

# 10 We are all in Xenialand

## Queer poetics, citizenship, and hospitality in Panos H. Koutras's *Xenia* (2014)

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*Xenia* is a 2014 film by Panos H. Koutras, based on a script he wrote with his longtime collaborator Panagiotis Evangelidis. Both had worked together on *Strella* (aka *A Woman's Way*) (2009, Greece), the celebrated trans incest story which is credited with having inaugurated, alongside Yorgos Lanthimos's *Dogtooth* (2009, Greece), the 'Greek New Wave' (Nikolaidou and Poupou 2017), the 'Greek Weird Wave' (Rose 2011), or the 'Queer Weird Wave' (Psaras 2016). As with other New Wave Greek films that followed on *Dogtooth* and *Strella*'s heels, *Xenia* came out in the middle of what has been globally narrativised as 'the Greek Crisis', the financial, social, and political turmoil that befell the country after 2009 and was mainly experienced as a debt crisis, pushing Greece to the limits of bankruptcy, Grexit from the European Union, and the collapse of the banking system. In 2014, Greece was also already becoming the stage of an intense 'refugee crisis' that would intensify in subsequent years, with thousands of asylum seekers – trying in the main to flee the war in Syria – coming to the country. On most occasions, they were hoping eventually to reach central Europe, yet they were condemned to remain in Greece, often residing in refugee camps euphemistically called 'hospitality structures'. Greece had also by that time been (and would continue to be) the stage for a rise in homophobic and xenophobic attacks, many of which were organised by the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party, since 2012 a considerable force in the Greek parliament, but also since 2013 on investigation and then trial as a criminal organisation, precisely for the attacks against migrants, activists, and unionists.

*Xenia* also came out in the heat of a nation-wide debate about citizenship (Christopoulos 2017). Traditionally offering nationality and citizenship on the basis of *jus sanguinis*, Greece had faced for decades the absurd situation of not offering papers to residents who were born and lived in the country all their lives – a form of marginalisation that intensified in the 21st century, as the number of young people born to immigrant parents who came in the 1990s reached unprecedented levels and visibility. These were young Greeks without the opportunity to acquire Greek citizenship and, in most cases, as they had not kept in contact with their parents' country of origin, young people condemned to live as effectively stateless. This situation gave rise to notorious

confrontations and prominent cases of young Greeks without citizenship (the famous NBA basketball player Giannis Antetokounmpo, for instance, even though celebrated as Greek after his career took off, had lived most of his life without the opportunity to acquire Greek citizenship). Most crucially, it gave rise to concrete political demands and an eventual resolution of sorts, through the redrafting of the Citizenship Bill in 2010–12 (unsuccessfully) and 2015–18 (successfully).

The film positions itself squarely at the centre of these two debates – the Crisis and the Citizenship debates. Its central story sees two young men, whose Albanian immigrant mother has just died, realising that they could now be stripped of their right to remain in Greece after they reach adulthood (the elder, Odi, played by Greek-Albanian actor Nikos Gelia, is about to turn 18). Unless, that is, they re-establish contact with their long-gone Greek father, who has never formally recognised them, and ask him to support their application for Greek citizenship. *Xenia* confronts Greece's deep issue with racism during the Crisis (exemplified by the acts of the Golden Dawn and the – limited but existing – public support it received), by constantly providing brief glimpses of the palimpsest of -isms and -ias that have been interacting in Greece, before and during the Crisis. The two brothers and their mother have lived a life of exploitation and xenophobia; of otherisation through what Rey Chow has so aptly described as the 'ethnicization of labour' (Chow 2002; El-Tayeb 2011: xiii–xv); and, last but not least, of homophobia. For the duration of the film, they keep meeting and connecting with people who have also had similar experiences. In one early scene when he happens upon a Golden Dawn attack, for instance, the younger brother Dany (played by Kostas Nikouli, also Greek-Albanian) will witness sex-working migrants being abused, a Muslim woman being forced to unveil herself, trans women being chased alongside African street sellers, a woman drug addict being verbally abused, and a shop owned by immigrants being damaged, before he himself is also attacked in the same scene.

