(Guilty) Viewing Pleasures and Reality TV: Queer Viewers Decoding the Greek Version of *The Bachelor*

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Introduction

In her 2001 work, 'Studying Reality TV,' Annette Hill asserts "… [R]eality TV is a powerful genre in that it has an ability to make and remake itself within the contemporary entertainment industry."[1] Indeed, reality shows have been staple entertainment for diverse audience groups, and their steadily successful course in the history of the medium points to the ways in which the genre undergoes continuous transformations, embedding different themes, forms, and types of reality shows in its desire to garner new audiences. Yet, despite such permutations, reality television has largely been cast in an unfavorable light. The genre's ostensibly dubious aesthetics and emphasis on superficial topics pertaining to the private domain often place reality programs and their viewers at the bottom of a "moral hierarchy."[2] Furthermore, research conducted across a wide range of disciplines has accused the genre of conveying racist, misogynistic, and homophobic messages while reinforcing heteronormativity, often together with other relationships of domination.[3]

Nevertheless, how power structures in media are perceived at the moment of reception can be subjective. Several scholars working in queer studies postulate that the reality television genre can not only reify heteronormativity but also expose and sabotage its omnipresent institutions. Phillipa Orme, for instance, who has used the eighth season of MTV's reality show *Are you the one?* (2014-) as a case study, has explored how gender- and sexually fluid contestants are represented onscreen. While highlighting reality television's adherence to homonormative and

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couple-centered logics, Orme's article acknowledges "its potential as a documentary form that equally holds the complexity for queer identity."[4]

Similarly, Ava Laura Parsemain employ a queer theory framework to discuss the seemingly incompatible coexistence of queerness and pedagogy in entertainment television. Their monograph, traversing various television program genres, reveals how reality shows can accommodate queerness and allow their audiences to learn about the queer self and the queer other.[5]

Both works, continuing the cultural studies tradition of studying the polysemous qualities of media texts and the meanings made of their content by active audiences, offer exciting insights into the field of gender and sexually diverse television representation.[6] What is worth mentioning, however, is that the concept of reception, as used within this strand of scholarship, is primarily based on researchers' practices of watching and interpreting the texts and not on real audiences.[7] Of course, some notable works take an explicitly queer approach in empirical media research and study the interactions of actual entities with reality programs, but they are limited in number.[8] Even scarcer from this literature is the examination of the affective power of media and the emotional responses in which audiences engage while consuming such texts. Recognising the ideological dimensions of media yet wishing to look beyond them, I probe how audiences interact with texts' content and messages in embodied and affective ways.

The issue of "affective experience" has been studied in a plethora of areas and fields, including cultural studies, psychology, audience, and feminist studies, and generated rich literature that encompasses different aims, approaches, and frameworks.[9] Still, their shared interest in audience engagement with media constructs the latter as "repositories of feelings and

emotions."[10] Misha Kavka suggests that reality television, in particular, constitutes a genre able to foreground "a technology of immediacy, which in turn is experienced as an affect of intimacy."[11] Indeed, various works preceding Kavka's have long concentrated on the television genre highlighting the gratifications and pleasures that different reality programs offer their audiences. For example, Charles McCoy and Roscoe Scarborough's analysis showcases how exposure to reality shows leads viewers to come up with a variety of readings and emotional responses, which may range from expressing complete disapproval and irony to camp and guilty pleasure.[12] Distilling a similar argument, yet within the context of queer audience reception, Andre Cavalcante's findings demonstrate "the tremendous authority of media and their ability to generate emotional turmoil and affective disruption" while underlining audiences' ability to manage and cope these images in agentful ways.[13]

Drawing on the above examples, this article uses the Greek version of the reality show *The Bachelor* as a case study to explore how queer viewers who consume Greek television make sense of the text. The employment of qualitative audience research and the selection of *The Bachelor* have been made based on specific criteria. Firstly, the available scholarly work on Greek reality television is very little and limited to a small number of edited volumes employing genealogical and theoretical approaches, and studies devoted to interpretations of the reality phenomenon through sociological and cultural perspectives.[14] Although the aforementioned body of work, mainly Ioanna Vovou's edited volume and articles, have been crucial for understanding the history, ideology, and impact of reality television, there is a marked prioritising of text-centric approaches.[15] Despina Chronaki's work is an exception to the rule; her chapter, employing semi-structured interviews with Greek audiences and fans of the American *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-), fills a gap in Greek media reception studies, yet does so in an attempt to capture the transnational reach of foreign television reality shows

alone. Thus, the case of *The Bachelor*, studied in the context of this article, aims to explore that under-researched area where audiences and Greek reality television meet. Secondly, the popular romance and relationship multimedia franchise I have chosen to study has received negative feedback from journalists and television critics who denounce the show for its trashy aesthetics and perpetuation of gender stereotypes.[16] Additionally, it is important to note that while *The Bachelor* was punished by the National Radio-Television Consulate—the Greek independent administrative authority which supervises and regulates the broadcasting sector— with a 180.000 euros fine for showing scenes that contribute to gender equality, several journalists and audience members on social media found the show to be a cultural threat for its viewers and asked for its cancellation via online campaigns.[17] Thus, a second intention of this article is to take part in the ongoing discussion about *The Bachelor* and shed light on the reception of the show outside the anglophone context.[18]

