

Sexualities and Public Space in Greece: a celluloid quest

Sexualidades e Espaço Público na Grécia: uma busca cinematográfica

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Abstract

Greece is a country that considers itself to be part of the Western civilization, though still a lot of oriental elements exist in its culture and way of thinking. LGBT people are considered to be either invisible or pointed out as metaphorical or literal punch bag. So it was a surprise that a year after the first Athens Gay Pride (2005), two Greek movies appeared with homosexuality as their central theme. The first one 'The Blue Dress', a drama about the journey of a young boy till he turns into a woman, won six national cinema awards. The second one 'Straight Story', a comedy about a world where homosexuality is the normative and heterosexuality is the 'not normal', was the biggest box office success of the year. This paper uses the stereotypes portrayed in these two films in order to explore the spatial dimension of being gay in Greece. Both films place queer subjects in their narrative in a stereotyped even offensive way, but at the same point offer a very accurate image of how 'homosexuality' is perceived in Greece. Issues that become more and more obvious during the rise of the extreme right organizations and their entrance in the Greek parliament and the violence against gay men. The way these two films explore the subject of being gay in Greece, shows the difficulties of placing the 'queer' in public and raise a series of questions of the space available for different sexualities. By analyzing these two films the paper shows how space is constructed regarding LGBT people and the limits created by a strong religious and patriarchic tradition reflected in the heteronormative and homonormative systems of this country.

Keywords: Public Space; Sexuality, Queer.

Resumo

A Grécia é um país que se considera parte da civilização ocidental, embora ainda uma série de elementos orientais existam em sua cultura e modo de pensar. As pessoas LGBT são consideradas invisíveis ou apontadas como saco de pancada metafórico ou literal. Por isso, foi uma surpresa que um ano após a primeira Parada do Orgulho Gay de Atenas (2005), dois filmes gregos tiveram a homossexualidade como tema central. O primeiro 'The Blue Dress', um drama sobre a trajetória de um jovem rapaz, até que ele se transforma em uma mulher, ganhou seis prêmios nacionais de cinema. O segundo 'Straight Story', uma comédia sobre um mundo em que a homossexualidade é a norma e a heterossexualidade 'não é normal', foi o maior sucesso de bilheteria do ano. Este artigo usa os estereótipos retratados nestes dois filmes, a fim de explorar a dimensão espacial de ser gay na Grécia. Ambos os filmes trazem sujeitos *queers* em sua narrativa estereotipada mas que, ao mesmo tempo, oferecem uma imagem muito precisa de como a 'homossexualidade' é percebida na Grécia. Essas questões se tornaram cada vez mais evidentes durante a ascensão das organizações de extrema direita e a sua entrada no parlamento grego, bem como a violência contra os homossexuais. A forma como esses dois filmes exploram a ideia de 'ser gay na Grécia', mostra as dificuldades de colocar o '*queer*' em público e levanta uma série de questões sobre o espaço disponível para diferentes sexualidades. Ao analisar estes dois filmes, o artigo mostra como o espaço é construído em relação às pessoas LGBT e os limites criados por uma forte tradição religiosa e patriarcal que refletem os sistemas heteronormativos e homonormativos deste país.

Palavras-chave: Espaço Público; Sexualidades, *Queer*.