The fact that the two protagonists find themselves in a position where they *could* ask for citizenship (by tracing their Greek father) is not in *Xenia* treated as a solution. It becomes, rather, a way to showcase the problem, as well as to show, through their desperate act of searching for their father and eventually abandoning that aim, citizenship as being not in any way related to blood, but performatively constructed by the act of demanding it, and thus open to different reenactments and constant reconceptualisations (Isin and Nielsen 2008). Dany and Odi's double position as young people living in Greece with a Greek and Albanian background – something underlined by their constant switching between the two languages – is not used as a way to reinforce the concept of Greekness, by claiming that it is now becoming broader, more inclusive of hybrid and multiethnic identities. Quite the opposite: it is used as a way of undermining Greekness's exclusive access to citizenship in the country.

The story starts like this: queer – and occasionally sex-working – 16-year-old Dany sets out from Crete, where he has lived with his mother, a singer in seedy bars. He goes to Athens to find his older brother Odi, who works there in a sandwich shop and meets him unwillingly (he is rather embarrassed by his younger brother's effeminacy). Dany wants to announce their mother's death but also to see the capital city he has never been to before. For a little while the film follows, with a weirdly unadorned attention to detail and mostly linear storytelling, the everyday precarious life of these young men as well as their persistence and optimism, the everyday plans and hopes that keep them together and holding on. The sandwich shop owner where Odi works harasses (regularly, by the looks of it) her workforce by shouting 'If you do not want to work, just go; do you know how many people are asking for work everyday?'; he responds with a quiet smile. The radio and TV, at various points, talk about the rise in racist attacks; they treat it as background noise. On the streets, fascist groups harass migrant kids; Odi advises his younger brother not to interfere ('when they are more than one, just don't look, and go'; 'but we don't look Albanian, you know'; 'yes, but we are; and you look queer, which is probably worse'). Odi lives with a Greek-Albanian flatmate, in a dark basement, yet they have also claimed the old apartment building's terrace where they have created a makeshift space to relax, listen to music, and drink. They never complain about how difficult it is to go (with a malfunctioning lift) from basement to terrace; even when we once see the endless flights of stairs in Odi's lengthy descent from terrace to flat, the result is rather comical.

In a similar mode, and even more expressly, Dany's queerness is shown as an extreme optimism able to affect everyone around him. Dany queers everything (from brotherhood love to the assaults he receives), with his gaze and camp comments. He also expects others to follow suit. Queerness, as a set of practices but also as a viewpoint and positive disposition to people and things, becomes a way to withstand pressure and make do – a way also to re-present others' making do as affectionate, sustaining, and sustainable. Even the narration of the demise of their mother takes, in this context, a lighter tone.

During his first night in Athens, Dany visits a gay bar in order to find details about their father. He is courted by Moustafa, a migrant and occasional sex worker who is saving money in order to be able to go to Italy. They flirt, they find themselves cavorting in the streets of Athens, before they get interrupted by a group of men ('the fascists') dressed in black and shouting 'Greece [belongs to] Christian Greeks', who stage an attack on the street – a realistic reconstruction of the many similar attacks Athens and other cities were experiencing in that period (Kotouza 2019; Ellinas 2013). The police will come and end up chasing not the attackers, but their victims. Dany will spend the night in a cell and the next morning will be sent to a penitentiary hostel – as he is still underage and, officially, a legal alien in the country. He will nevertheless



*Figure 10.1* Dany (Kostas Nikouli) watches, and photoshops, as he is being watched walking around Athens in *Xenia* (2014)

*Source: Xenia* (2014), directed by Panos H. Koutras © 100% Synthetic Films, Wrong Men, Entre Chien et Loup, and Peccadillo Pictures (2016).

escape and return to his brother's home, the trip to try to find the missing father thus becoming imperative.