Following the lead of queer scholars who apply phenomenological thinking to media studies research, I place "the body, and questions of embodiment, at the center of inquiry" to interrogate "where we stand" when we consume media texts.[19] According to Andre Cavalcante, the experiences and feelings of the body are of pivotal significance in qualitative research and can "complement ideological understandings of media audiences by offering a more embodied and dynamic optic."[20] Thus, an emphasis on those (in)appropriate emotional and bodily responses triggered when consuming culturally inferior television programs from the private sphere of the house may offer fruitful ground for making sense of the audience's kaleidoscopic responses to the sociopolitical world they inhabit.

Ahmed's queer phenomenology provides a useful theoretical foundation for understanding how sexual orientations and orientations as ways of residing the world "leave their impressions

on the skin."[21] Ahmed unfolds her argument by exposing how vertical and horizontal lines are extended around us and serve as "straightening devices that keep things in line" and thus ensure that collectives remain with their heads facing heterosexuality.[22] Objects—such as the familial/familiar television device, as I argue here—make "visible a fantasy of the good life" and promise access to this life in exchange for work done to take the well-trodden pathway of heteronormativity.[23] Yet, at the same time, queer phenomenology also promises the joy to explore "other paths and even go astray."[24] Such queer moments and practices have the potential to form new directions, thus generating "a diagonal line, which cut[s] across 'slantwise' the vertical and horizontal lines, . . . perhaps even challenging the 'becoming vertical' of ordinary perception."[25]

Against this backdrop, the Greek version of *The Bachelor* is discussed; yet the article is not about the reality show per se. The show's narratives and scripts serve as an impetus for investigating how queer bodies that live outside the majority culture position themselves in relation to *The Bachelor* and the extent to which they "rework" dominant discourses and ideologies endemic within the reality show. While acknowledging that positive and diverse media representations matter not only for broader sociopolitical change but also for the well-being of gender and sexually diverse groups of people who wish to see themselves represented onscreen, I argue that even strictly heterosexual and heteronormative texts—such as in the case of *The Bachelor*—can enable queer and pedagogical pleasures for viewers, thus blurring the unfounded dichotomies between high/low culture and heterosexual/queer television.

Method

This study aims to provide empirical accounts of the viewing pleasures that audiences gain by watching reality television. The notion of audiences, as used in the context of this study, refers

to individuals who watch television on a regular basis and consider themselves members of the queer community. Queer here is used as a word that encompasses a wide variety of people across a spectrum of sexual orientations and gender identities. However, despite the research subjects' positioning under the above umbrella, they are of different ages, physical features, and ethnicity. This intersectionality of identities is of particular interest and should be considered during the analysis of their responses. Another element defining this study is the degree of familiarity that the research subjects share among each other as well as with the researcher. In particular, all individuals included in this study belong to the wider circle of my friends and acquaintances, some of whom I met during the COVID-19 pandemic. From November 7, 2020, up until November 30, Greece entered a second national lockdown and night curfews were among the preventive measures implemented by the government to slow down COVID-19 spread. At that time, Evi, one of the participants of this study, returned to Greece and used her empty family house as a meeting point for her friends. It was during these encounters at Evi's house that the participants and I started to watch the first and later, the second season of *The Bachelor*. Unlike other television shows such as comedies and dramas, the story of the Greek bachelor and his love adventures with the twenty women who lived together in a mansion was the only one to spark intense conversations and comments during its broadcast, thus supporting McCoy and Scarborough's finding that, "part of the enjoyment of watching "bad" television comes from talking about the show, as it is occurring."[26] The intense emotional reactions generated while consuming *The Bachelor* prompted me to share with my friends the intention to conduct a study based on their/our responses to the second season of *The Bachelor* and they gave me their consent. Consequently, what started as a friend gathering evolved into ethnographic research, which led me to encounter some ethical challenges. Nevertheless, my prior engagement with academic scholarship on reflexive research helped me

to comprehend my dual and conflicting role as a researcher and friend and make informed choices in all stages of the study.[27]

Taking the form of our relationship into account, I follow what Lisa Tillmann-Healey has named friendship as method.[28] Drawing on feminist and queer research, and building on the idea of friendship as a useful site of inquiry, friendship as method "rejects scientific neutrality, universal truths, and dispassionate inquiry and works towards social justice, relational truths, and passionate inquiry."[29] Due to its deviation from traditional ethnographic work, friendship ethnography has the potential to reduce power relations (without nullifying them) and does not necessarily require outright planning; instead, it develops over months and is based on dialogue, compassion, and an ethics of care.[30] At the same time, some of its potential drawbacks as a data collection method are related to its small sample size, which renders findings non-generalisable. Another consideration involved blurring boundaries between researcher and participants, which is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, research conducted with friends and established acquaintances offers "reciprocity of disclosure" and can thus reach great depth and a high degree of comfortableness.[31] On the other hand, the very involvement of the researcher with the study participants in different contexts obligates the latter to make ethical choices as to what can be shared and to what end from their in-between discussions.