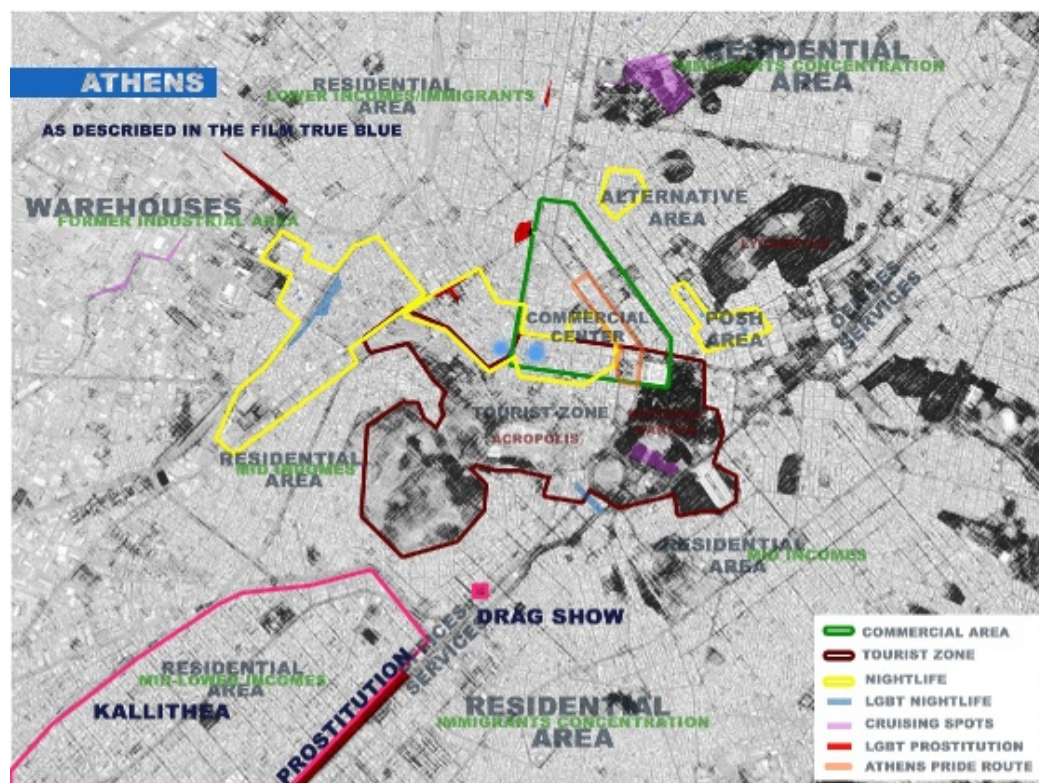
Greece is a country that dreams of being part of the Western World, but several elements in its way of living, thinking and in its tradition distinct it from the European lifestyle, pointing to the east and to more religious countries. The main reason of this edgy position is its geographical location and economic situation, but also, the governing mentality over contemporary issues, such as gender, is rather conservative, due to religion and a traditional background with several ties to the past.

Academic and cultural circles appear to be open-minded and are making an effort to advance gender and sexuality discourses. Unfortunately, women and LGBT people still struggle for equality, and in the case of the latter, mentality and law have a long way to go before claiming signs of acceptance.

In 2005 a group of volunteers dared to organize the first gay pride in Greece. In June that year 300 people were present in this event, while at the other side of town people were distributing pamphlets with the phrase 'Faggot get out of Athens'. In a strange coincidence, at the same time Greek Cinema started producing two 'LGBT themed films'; a coincidence that could have been a sign of a changing mentality. Then the movies were out and, despite the initial good intentions by the directors, both movies ended up - from naïve to negative - repeating images of the past, never managing, as you might expect them to, to go beyond the ruling homophobia nor do they break any stereotype.

During its golden era (the '50s and '60s) Greek cinema functioned through social stereotypes, so the gay men were effeminate and usually a comic element. Before the '80s, one has to make in depth analysis of the films to discover *queer* elements (KYRIAKOU, 2011). In the '80s Greek cinema followed the gay pathway in order to make edgy dramas (TERZIS, 2011); the main example being the film 'Aggelos' (1982), a movie that shocked local viewers and infuriated LGBT communities in all international festival in which it was presented.

In the '90s - thanks to various new voices that appeared in Greek Cinema -there is a different approach when representing homosexuality in films, even though homosexuals are not in the spotlight. We can see this different approach in shorts films that never reached mainstream audiences or in mainstream films like 'Upside Down and Sideways' (CACOYIANNIS, 1992), which speak about (without ever portraying)



Map 1. The Center of Athens around 2005-2006.

homosexual practices. Of course, this is not about cinema; instead it is a reflection on the general exclusion of sexuality from the public sphere, especially sexualities beyond the norms (CHATZITRYFON, 2008).