Dany and Odi, now internal migrants in a country that has been marginalising them as perennial migrants and second-class citizens with their citizenship in abeyance, decide to embark on the journey that will see them travel through mainland Greece. They stop in Larisa where they find Tasos, their mother's queer best friend, now a patron of a seedy nightclub, and in a relationship with Ahmad, an immigrant worker. After Odi, bullied by a group of macho Greek-Albanian men, shoots them in self-defence, they leave the city, hiding for a few days in an old, abandoned hotel in the northern city of Kozani. This is the 'Kozani Xenia', built in 1965 to an acclaimed modernist design by architect Giorgos Nikolettopoulos, one of 26 hotels all bearing the same iconic name 'Xenia' which the Greek state erected across the country during the 1950s and 1960s to spearhead tourist regeneration.<sup>1</sup> Both the place and its name become transformative sites for the whole film, *xenia* being at once the ancient Greek word/concept for hospitality and etymologically very close to the word *xenos* (foreigner). Alone and undisturbed in the ruins of the Xenia hotel, Dany and Odi will mend (themselves, their relationship, the traumatic experiences of the past, their sense of a mission), while celebrating Odi's 18th birthday with brotherly – and in a couple of moments not so brotherly – love.



Figure 10.2 Dany (Kostas Nikouli) (left) and Odi (Nikos Gelia) under the sign of the abandoned Xenia hotel, its meaningful name inverted and in obvious need of some reconstruction, in *Xenia* (2014)

Source: *Xenia* (2014), directed by Panos H. Koutras © 100% Synthetic Films, Wrong Men, Entre Chien et Loup. Courtesy of Panos H. Koutras.

The brothers will continue their journey to reach the northern metropolis of Thessaloniki, where they have heard that their father now resides under a different name having become . . . a very successful homophobic and xenophobic local politician, supported by Golden Dawn. In a final confrontation with such a politician who may, or may not, be their father, and who lives in what looks like a kitsch and *nouveau riche* imitation of the Kozani Xenia hotel, Dany and Odi decide not to press him anymore to sign the relevant recognition papers and prefer to procure a payment in cash instead. With the money they have extracted from the Golden Dawn politician, they may return and rebuild the Xenia hotel they have loved so much, or they may ‘go to Europe’, ‘everywhere foreigners, but, for that matter, everywhere at home’ as Odi says to Maria, a young Ukrainian-Greek singer they befriend on the last parts of their journey.

Add to all that a subplot about a ‘Greece has got talent’ TV music show taking place at the same time in Thessaloniki, to which the older brother decides to apply by singing, no less, a song from the 1960s by Italian Patty Pravo, ‘Tutt’al più’, the mother’s favourite tune. Pravo’s retro songs have

already been prominent in the film's soundtrack since the very first scene, when Dany announces that 'Patty Pravo is my goddess' (to the eventual sound of her song 'Sentimento'). And the Italian singer even briefly appears herself as a *dea ex machina*, in the very last scenes of the film (with Dany shouting once again 'Θεά!' ('Goddess!')). Patty Pravo's music and presence bookend and syncopate this film, bringing along a certain type of camp sensibility to underline its use not as escapism, but quite the opposite: a strategy of representation, affective attachment, insistence, and survival, that also provides a political statement.

*Xenia* has been praised for its clearly playful reference to the Odyssey (Odi, after all, is short for Odysseus – it seems 21st century world audiences still like their Greek film to contain a reference to the classical past, too),<sup>2</sup> its progressive representation of migration, identity, and desire, and, last but not least, its self-conscious reference to Greece-of-the-Crisis, its 'crisis realism'. It has been less discussed as a new queer film – which is a pity, since by and large it works as a self-conscious pastiche, a playful revisiting of tropes that have been used in the recent past by a canon of new queer cinema examples, including those talking about migration (Aaron 2004; Rich 2013). When, midway through the film and following a series of intertextual references (to key films by Ducastel and Martineau, Özpetek, Almodóvar, Lifshitz, Giannaris and Rodrigues), the two brothers enter the empty *Xenia* hotel, the viewer feels they may as well have entered a space called simply 'the welcoming heterotopia of queer cinema' – for reasons that I will explain in the following section. What I will argue is that not simply the references to queer desire or the presence of queer migrant characters, but also its more sustained (new) queer aesthetic, allow *Xenia* to go beyond a 'forthright celebration of homosexuality, advocacy of immigrant rights and rejection of patriarchy' (Lodge 2014).<sup>3</sup> They offer instead a radical reframing of questions regarding migrancy and refugeehood, identity and belonging, Greek/European society during the Crisis, and, last but not least, national and sexual citizenship.