With the above in mind, the study took place between September 7 and December 17, 2021. During this period, I kept notes of the dialogues and comments uttered while watching the episodes of *The Bachelor* together with the participants. I also phone-called some participants-friends after the reality show's finale and asked them if they would like to answer a few additional questions. These questions and answers were transcribed verbatim and translated from Greek to English. When I completed the first version of the article, I shared the document

with all participants to obtain comments, corrections, and/or clarifications and then integrated their feedback and suggestions. When I completed the article's final version, I received the participants' informed consent and asked them how they wanted to see their names appear in the article. Depending on their decisions, I kept real names and personal information intact or used nicknames and non-identifiable data for those participants who did not wish to share their personal information publicly.

Heterosexual lines, ambivalent feelings, and the reality of reality television

Before proceeding with the ways in which queer viewers decode the reality show, it is important to highlight a few points relevant to the study. Although *The Bachelor*'s episodes were broadcast many times throughout the week by ALPHA TV channel, the participants adopted the habit of meeting towards the end of the week to consume the show together. Indeed, visiting Evi's family house on Fridays—while her parents were temporarily residing at their village house in northern Greece—turned out to be a regular routine for all participants. Fridays had also been associated with the day of "the rose ceremony," during which the bachelor presented a red flower to those female contestants he wished to have stay on the show for another week. All participants were interested in watching the ceremony live and finding out who would remain in the mansion but mainly, the responses of the contestants who would be eliminated.

Figure 1. After her elimination, Sia Voskanidou waves goodbye to the bachelor.

Rafael (NB, G, 25) remembers Sia (figure 1), a female contestant from the first season of the show, whose elimination announcement from the bachelor, Panagiotis Vasilakos, led her to come up with a goodbye speech that would go viral on social media: "you are super handsome, you have a wonderful personality, but you have a huge flaw, and that is your lack of taste (in women)."[32] Rafael has repeatedly expressed their fascination for those female contestants who are not afraid to be "glamorous, sassy, and pugnacious" and is often very much inclined to imitate some of their most memorable reactions. Such aspects of the show, particularly the ways through which the reality show portrays its contestants, have often incited lively discussion from the participants. According to Dana Heller, dating, wife-, and wedding-themed reality television shows are replete with reductive stereotypes, therefore, presenting certain women as "sexually licentious, emotionally manipulative . . . and fiercely competitive with other women for men, wealth, and status" is not uncommon.[33] However, participants expressed their concerns about the ways through which *The Bachelor* reifies cultural conceptions of gender identity. For instance, while watching a scene from the show where a female contestant

rudely interrupts a dialogue exchanged between Alexis Pappas and another contestant, Chrysanthi (F, L, 30) reacts as follows:

> Chrysanthi: Now look at that . . . look how much it (*The Bachelor*) instrumentalises women . . . the harem stays in the house . . . they wear their best dresses and fight for the heart of the maharajah . . . I can't imagine myself as passive and confined inside a house setting for none!

In this quote, Chrysanthi's account of the rose ceremony speaks to the promotion of heteronormative beliefs and sheds light on the show's regressive cultural politics. Most importantly, however, she offers a nuanced understanding of how "the bodies" in/of *The Bachelor* "become orientated by how they take up time and space."[34] While detecting the show's polyamorous leanings, Chrysanthi's words reveal that the orientation of *The Bachelor* is actually based on a very particular relation to, and perception of, space, bodies, and objects within it, all of which help to sustain gender binaries in place and render the heterosexual couple a "point" along a horizontal line. Nevertheless, for a body to appear "in line," to use Ahmed's vocabulary, intense and repetitive work is required.[35] Thus, the repetitive gendered bodily movements and gestures enacted within *The Bachelor* can be read as a work of this kind and "an orientation toward the future, insofar as" the contestants' "actions are also the expression of . . . an intention" for adhering to the heterosexual line.[36] At the same time, however, for Chrysanthi and other participants, accumulating different "points" of the line might actually have a disorientating and not an orientating effect.