Before talking about the two films, let's draw a quick map of homosexuality in Athens, and in which public spaces LGBT people have access (Map 1). In Greece, even in the two biggest cities, Athens and Thessaloniki, there has always been a gay scene based on bars, clubs and some restaurants, where everything happens behind closed doors. LGBT activist had, and still have, a hard time convincing members of the community to come out, but people prefer the protection of bars, before returning to their homes and their closets. Athens has two gay sites, one south of the Acropolis hill – next to a residential and touristic area, where among office buildings the gay crowds are not visible- the other is in the former industrial area of Gazi, in the North-East, which is under fast gentrification. One should also add in this map the cruising spots (Zappeio Gardens next to the National Garden, Pedio Areos Park on the North, Agia Anna Str North East among the Warehouses) and LGBT prostitution areas (Syggrou Avenue, Kavalas Avenue for Trans and Komoundourou Square for male prostitution). With the exception of Gazi which is - today thanks to the new Metro Station, but not in 2005- the hot spot of Athens nightlife, the other areas are out of the spotlight and 'safe' – the only exception being gay-friendly bars that are among the Athenian hotspots but usually avoid characterization¹.

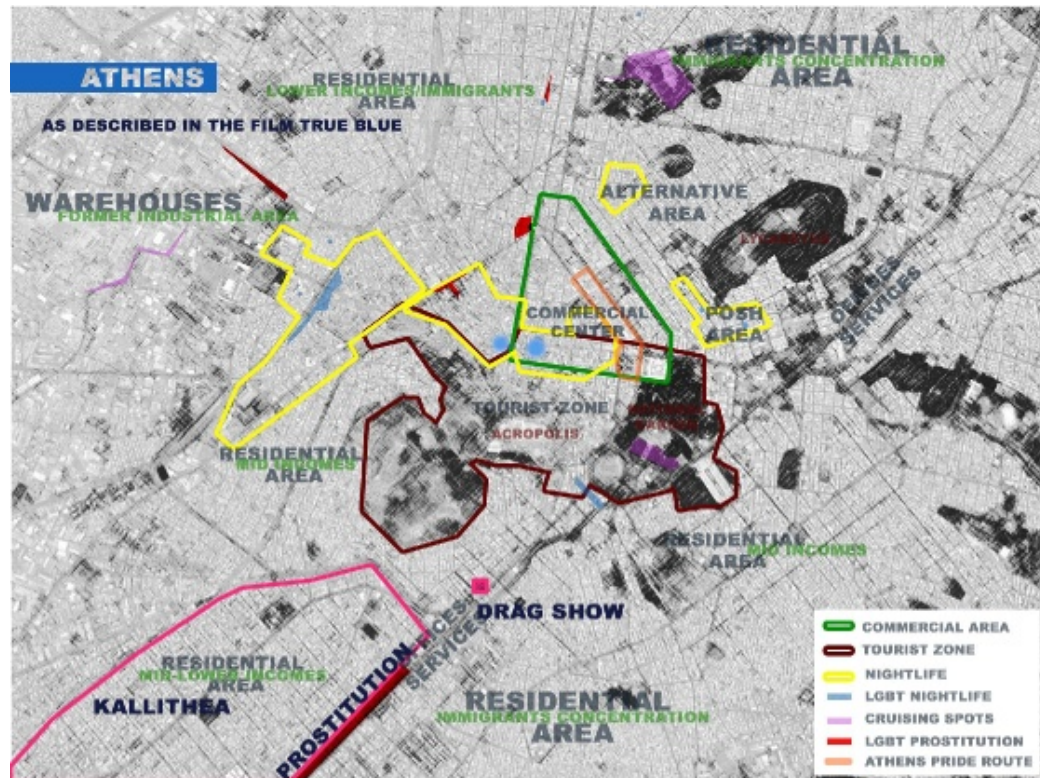
After the first Pride, LGBT people gained a certain visibility, but still the general mentality remained stuck on stereotypes and negative images. The outline of this mentality can be drawn very clearly by these two gay themed films that were distributed in theatres after June 2005. 'True Blue' (2005) shows the

tragic pathway of Yiorgos when coping with his sexuality and his family. 'Straight Story' (2006) is a comedy that shows a world where homosexuality is the normative and straights are the 'perverts'. On paper both films appear to make a point and offer a new take on subject, other than the mainstream image of homosexuality, but both ended up in the typical public representation of homosexuality, almost justifying homophobia. The two films were chosen based on the time frame and the recognition they had, as 'True Blue' earned 6 Greek Cinematic Awards, while "Straight Story" was one of the biggest box office successes of the year².