*Xenia* the hotel and *Xenia* the film may stand for a metaphorical 'elsewhere', a heterotopia in which queer cinema can talk about migration, citizenship, crisis, identity and belonging, yet they are also presented as a metonymy of a national space in crisis. They become the space where a realist allegory (if there can ever be such a thing) of Greek society during the recent socioeconomic crisis is articulated. Precisely by bringing together national allegory and new queer film aesthetics, *Xenia* succeeds in problematising the two main progressive arguments around which the debate on migration is held on a global scale today: hospitality and citizenship. In this film, hospitality ('*xenia*') is not there to be offered, but becomes an expansive state of affairs – needed by everyone, and to be co-managed by everyone at a moment when everyone is becoming a foreigner, a '*xenos*'. Citizenship takes a similarly unexpected turn: it is not citizenship rights, but the very idea of citizenship (including sexual citizenship) that becomes

a quest(ion) addressed to everyone by the end of the film. With the two protagonists walking towards an unknown direction, and with Patty Pravo coming to their queer reassurance (while also offering no closure for any of the film's pressing questions or open wounds), *Xenia* ends, as we shall see, with a scene that can make us think of what Lauren Berlant has called 'diva citizenship': a genealogical provocation, a moment of emergence in which 'a person stages a dramatic coup in a public sphere in which she does not have privilege' (Berlant 1997: 227).

### **(Queer) migrants, refugeehood, citizenship, and (the Greek) crisis**

Some of the best Greek film musicals of the 1960s, still in the cultural canon to this day, had their most spectacular (and, for many contemporary viewers who avidly rewatched them over the decades, their queerest) numbers in luxurious, modern, shining Greek hotels. Indeed, one of the main arguments about the need for those 1960s Greek musicals and the reasons for their extreme success with Greek spectators is that they were culturally working as a celebration of tourism and modernisation, being equally a paean to the Greek state and its futurity. Forget about the colourful blouses, the elaborate dance numbers meshing bouzouki with '60s global pop, or the melodramatic storylines. The point of the old Greek musicals was their setting: those new roads, the Athenian skyline, the tourist beaches, and, of course, *those* hotels (cf. Papadimitriou 2005).

In that respect, there is an irony underlying *Xenia*, reaching perhaps its peak when the two protagonists start singing and dancing elaborate routines they seem to have rehearsed in the past in the makeshift environment they have created in the derelict *Xenia* hotel. Do they knowingly stage a pastiche reminiscent of old popular Greek cinema in that site? Possibly not (even though, at the rate older Greek musicals are retransmitted on Greek television, they may as well have been growing up watching them on TV or online; as must have done the film's director and the members of his crew). Their dance nevertheless, in that setting, playfully underlines a set of visual allegories strategically addressing the Greek cultural context. They dance alone, in the light and the diegetic music they themselves provide, on the patio of a derelict hotel site which could be seen as a reminder of Greece's wayward path to modernisation and current financial ruin.

As the two brothers perform their dance, with the interaction of their bodies bordering on the erotic, the setting thus gently mocking the representational limits of a traditional Greek family scene, one is also reminded of the ways in which the concept of the traditional Greek family has already been working against these two men. First, by marginalising their single mother (who, we have heard, was the victim of gender violence and exploitation), then by disallowing them to claim citizenship through a strict law of blood patrilineage operating as the main citizenship law of this patriarchal

and (Greek) family-driven country. Traditional kinship network and wayward modernisation come, therefore, to be added as targets to the film's already analysed critiques of racism and xenophobia (cf. Koutras 2014).