Aside from those gender aspects in the show that "stand out" and are often mentioned during the broadcast of the episodes, a few participants were equally interested in understanding how

The Bachelor makes, as Ahmed might have stated, "certain things, not others available."[37] Among the most cited omissions in the show has been the lack of non-white bodies and bodies residing within the spectrum of fatness. For Evi (F, L, 42), who self-defines herself as a white fat lesbian, the omnipresence of bodies that conform to an ideal of thinness causes bodies like hers, which do not "line up," "to inherit their own disappearance" on the basis that fat bodies have "made the wrong turn."[38]

> Evi: I am 100% sure that if I watched it with my mother, she would be enchanted with those skinny bitches, and then she would get back to me only to tell me that I need to go on a diet if I want to find more womanly clothes and not stay on the shelf.

Evi's narrative contains several aspects of her mother's verbal and non-verbal communication, which work towards "controlling or correcting the operations of [her] body."[39] Such disciplinary mechanisms reverberate in Dimitris Papanikolaou's research on the Greek family and bring to mind a particular family constellation he defines as biopolitical. Inspired by Foucault's thought, Papanikolaou conceptualises the biopolitical family as a functioning agent of the society committed to the project of sculpting normative and 'proper' bodies. As he explains, this type of family "works intensely on the bodies of its members…undertaking," among others, "surveillance over their 'natural' gender and their 'normal' development."[40] This means that while subjects who follow gender and body expectations may remain untouched by "the net of Greek kinship," others, like Evi, who are different, are more likely to accumulate "stress or stress points."[41]

Other participants, not only advanced critical readings of specific topics (or lack thereof) from the show, but they also shared how particular players triggered diverse emotional reactions for

them. Borrowing from the writing of Ahmed, emotion must be understood as "a form of action" which "makes" and "shapes" bodies.[42] For Niki (F, B, 38), the mere appearance of a particular contestant onscreen made her hide herself behind the cushions of the sofa in embarrassment before turning her attention to her phone for distraction. Niki repeats what the contestant in question said on her romantic date with the bachelor and shared her thoughts:

> Niki: "Ice is melting, the ozone hole has opened up . . . and all this is bothering me a lot." Who says that on a date? And with this specific word choice? I wouldn't dare tell my colleagues that I watch *The Bachelor*, but honestly, it is tragic and hilarious at the same time.

Niki's condemnation of *The Bachelor* does not impede her from viewing it. In fact, her guilty viewing pleasure involves, as Melinda Reid has argued, "the positive direct response of pleasure . . . and the negative meta-response of guilt."[43] Much like Niki, Chrysanthi felt torn between enjoying and dismissing "objects [that] are all somewhat embarrassing to desire and yet desired anyway."[44] Such conflicting feelings were activated in those cases where the contestants' "absurd" performances and "dimwitted" dialogues compromised Chrysanthi's feminist beliefs. Interestingly enough, however, for Rafael, *The Bachelor*'s anti-feminist perspective did not clash with his feminist worldview and explained their relationship with the reality show using their age as a defining lens:

Rafael: *The Bachelor* is a genuinely cringey show. Gen Z consumes pop culture in ways different from previous generations. Far from demure, we (Gen Z) have reclaimed stupidity. So these cringe jokes are funny because we are aware of the intentional stupidity and we make fun of it. . . . It is like reclaiming the word faggot.

While viewing gender as a dimension of inequality in *The Bachelor*, Rafael employs a reading mode of the text which can be best described through the politics of camp. Drawing on Susan Sontag's classic *Notes on Camp,* camp constitutes -among many other things—"a seriousness that fails," and a type of reception incarnating "a victory of "style" over "content", "aesthetics" over "morality", of irony over tragedy."[45] In short, when consuming texts through a camp sensibility it is possible to step beyond evaluative criteria and admire shows like *The Bachelor* for their unabashedly failed content. Thus, returning to Ahmed, viewers such as Rafael who read television through camp lenses "follow a diagonal line," in that they see "the world "slantwise" and allow other objects to come into view."[46]

On the other hand, there is still the tendency of participants to examine *The Bachelor* with reference to the genre to which it belongs. Evi has been attentive to the reality aspect of reality television and highlighted how *The Bachelor*'s contestants' presence and interaction often take place in ways that appear forced and strange. Several times, Evi has searched videos on YouTube via her phone to check for similarities between the Greek *Bachelor* and its American counterpart or even brought our attention to particular scenes from the Greek version of the show which she finds suspicious.

> Evi: Ours [*The Greek Bachelor*] is scripted as fuck. Look at some scenes very carefully, you will notice from the players' expressions that they themselves can't help but laugh with the absurd things they are expected to say. They are performing roles which are meant to get us hooked. And it works.

