

*Film Criticism International: Women, Cinema and Modernity through the Eyes of A Greek Film Critic in the 1920s*

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The subject of this project is the emergence of film criticism in Greece in the mid 1920s. I’ll present to you a part of a larger research project and its provisional conclusions. Here I focus on the woman who introduced it, Iris Scaraveou. My choice was based on the fact that later references to her name and work are hard to find. She even seems to be barely known in the contemporary journalist circles.

The research aims to record all traces left by Scaraveou in the press. Through them, it would be possible:

1. to study her distinct relationship with the cinema of her time
2. to determine her place on the European map of cinema culture
3. to compose a biography of her
4. finally, by using Scaraveou as a point of reference, I also investigate the channels through which the cinephilia travelled from the cultural

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centres to the periphery, from London and Paris to Athens. My purpose at this point is to relate Greek to West European film criticism.

New evidence eventually shifted my original line of questioning. I found out that having started with film reviews, Skaraveou then moved on to journalism and worked on a daily basis for a major Athens newspaper. Consequently, I became interested in collecting evidence and studying the career of a woman as an inter-war journalist. I ascertained that Scaraveou had an extended professional life. Yet, her name is absent from all studies about the history of feminism and the development of female journalism in Greece during that period.

The emerging question is this: Why a woman with such a remarkable career and whose contribution to the history of Greek film criticism is of great importance, is missing from both our collective memory and history? I will attempt to provide a tentative answer to this question.

In Greece, academic interest in the silent era is quite limited and relevant research did not emerge until recently. Western European literature on the subject had already been booming since 1990. There are remarkable studies on film criticism of the 1920's, the magazines concerned, as well as on the women who took an interest in cinema and contributed to both cultivating film criticism and cinephilia in their own special way, like Colette, Iris Barry and the co-editors of *Close up*: H. D. and Bryher. The studies conducted by Leslie Kathleen Hankins, Heidee Wasson and Maggie Humm helped me examine Scaraveou's writing in a different light. Barry, H. D., Bryher, Virginia Woolf, enjoyed a prominent position in the modernist circles of their

times. Through both their writings and their actual participation in different activities in clubs and production of artistic films, or, later on, in their preservation, they contributed immensely to cinema being conceived as a form of art. Ultimately, as Maggie Humm points out, they developed an alternative style of writing about cinema: A kind of writing which is not normative, allowing for the inclusion of elements of personal observation or doubt, making space for the audiences and their reaction, not imposing on them the image of an omniscient film critic. So, based on these conclusions, I will attempt to focus on presenting the Greek paradigm and its correlation with the respective West European context.

When I delved into Iris Barry's track record I was enthralled by the assumption that Iris Scaraveou might have been inspired by her. The initial overtone was the name 'Iris'. Both the first name Iris, and the surname Scaraveou are quite unusual for Greek names. That gave rise to my suspicion that it was a pen name. My hypothesis was confirmed by Aglaia Mitropoulou who, in her *History of Greek Cinema*, claims that it belongs to Elli Inglessi. Mitropoulou, having already linked Iris Scaraveou to Iris Barry by as early as 1980, observes that '...Scaraveou [...] predated Barry's appearance as a critic in 1924 for the *Spectator*'.

So far I haven't been able to find more evidence directly linking the two critics. Nor is there any reference of Scaraveou to Barry, indicating that she knew of her or of her work and used her as a model. Nevertheless, through my research it has become evident that both women, respectively, played an important role in supporting cinema, each one in their own home country. And, as it is the case with Colette, H.D. and Bryer, Scaraveou's perspective

differentiates her from her male colleagues, providing her writing with distinct characteristics that we could call 'feminine'. Like her peers, Scaraveou tried to promote the idea of cinema being a form of art in her country, not just an entertainment commodity.

To me, Iris Scaraveou remains a mystery figure to the present day. If Barry was depicted as 'phantom' in 2004, then this is yet another feature that the two women share, despite the sheer volume and the clarity of the information existing on Barry. I haven't been able to locate any traces left by Scaraveou in the form of an autobiography, diaries or letters. Her texts barely contain any references to herself. My search for trails of kinship related to the surname Inglessi has borne no fruit. Neither have I been able to trace down the particular magazine she used to write for, before 1924, and whose title unfortunately Mitropoulou does not mention.

Scaraveou's earliest work is traced back to the correspondence column of the trade magazine *Kinimatografikos Astrir*. First published in May 1924, the magazine 'intends to upgrade cinema in Greece and rid it of prejudices and misunderstandings surrounding it'. It connects distributors to theatre owners but it actually targets the general public and, definitely, women. It contains articles about the activities and lives—weddings, divorces, deaths- of film stars. New films are presented in the form of narrations or novels in a serial form, along with information concerning the shooting of new films. The pages entitled 'Cinema Week' cover what is taking place in Greek cinema theatres.

Scaraveou appears in the first issues and specializes in interviews with stars. Her first interviews are translations from foreign magazines. She signs some of them using her pen name, while some others, either by another pen name or not signed at all, I assume could be attributed to her judging from the selection of subjects. She translates from English and French while her fondness of French cinema becomes readily apparent.

In the first issue of 1925, about six months after her first articles, an innovation is introduced into the magazine: 'Short Reviews. *La Garçonne* [1923, dir. Armand du Plessy], *Pulcinella* [1925, dir. Gaston Roudès]'. It is her very first attempt to review two films being shown in Athens at the time. Her personal style of reviewing is readily recognizable; she invariably refers to the acting and the actors' performance, without overlooking the *découpage* and the visual composition of scenes, always seeming to be fascinated by what she calls 'realism', a point, among many others, that should be further investigated.