In 2005, the director Yiannis Dimantopoulos adapted the book 'What a nice dress, Yiorgos' (KAVVATHAS, 2000); a reportage-literature based on interviews of Rachel, who had been through a man-to-woman sex change operation, and her mother, who still called her Yiorgos. The book was a best seller, but despite the deep meanings described on the back cover, it remained superficial and rather naïve, as described by Dimitris Papanikolaou in his introduction to the screenplay of the film 'Strella' (PANOS KOUTRAS, 2010). The film goes even further, creating a caricature of Yiorgos, and revealing the mother as the main tragic figure. The film uses various flashbacks and it doesn't keep a linear narration. If we put the events in the chronological order, we can see that homosexuality is portrayed like a progressive disease: Yiorgos as a young boy starts dressing with his mother clothes, he takes candy from strangers, has suicidal tendencies; then he becomes a dancer and explores sex with both men and women; then he turns gay, becomes a drag, a prostitute; then has a sex-change operation; gets married, goes to prison and makes out with another woman; then goes into an undetermined sex version of himself, until he

kills his mother. In the meantime he is just in constant hysteria, screaming, shouting and blaming everyone around him. The development of the story leaves little room to see Yiorgos/Vera as a human being.

The spatial development of the film follows a similar path, showing that Yiorgos can't be part of the Greek Society (Map 2). He lives in Kallithea, a lower income area near Athens, near Syggrou Avenue, where there is still a sense of a neighbourhood and a small society. He discovers his bisexuality while living in Paris - in Greece people are traditional so he wouldn't have explored such indecencies. After failing in Paris, he creates a travelling show and travels around Greece and the Mediterranean. Every time he returns home, he is more violent, more depressed. When he is in public places he plays hide n' seek, even with his little sister, who seems to understand him. The film renders some actual LGBT places: an empty lot where he prostitutes and a drag show bar. Since that the transvestites/transgender that prostitute in Athens stay on main urban avenues then what the film portrays looks more like a copy of Almodovar's 'All About my Mother' than the spatial reality of Athens. On the other hand the drag show has none of the fun that Greek drag shows have; no camp, just poems about how unsatisfied those people are in their bodies. Whenever Yiorgos manifests his sexuality in public is just a reaction to his mother, a provocation that on the next scene will be hidden and covered. Even in the clubs



Map 2. The film True Blue portrays gay life around Syngrou Avenue showing just the Prostitution Area and Drug Show Bar, outside of the City Life.

and gay places that we see him, there is always a misery underlined by the '80s atmosphere and gloomy cinematography.

Yiorgos is presented as a parasite to everyone: his mother, his fiancé and his boyfriends. Even after the sex-change operation, as Vera, she continues living the same way. She conceals her past from her husband, she can't succeed as a performer, she goes to prison, and she unsuccessfully tries to adopt a kid. All the movement Yiorgos was making towards coming out is cancelled after he becomes Vera, showing the operation as a mask to hide homosexuality, as an adaptation to the norms. In the film, gay people are deprived of public and private space. The director mentioned in an interview, that the film "[...] is about a man who tries to gain his balance, social

acceptance, to hold on to something to be able to cope, to live. Unfortunately he doesn't make it; he is deprived of the right to live" (KALOVYRNAS, 2006, n/p). Besides the right to live the director also deprived Yiorgos from the right to have an identity:

I didn't want the movie to focus only on this problem, but to make the audience understand that the specific diversity and the 'other' includes all people who are different in any way, not only by sexual orientation. This 'extreme' life includes all people who are different. (KALOVYRNAS, 2006, n/p).