This quote echoes Annette Hill's finding that "the performance becomes a powerful framing device for judging reality TV's claims to the real".[47] Given that the pleasure of reality television partly derives from "the belief that the 'characters' are sincere," challenging reality players' ostensibly transparent performances demonstrates how the pseudo-promise of the real in shows like *The Bachelor* is bound up with audiences' willingness to suspend disbelief for the sake of their viewing experience and pleasure.[48] Thus, in a very real sense, any attempt to determine which bodies—be they the ones behind, in front of, or inside *The Bachelor*—laugh at whose expense becomes futile in the face of reality television's slippery terrain.

New lines and moments of resistance

The previous analysis showcases how study participants decoded *The Bachelor* and the kinds of pleasures they experienced while viewing it. Although their answers vary, they all respond to the question of how we face objects that lie ahead of us, as it is in the case of (reality) television. In the part that follows, I explore orientation as a matter of "how we inhabit spaces."[49] I consider the possibility to turn around, face familiar objects and bodies from a different angle and face new, unfamiliar objects and other people—those that might have been in the background or behind us. Thus, the question I examine here is what participants can extract from *The Bachelor* and to what extent, if any, they can rework the compulsory orientation of heterosexuality and its social gifts as broadcast onscreen.

Given queer phenomenology's emphasis on spatiotemporal parameters, the setting where participants consumed the show will be considered. The apartment of Evi's parents in which the study took place constitutes a typical home space that is inextricably linked to the idea of biological family, marriage, and reproduction. With the advent of the coronavirus epidemic, however, these idea(l)s were seriously compromised. Indeed, the departure of Evi's parents,

together with the temporal occupation of the apartment by Evi and her friends, modified the composition as well as the number of the bodies residing the apartment. Its new temporary residents, although circulating in a space that is not necessarily theirs, spent time together beyond television viewing, engaged themselves in common activities and eventually established a kinship network different from the one that Evi had once experienced when she lived in the apartment with her parents. In a similar way, Evi's house stopped carrying "the memory of defeat […] and trauma" and served as a safe space that enabled the rest of the participants to feel comfortable.[50] According to Ahmed, "to be comfortable is to be so at ease with one's environment that it is hard to distinguish where one's body ends, and the world begins."[51] Although the feeling of comfortableness is typically associated with forms of privilege granted to white heterosexual bodies in public spaces, here I focus on specific moments of *The Bachelor* and relevant conversations from the participants, which construct Evi's house as a space that allows queer bodies to "fit in."[52]

Particular characters from *The Bachelor* and scenes involving them have been frequent objects of discussion within the group of participants. Among the characters which have attracted intense attention is Athina (figure 2). Commonly known as "Athina New York," Athina is a Greco-American fitness instructor, who is memorable for her broken Greek and funny miscommunications with the other contestants in the show. Since appearing on *The Bachelor*, Athina has gained popularity, leading to numerous talk shows concentrating on her appearance and cheerful character. For the participants, Athina diverged significantly from the rest of the female contestants in that she never found herself involved into catfights. Evi considers Athina to be "genuine" and attributes her distancing from quarrels to language barriers. Chrysanthi, more than any other participant, has consistently expressed her admiration for—and attraction to—Athina, as exemplified by the following quote:

Chrysanthi: she is carefree, smiley and above all hot. If I were the bachelor, I would have no second thoughts. I would take her from the mansion straight away and move with her back to New York.

Cognisant of Chrysanthi's crush on Athina, Evi and Rafael enjoy teasing Chrysanthi. Yet Chrysanthi is never discouraged by their comments; every time Athina is shown on television, Chrysanthi does not miss a chance to praise her external appearance and character. Such actions are "out of line" and disrupt the pervasive assumption of heterosexuality by exposing and sharing some of the perverse pleasures that one may gain when consuming a heterosexually themed text "in a familiar room."[53]

Figure 2. Athina speaking in front of the camera.

Another aspect of watching *The Bachelor* is the engagement of the participants in ways that escape the active/passive dichotomy. Overall, instead of sitting back, all participants combined the act of consuming the reality show with other activities such as texting, surfing on the internet, talking to each other and other friends through tablets, and playing board games on laptops. Their media engagement, thus, challenged a preferred viewing position in which viewers should be absorbed in watching television and allowed a multiscreen viewing. For some participants, *The Bachelor*'s content even served as a source of inspiration for the shaping of DIY performances and small acts. Sofi (F, Q, 33), an Albanian woman with many years of experience in acting and singing, was often asked by the rest of the group to copy the behaviors of *The Bachelors*' players and she usually accepted the challenge with joy. Other times, Sofi went as far as to deliver her own shows and include the other participants as active agents in her performances. The show titled "I want them all 18 although it's a sin" is an indicative example. Sofi began this performance by picking a romantic tune on Spotify and placing candles on the table. Then she disappeared for a few minutes only to come back wearing a bra, the bottom of her pajamas, silver heels and with a mustache drawn on her face. Following the style of a romantic date similar to the ones shown on *The Bachelor*, Sofi approached Evi, Rafaelos, Niki and myself, ensuring physical intimacy. She was talking to each one of us passionately and gently asked each of us in turn to dance with her to the rhythm of the song. The show finished with her saying "it is too hard to choose because I want you all" and brought us all together in a cluster resembling a communal orgy, in which we laughed while she was pretending to be writhing in sensual desire. Right after that, she landed on an armchair and mimicked the pains of labour, pulling out of her pajamas a stuffed elephant which was her new-born baby.