We immediately take notice of the density of her review, commenting:

1. on the literary adaptation
2. on technical matters
3. on the institutional and social response to the films in other countries,
4. on actors and the evolution of their performance from one film to another and over time
5. on the interaction between actors, directors and script writers.

It appears that the critic is informed not only about the films themselves but also about writers and novels. Though she does not consider herself to be qualified enough to write literary reviews, she consistently makes detailed comments on the original literary work being adapted. It becomes obvious that she is an educated young woman who has read widely, has seen lots of films and is continuously informed through foreign magazines, and possibly newspapers. Besides, in her texts there are specific mentions to magazines of the time; the French *Ecran* and *Mon ciné*, the Italian *Cine-fono*, the American *Photoplay*. Her admiration for the avant-garde trends in cinema can be clearly seen from her early texts: She regards *Doctor Caligari* as the 'optimal' film of the actor Konrad Weidt. Even here, the star of the film remains at the centre of her attention; nevertheless, judging from the material presented in the magazine, it may be the case that her readers are mainly interested in film stars and plots of the films. Of course this is not a characteristic typical of audiences or readers of the cinema Press in Athens.

She is particularly fond of the French director Germaine Dulac, whose films as well as professional and artistic development she meticulously keeps track of and records. Dulac is her idol. She emphasizes the symbolism in her films and how lucky she was to have been born in France, in a country where she is honoured by her male colleagues and gender is no obstacle to the recognition of her work.

I'll just mention here that Scaraveou featured in a Greek 1928 film and that she appeared to have written a scenario, which would be directed by Dulac. This involvement with film practice is another common point between her and her Western peers.

Yet another feature linking Scaraveou to the European modern style of writing about cinema is that she chooses to review European films. She regards Hollywood as an industry whose sole target is profit, suppressing artistic vision for the sake of increasing the return on investment. Her preference for European cinematography lies in the quality of the scripts employed: In the US scripts are churned out as the end products of a process resembling an industrialised assembly line, since various specializations are employed. Europeans opt for adaptations, for which they have to pay for copyrights, but, on the other hand, they ensure the publicity that well known plays can entail. A similar view is also shared by Barry when suggesting in her texts ways to improve the quality of British films.

Since 1927 Skaraveou has become regularly concerned with Greek cinema and has been trying more often to persuade Greek playwrights to engage in writing film scripts. Her main concern is how Greece could develop proper production companies, which could eventually lead it to an on-equal-terms contribution within the internationally established framework. Through her first actual intervention she proposes a project for the development of the film production in Greece. Her conviction is that if a reliable production company was to be created it would have to be affiliated with foreign artists. In the years to follow she closely watches the production of Greek films both with optimism and sternness, that is expressed with harsh remarks and conclusions. She often encourages theatre actors to turn to cinema, or sometimes deters them from doing so.

Two more of her writing and professional activities worth noticing. The first one concerns her cooperation with the magazine *Protoporia* [= *Avant-Garde*]

for as long as it was published, from 1929 to 1931, and for which she also writes film reviews. In the same field we can include her contribution to other short-lived magazines, youthful ventures comprising a total of no more than three or four issues each.

The second field of activities concerns her work in the daily nationwide newspaper *I Vradyni*. By as early as 1929, she starts contributing to this newspaper by writing articles not only about cinema, but on many diverse subjects such as social problems or sports, always focusing on women. Most likely she writes the chronography column under a pen name and, at the same time, she keeps interviewing people and reporting not only from Athens but also from Paris and Istanbul. Ultimately, in 1933 she ventures into the publication of a weekly newspaper, only seven issues of which are retrievable.

All the above represent a woman who fought hard to claim a place in Greek journalism and struggled to establish cinema as the newest form of art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Several analogies can be drawn between her and her West European peers. There is, though, a fundamental difference. Her colleagues were able to get support in their ventures: Barry was offered twice the post of a cinema critic, for a literary magazine and for a nationwide daily newspaper of 2 million circulation, by the publishers themselves and she held an on-equal-terms active part in London Film Society. H.D. , Bryer and the other cinéphiles of *Close up* were also members of a wider cinema-oriented society in the midst of which they could get support and help, rope each other in expressing themselves through writing for the public. Nevertheless, their social and financial status should not be underestimated as a factor contributing to this. Colette had already established a place for herself in her

country's literature and was merely adding her interest in cinema to her literary repertoire. The work of all the above mentioned women was encouraged, acknowledged, and widely accepted in circles of similar pursuits in their countries. It was also welcomed by following generations in many ways.

Scaraveou, on the other hand, did not find favour with her contemporaries. Not because she was any less competent, but mainly because she lived, worked and expressed her creativity in an environment in which she was never really accepted. It is a conclusion drawn by the awkward silence kept about her work. The presumed answer to the question 'why she wasn't accepted' rests on her gender, class and pursuits. Just because

1. she was a woman
2. because she pursued and engaged in cinema, which was not yet recognized as a form of art by the contemporary Greek literary elite
3. just because she wrote about cinema –regarded then as an insignificant means of expression
4. and, finally, because she did not seem to have any social links to the upper class, nor did she have any access, apparently, to the intellectual circles which, historically speaking, prevailed and set the literary rules of the times.

Whether there are other reasons ascribing to her invisibility, needs to be further investigated.