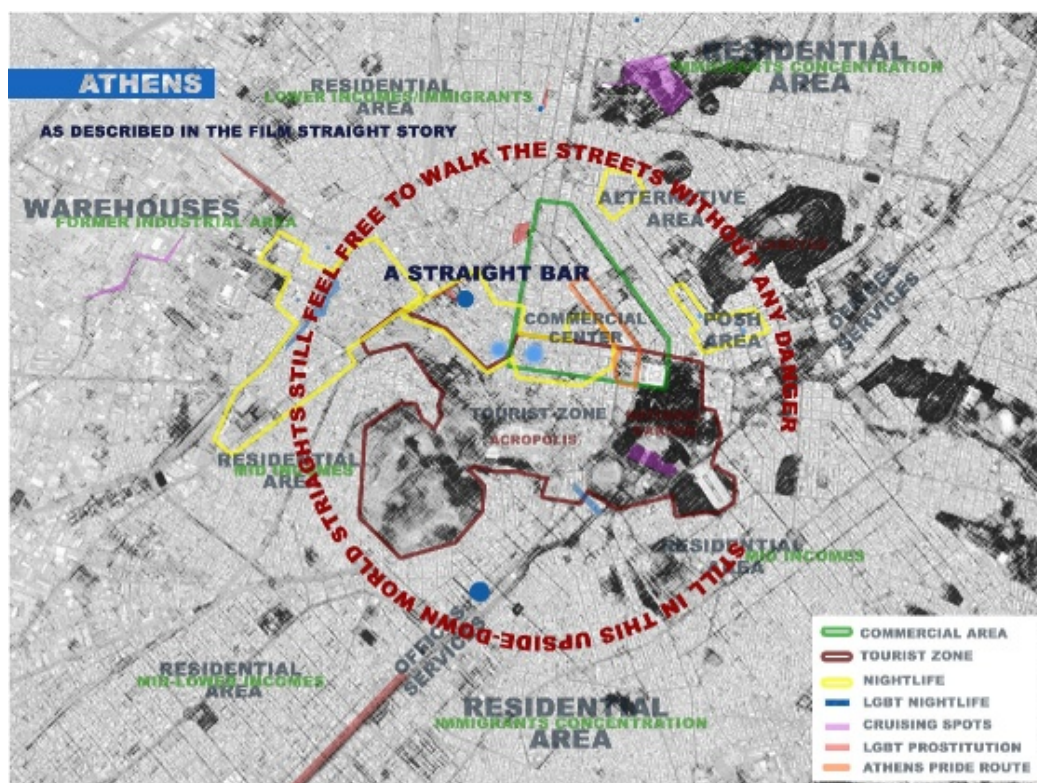
As a result of his effort to describe aspects of queer theory, the director ends up describing as 'extreme' anyone that breaks out of the norms, as unable to live a 'normal' life and that diversities don't fit in society. It's no surprise then that the tragic heroine of the film is not Yiorgos/Vera but the mother, who has to suffer all this pain.

On the other hand there is Vladimiro Kiriakidis and Efi Mouriki's 'Straight Story' (2006), which uses comedy in order to show that it's not a question of wrong or right, but between common and uncommon. In a parallel dimension homosexuality is the normative and heterosexuality is considered diversity. Giannis is a closeted straight man, living with his two fathers and in love with Sofia. Sofia is in a relation with Zeta, but soon she falls for Giannis and they have a secret affair.

The main idea of turning things upside

down is to show, in a very didactic way, that some people suffer just because they are different. However, on reality the movie just makes fun of the impossibility of this subversion and that homosexuality can't be normalised. The humour is always on the effeminate gays, on the hysteric reactions, on the idea that a gay guy calls a straight 'pervert'. A plot twist in the end is too obviously didactic and it comes too late in the film, to tone things down.

The film makers put gay people in straight shoes – nuclear family, reproduction, househusbands, worrying about the son being too old and still single - and it is obvious that they had, within the couple, specific gender roles. At the same time they fail to reverse heterosexual notions. Straight people are



Map 3. 'Straight Story' shows a generic version of Athens and the 'others' have very specific places to go, but still they are free to walk around. The choice of the Straight bar being one of the most in the closet gay-friendly bars of Athens, creates an interesting anecdote.

normal guys that struggle in a world dominated by gays – a very popular idea and a fear inside the Greek community. Even the fact that they are called straight and not 'heteros', or any other slang word to show perversity, makes things clear. They hang around with other straight people in houses or in Straight clubs. Their public image, apart their sexual orientation, has nothing strange, nothing queer. The only way someone would think about them as being straight is when they are caught in action –either in bed or in a club (Map 3).