Sofi's improvised performance, instead of reifying the heteronormative structure of *The Bachelor*, exposes and parodies its very mechanisms and "creates new angles," to speak with Ahmed. When I called her to ask about that performance, Sofi answered as follows:

> I enjoy making my friends happy, that's why I do these performances. It is so liberating to take the very stereotypes you hate and turn them upside down. To me, it feels as if the show itself is begging for such parodic enactments.

Humour, hyperbole, naivete, and a sarcastic mood—these are some of the tools that Sofi uses to critique *The Bachelor*'s conventions. For Hongwei Bai, reading Muñoz, "humour constitutes a valuable pedagogical and political tool for queer minoritarian subjects; through humour, queer performers find strength and solidarity in subverting the assumed seriousness of the dominant discourse."[54] Far from a passive viewer, Sofi adopts a more proactive and even activist approach which extends beyond her friendship network and the familial space of the house. Aside from delivering such performances, Sofi, along with Evi, is active on social media. Together they take lines from *The Bachelor* that they find absurd and make memes, exerting their own critique in creative yet uncompromising ways. For Evi, watching the show and posting on twitter (while sharing with us) those aspects she considered problematic in real time turned out to be part of her routine during our gatherings.

I post these tweets in case there is even one person who buys what they see. At the beginning I felt bad for myself but I came to the conclusion that I can be feminist and watch such shows. That I can laugh with what I see and criticise the over-the-topness of such performances. It is empowering to watch what is wrong and judge it and make an impact through your posts.

What is essential in Evi's words is the sense of being orientated towards and away from *The Bachelor*. Like other participants, her initial ambivalence about the show reveals how contradictory emotions make bodies move in different directions. However, instead of contemplating this clash of emotions, Evi shared them online. Such actions, departing from negative and inappropriate feelings, turn into productive processes in that they mitigate the private-public divide and have the potential to address different communities of spectators online.

Conclusion

How do people watch television that is labeled as "trash, "problematic," and "humiliating," and what do they make out of these programs? These questions served as a starting point to conduct a reception study and explore how the Greek version of the reality show, *The Bachelor*, which has attracted intensely negative criticism, may be decoded by particular communities of spectators. Investing in cultural studies' engagement with queer audience research and building on the idea of friendship as method, the study shed light on the diverse readings that queer viewers employ to converse with the genre of reality. It showcased that all the participants who watched *The Bachelor* comprehended and disagreed with the heteronormative structure of the show. For the overriding majority, the consumption of the text elicits conflicting feelings of pleasure and guilt, yet several participants agreed that the show actually provides them with empowerment and pure amusement. The above emotional responses demonstrated variations in the way viewers decode the text. Many viewpoints expressed by the participants revealed their interest in invisible aspects of the show, such as the omnipresence of white and thin bodies to the exclusion of bodily diverse individuals. Furthermore, another important dimension that emerged from the study was the pervasive culture of heterosexuality, which is manifested in

the show through the circulation of heteronormative ideals and traditional gender stereotypes about femininities and masculinities alike.

Although the participants of this study never justified their preference for *The Bachelor* or compared it to LGBTQI+-related programs, their responses about the reality show, as complemented by Ahmed's queer phenomenology, unravel the multifaceted process of emotionally engaging with and consuming media texts and showcase that one's orientation is not only determined by the direction one faces. The voices of the study participants and their experience of/from/in front of *The Batchelor* reveals that the space we inhabit, the bodies with which we inhabit spaces, and the objects we choose to leave behind, see, and rework, open up habitable worlds where queer politics and spaces are possible.

With this in mind, totalising understandings of the role and functions of media products entail the risk of losing sight of their actual societal impact at a micro level. Consequently, by turning our attention to low culture products and exploring the responses they elicit in diverse groups of viewers, we might start perceiving these programmes in ways that prevent facile criticisms of quality and morality, and perhaps permit different kinds of viewing pleasures to emerge. This study, placed in the context of Greece, served as the first exploration of queer audience studies and, hopefully, an invitation for other researchers interested in exploring this fertile yet largely untouched field.

