papataxiarchis in Papanikolaou, 2009, p. 258).

We can find more connections between the Greek and Serbian productions. A common element of some of the films is the semi-fictional, docu-drama style of the film, as both *From the Edge of the City* and *Marble Ass* started as documentaries. Giannaris was inspired by the ethnic minority youth of the Pontian-Greeks, assigning the roles to real migrants with little to no acting experience, keeping some of the boys' actual names, while Zilnik's inspiration was Merlinka, the trans actress, and her group of friends because of a random encounter at a train station, also keeping the protagonist's name as is. This narrative technique blurs the lines between fiction and documentary film, creating more realistic stories where the actors can influence the portrayal of these queer and/or migrant characters. Thus, they employ certain documentary elements and realistic aspects, but the worlds the films construct are fictional and, perhaps, an attempt to escape the rapidly changing and suffocating realities of Serbia and Greece. What they also seem to agree on is that the characters are all doomed to face tragic or dramatic endings. Be it the imprisonment of Panagiotis and Ilias, the deaths of Sasha and Elion, or the isolation of Sasa in Belgrade with the death or resettlement of her loved ones, the protagonists are either abused by the national states or face the results of the family dynamics, like Milos' disapproval of his daughter's sexuality. Only Merlinka's ending has a more positive outlook for her life, as she remains who she was in the start of the film, deciding to migrate to meet Italian men, bored of the ones in Belgrade.

Is Serbia presented as a "queered space-off", as Greece is? Zilnik's trans characters seem to be doing alright in the community they have built for themselves, unfazed by what the Serbian society dictates. This community, however, exists in a liminal – almost dystopian- space. It is solely lived in the margins, inside the girls' house or in the dark alleyways and brothels where they pimp themselves, away from the public domain. Therefore, they continue to dream of what it would be like to move away from a country that is "full of enemies". Similarly, some of Marinković's characters move away to Western European countries, like Lana and Lila are where they can much more freely express their desires and enjoy "restructured freedoms and

inequalities” (in Luibhéid, 2008, p. 170-171, Mole, 2021, pp. 4-5). Others fantasize what their lives would be like abroad, witnessed in the character of Lana. She remains frozen and immobile in her homeland, even though she dreams of a migration she cannot act upon. Therefore, Zilnik’s Serbia is queered, in how the film’s motifs attempt to destabilize beliefs around gender roles and one’s sense of belonging to the nation, but Marinković’s isn’t, at least not in the way Greece is presented as reshaping the apparent stability of ethnic identification, migrants’ national integration and gender performances.

Overall, the present work attempted to bring together the readings of queer migrant cinema from Greece and Serbia with a consideration of their cultural and political histories, to see if they create a space for and demonstrate possibilities of visibility for queer subjects and migrants, or if they are dulled by the national, gendered and sexualized borders in the Balkan space. What most of these films have in common is an edgy, unashamed representation of queerness and an exploration of the issues of the minorities considered outsiders and outlaws. I propose that Papanikolaou’s employment of the concept “double haunting” can perfectly encapsulate what these films managed to do. In discussing the modern Greek queer history and analyzing a queer film that would come a few years later, *Strella* (2009) by Panos Koutras, he explains that modern cultural texts present individuals who are haunted by the past they strive to embrace and the imminent future that they can construct which has not yet come, through multiple failures and remakings of who they are in a fast-changing Greece (pp. 179-180). The queer and migrant characters I discussed grapple with emotions of longing to be both “here” and “there”, loss and a need for social and cultural belonging in the present, but finding safe and productive spaces for themselves only in the margins. They negotiate their hidden pasts, haunted by their stories in a homeland they miss and the various forms traumatic xenophobic and homophobic violence they face, while imagining about the realities they want make for themselves in the future.

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