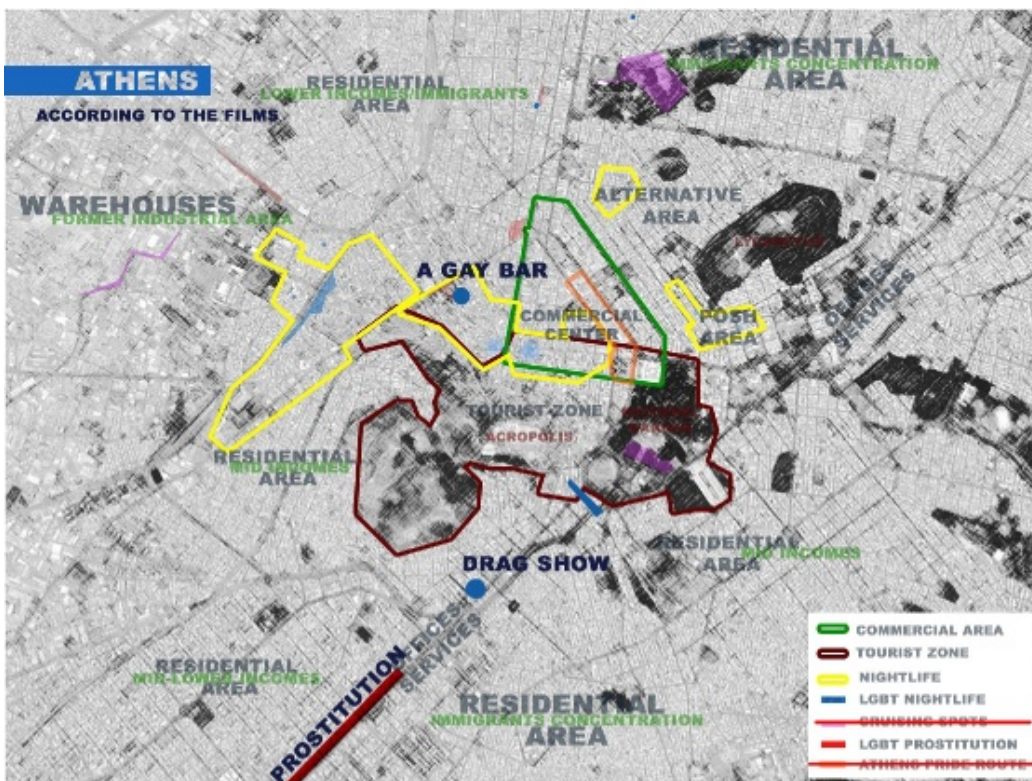
Gay people in Greece are victims of violence and offenses, mainly, when they don't correspond to a certain masculine stereotype. In public, appearance is an issue, and the clubs exist because these are the places where they can be freer. So the joke would be more interesting if there was a

comment 'he is so masculine, definitely he is hetero'. What if there was a hetero cruising spot or a heterodar.com? The straight couple isn't afraid to show affection in public spaces, they are at ease with that, but in a world that they may be in danger, they would have to think twice, especially since they are both in the closet. The movie falls into the dipole heterosexual/homosexual, following the recipe of the Greek comedy from the '00s, based on sex jokes and TV aesthetics.

It is rather easy to accuse these two films of making a false portrayal of gay life in Greece or that they fail to make a difference. But one can say how they succeed to illustrate how the general mentality regards the LGBT community: effeminate versions of the Greek Male, a shame to the family, a burden; confined in their gay world, underground places, where they have the

illusion of being normal and in power; that they can survive only through art or prostitution; that they are sad, psychologically traumatized by their inability to fit into society, and not by the society's inability to accept them. According to those two movies, on the map of Athens (Map 4), we would only find one gay bar area in Syggrou

Avenue, no view of the rainbow flags in Gazi, not a sign of the gay-friendly places right in