Acknowledgements

Notes

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[4] Philippa Orme, "Are you my perfect match? Reality TV as a stage for queer identity in MTV's *Are You the One*?," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 60 (2021), https://www.ejumpcut.org/currentissue/Orme-AreYouTheOne/index.html

[5] Ava Laure Parsemain, *The Pedagogy of Queer TV* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

[6] For an introduction to the interplay between media text and the reader/audience, see John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'The Popular'," in *Popular Culture: A Reader*, edited by Raiford Guins and Omayra Zaragoza Cruz (London: Sage, 2005), p. 65. Here I propose an indicative list of works which have engaged in queer readings of popular texts in screen studies: Spyridon Chairetis, "Negotiating heteronormativity in the family melodrama: A case study of Giorgos Katakouzinos's *Angelos/ Angel* (1982*)," FILMICON: Journal of Greek Film Studies*, 4, no. 1 (2017): 7-28; Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Brett Farmer, *Spectacular Passions: Cinema, Fantasy, Gay Male Spectatorships* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

[7] Rafal Zaborowski and Frederik Dhaenens, "Old topics, old approaches? 'Reception' in television studies and music studies," *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, 13, no. 1 (2016): 446-461.

[8] Riina Rautiainen, "Portraying Gays on Reality TV Case *Gay Army* and its Reception," *SQS: Suomen Queer-tutkimuksen Seuran Lehti*, 3, no. 1 (2008): 67-74, https://journal.fi/sqs/article/view/53651

[9] For a brief overview of the literature, see Dorothy Hobson, "Housewives and the mass media," in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies 1972-1979*, edited by Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe and Paul Willis (London: Hutchison, 1980): 105-116; Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick, Matthias R. Hastall, and Maik Rossman, "Coping or Escaping?: Effects of Life Dissatisfaction on Selective Exposure," *Communication Research*, 36, no. 2 (2009): 207-228; Eric Shouse, "Feeling, emotion, affect," *M/C Journal*, 8, no. 6 (2005): 1-25.

[10] Anne Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 7.

[11] Misha Kavka, *Reality television, affect and intimacy: Reality matters* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 19-20.

[12] Charles Allan McCoy and Roscoe C. Scarborough, "Watching 'bad' television: Ironic consumption, camp, and guilty pleasures," *Poetics* 47 (2014): 41-59.

[13] Andre Cavalcante, "Affect, emotion, and media audiences: the case of resilient reception," *Media, Culture & Society* 40, no. 8 (2018), p. 13.

[14] Ioanna Vovou, *The World of Television: Theoretical Approaches, theory, analysis of programs and Greek reality* (Athens: Herodotus, 2010); Evangelos Sorogkas, *The Reality Phenomenon* (Athens: Kastaniotis, 2004).

[15] Ioanna Vovou, "Injecting Actuality in TV Fiction: The Financial Crisis in Greek TV Comedy Series," *Filmicon: Journal of Greek Film Studies*, 6, no. 1 (2019): 112-137, https://filmiconjournal.com/journal/article/pdf/2019/6/6.

[16] Christina Galanopoulou, "Are women in danger from *The Bachelor* and Alexis Papas? No duh," *Lifo*, October 1, 2021, https://www.lifo.gr/stiles/optiki-gonia/kindyneyoyn-oi-gynaikes-apo-bachelor-kai-ton-alexi-pappa-e-ohi-da; Emilios Harbis, "The elimination ritual performed with flowers and the game of publicity in reality television," *Kathimerini newspaper*, October 16, 2020, https://www.kathimerini.gr/culture/561119401/i-teleti-

ton-rodon-kai-to-paichnidi-tis-dimosiotitas-sta-rialiti/; Nefeli Rapsomaniki, "Reality shows and the realism sexism in society," *Sputnik magazine*, October 24, 2020, http://mag.spoutnik.gr/prisma/kinonia/2298/ta-reality-shows-kai-o-pragmatikos-sexismos-tis-ko/.

[17] Avgi Newsroom, "*The Bachelor*: Thousands of signatures requesting to see Alpha's reality show cancelled," *Avgi magazine*, October 4, 2021, https://www.avgi.gr/koinonia/397400_hiliades-ypografes-me-aitima-na-kopei-rialiti-toy-alpha. For more information about the National Radio-Television Consulate, see Spyridon Chairetis, "Tracing the Ephemeral: 'Lesbian' Characters in Greek Television Comedies," *VIEW: Journal of European Television History & Culture*, 10, no. 19 (2021): 1-10.

[18] Dana Cloud, "The irony bribe and reality television: Investment and detachment in *The Bachelor*," *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 27, no. 5 (2010): 413-437; Rachel E. Dubrofsky, "*The Bachelor*: Whiteness in the harem," *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 23, no. 1 (2006): 39-56; Scott Haden Church, Tom Robinson, Clark Callahan, Katherine Klotzer Barboza and Daniel Montez, "Savvy viewers and (simulated) reality TV: An analysis of *The Bachelor*'s appeal to viewers," *Journal of Popular Television*, 8, no. 1 (2019): 23-43.

[19] Katharina Lindner, "Situated Bodies, Cinematic Orientations: Film and (Queer) Phenomenology," In *De-Westernizing Film Studies*, edited by Saer Maty Ba and Will Higbee (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 152.

[20] Andre Cavalcante, "Affect, emotion, and media audiences: the case of resilient reception," 2.

[21] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 54.

[22] Ibid., p. 66.

[23] Ibid., p. 90.

[24] Ibid., p. 178.

[25] Ibid., p. 107.

[26] Charles Allan McCoy and Roscoe C. Scarborough, "Watching 'bad' television," p. 49.

[27] Orit Karnieli-Miller, Roni Strier, and Liat Pessach, "Power Relations in Qualitative Research," *Qualitative Health Research*, 19, no. 2 (2008): 279–289; Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching* (London: Sage, 2002); Anna Pechurina, "Positionality and Ethics in the Qualitative Research of Migrants' Homes," *Sociological Research Online*, 19, no. 1 (2014): 1–9.

[28] Lisa Tillmann-Healy, "Friendship as Method," *Qualitative Inquiry* 9, no. 5 (2013): 729–49.

[29] Ibid, p. 733. For examples of feminist/queer research, see Judith Cook and Mary Margaret Fonow, "Knowledge and women's interests: Issues of epistemology and methodology in feminist sociological research," *Sociological Inquiry* 56 (1986): 2-29; Helen Roberts, *Doing Feminist Research* (London: Routledge, 1990); Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, "Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research," 1-28, in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000).

[30] Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Andrew Stevenson and Rebecca Lawthom, "How We Know Each Other: Exploring the Bonds of Friendship Using Friendship Ethnography and Visual Ethnography," *Anthrovision: Vaneasa online journal* 5, no. 1 (2017), https://journals.openedition.org/anthrovision/2525; Isabelle Rivoal and Noel Salazar, "Contemporary Ethnographic Practice and the Value of Serendipity," *Social Anthropology* 21, no. 2 (2013): 178-185.

[31] Thomas, J. Berndt, "The Distinctive Features of Conversations between Friends: Theories, Research and Implications for Sociomoral Development," 281-300, in *Moral Development through Social Interaction*, edited by William. M. Kurtines and Jacob L. Gewirtz (New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 1987); Jacquelin P. Wiseman, "Friendship: Bonds and Binds in a Voluntary Relationship," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 3 (1986): 191–211; James Youniss, "Social Construction and Moral Development: Update and Expansion of an Idea," 131-148, in *Moral Development through Social Interaction*, edited by William. M. Kurtines and Jacob L. Gewirtz (New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 1987).

[32] Rafael is one of the five participants in the study. All names appearing in this article are accompanied with a set of acronyms. When referring to gender identities, F stands for female, and NB for non-binary. The acronyms L(esbian), B(isexual), G(ay) and Q(ueer/estioning) are used to describe the participants' emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to other people. Their age is also mentioned.

[33] Dana Heller, "Wrecked: Programming Celesbian Reality," in *Reality Gendervision: Sexuality & Gender on Transatlantic Reality Television*, edited by Brenda R. Weber (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 127.

[34] Sara Ahmed, "*Queer Phenomenology*," p. 5.

[35] Ibid., 66.

[36] Ibid., 109.

[37] Ibid., 14.

[38] Ibid., 76.

[39] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Allen Lane, 1995 [1975]), p. 136.

[40] Dimitris Papanikolaou, *Greek Weird Wave: A Cinema of Biopolitics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), p. 150.
[41] Dimitris Papanikolaou, *There is something about the family: Nation, desire and kinship at a time of crisis* (Athens: Patakis, 2018), p. 427; Sarah Ahmed, "*Queer Phenomenology*," p. 160.
[42] Sarah Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 4.
[43] Melinda Reid, "Guilty Pleasures Revisited," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 80 (2022): p. 191.
[44] Ibid., 191.
[45] Susan Sontag, *Notes on Camp* (London: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 6 & 10.
[46] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, p. 107.
[47] Annette Hill, *Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 449.
[48] Charles Allan McCoy and Roscoe C. Scarborough, "Watching 'bad' television," p. 52.
[49] Sara Ahmed, "Queer Phenomenology," p. 160.
[50] Giorgos Kesisoglou, "Dimitris Papanikolaou in conversation with Giorgos Kesisoglou: Short-circuit-in-families, public truth telling, queer genealogies and archive troubles," *Metalogos Systemic Therapy Journal*, 36, no. 1 (2020): p. 5.
[51] Sara Ahmed, "Queer Phenomenology," p. 107.
[52] Ibid., p. 134.
[53] Ibid., p. 7.
[54] Hongwei Bao, "Queer Disidentification: Or How to Cook Chinese Noodles in a Global Pandemic," *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*, 17, no. 1-2 (2021): p. 8.

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