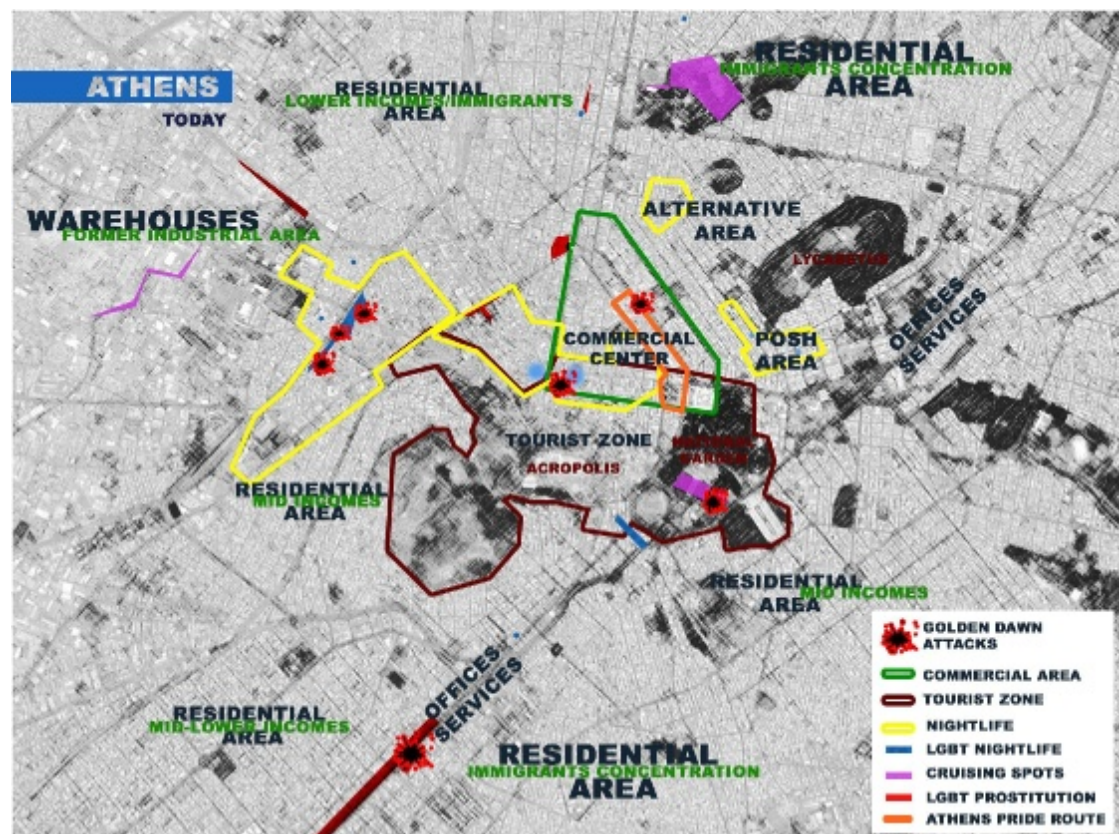


Map 4. What stays in the picture after looking these two films, while the rest of LGBT life fades away.

the heart of the hot spots of the Athenian nightlife, not even a trace of a cruising spot. Probably, driven by homonormative remorse, the creators tried to avoid the subject of random meetings for sex, never occurring to them that sex in public is not always a fantasy, sometimes, in a capitalistic world, is the only option (KNOPP, 1992). 'True Blue' has a scene in which Yiorgos brings various boyfriends to his home and introduces them as friends. Among gay people this could be a brave choice, a coming out to the family. According to the film this is yet another burden for the stoic mother, who patiently tries to overlook all this perversion. In Greece, social structure keeps people in their family homes at least till their early 30s, how can we even think about a private space for the gay son or the lesbian daughter? (AGGELIDIS, 2007).

'True Blue' frames Yiorgos/Vera as an outcast, not because of his psychosis, that would make him problematic even if he was heterosexual - but because he is gay and becomes a woman despite nature and society. 'Straight Story', on the other hand, fails to go beyond the antithesis heterosexual/homosexual, disregarding the whole discourse on sexuality after the '90s.

Looking into these two films, it's easy to see how nowadays conservatism gains more and more ground. Ideas mildly and naively expressed in these movies, are stronger as a racists and fascist speech wins 10% of the Greek voters (MEGALKOUDI, 2012). And suddenly, what we thought as merely offensive in 2005 is dangerous and deprives LGBT people of the right to exist. If we put on a map (Map 5) the various attacks on LGBT people, we can see that they happen right inside areas that we thought were safe, thus, through fear, people are deprived of the right to exist in public space. It would take five years for Greece to look into LGBT people in a more respectful eye, through films like 'Strella' (KOUTRAS, 2009).



Map 5. The intrusion of Homophobe attacks in LGBT areas after the rise of Golden Dawn.

¹ Usually they avoid distributing gay free press and revealing their LGBT status to their 'other costumers'.

² There have been other LGBT themed films in since that time, still none had the commercial success of Straight Story reaching broader audiences, or the acceptance of the official National Cinematic Awards like True Blue (since 2009 the National Cinematic Awards have been replaced by the awards of the Greek Cinematic Academy, a completely different institution).

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