By positioning the Xenia hotel as a metonymy of Greece-in-crisis, Koutras's work seems to be gesturing towards all those debates without necessarily choosing a side. This could indeed be a nostalgic paean to what *has been* and a revisiting of a ruinous site as a national allegory of failure: after all, we have just seen scenes from a country riven by nationalist and extremist thugs, a country in despair, with its support networks being dismantled and in political, social, and economic meltdown. Given the film's overall politics, however, one could also see here a progressive statement about migration and migrants as being the country's real new force, the way out of the dead-end. While drinking in the empty Xenia, Odi fantasises about how he will return one day to buy the hotel and 'rebuild it from scratch, make it a brilliant hotel, and live in it too'. At the end of the film, the two brothers, with the support of a queer family of sorts which they have assembled in the process (about which more later), may indeed take the decision to go back to the derelict Xenia and remake it – a new return of the optimistic Greek '60s, only now with the much-needed input of the country's new citizens. This seems like, one might say, an old debt being paid by a new reconstruction (a 'debt-restructuring', as it were), and thus by new, but 'healthier' debt – a country giving (recognition, allowance) and taking back (new labour, reconstruction). 'In *Xenia*, everyone is indebted to everyone else as a basic precondition', asserts Stathis Gourgouris, making sure to add that this is only part of the story, since it is exactly the film's uncompromising queer politics that allows it to 'refuse to be absorbed into some sort of redemptive *familiarity*' (Gourgouris 2019; original emphasis). It is exactly because the film also talks about queer trauma, queer families and kinship, while aligning itself with a recognisable queer film aesthetics, that it can also remobilise its political statements about inclusion, migrant rights, polity, and citizenship.

*Xenia*, in other words, plays with a popular progressive argument that sees migrants as 'the new regenerative power' of the old world; it allows this argument to be glimpsed, and then takes it away. Yes, this is a new story (a new beginning) for this old hotel, as well as for this old and indebted country; but it is not a repayment of the debt, it is not a refurbishment, it is not a guaranteed success story. It is not even a face-to-face dismantling of the power of neofascist politics and their racist practices. It is, instead, a return, not to a grand strategy, but to tactics and practices – not a stable assertion of hospitality (of a national 'us' that becomes hospitable to an incoming 'them'), but a thinking about sites of hospitality as ethical sites of in-betweenness. Last, but not least, even though putting forth a clear demand for citizenship, the film in no way posits that this is the end of the road. Instead, it allows for the multiple and variously queer temporalities of citizenship to become apparent, presenting us with a model of citizenship that is constantly demanding, in construction, imminent but also immanent.

### The (queer) practice of un-suturing

The same year *Xenia* came out in Greek theatres (to great critical acclaim in international festivals, but lukewarm returns at the Greek box office), the most watched Greek film (and one of the biggest recent commercial successes of Greek cinema) was Christoforos Papakaliatis's *Worlds Apart* (2015). The two films, intriguingly, have a considerable thematic proximity. They both deal with the issue of the rising attacks against migrants in Greece after 2009, especially the organised pogroms conducted by members of Golden Dawn. They also clearly attempt quite a realistic depiction of 'Crisis Greece', and they both, in some way, address the tendency of the Greek family to 'hide', to exclude, and to perpetuate violence and trauma. Yet in structural terms, these two films could not be further apart. *Worlds Apart* keeps distinct and separate its five different stories of precarity, despair, and racism, until the end when, during a classic Sunday family table gathering, the viewer realises, through constant shot-reverse shots that uncover the members of the family one after the other, that all the stories we have been watching belong to members of the same family. This 'return' and repositioning of everyone's story to the arch-narrative of a kinship network offers the storyline's most dramatic moment (because, yes, viewer, the father will be the Golden Dawn chief overseeing the pogrom against the old airport settlement where, unbeknownst to him, his daughter is staying with her refugee boyfriend; and, of course, she will be killed during the attack). The film eventually also produces a catharsis and a type of solution: the pater-familias will understand the tragic consequences of his acts and repent; the mother will find solace in the company of a gentle German man; the remaining son will take care of them and their mourning. Compare this to *Xenia*, where the point precisely is that we will never get an eventual family reunion, and the various parts of the story will *not* be tied together. Indeed, closure will be delayed and resisted to the very end, and the family itself will remain an open-ended queer process.

The best way perhaps to account for the films' crucial difference is by employing the formal terms of suture (in *Worlds Apart*) and what I would call 'un-suturing' (in *Xenia*). We are used to thinking of suture as the mechanism for providing ideological, subjective, and visual stability to a film (Heath 1977–78; Oudart 1977–78). Developed as a cinematic critical term on the basis of its use in Lacan's psychoanalysis, it has been variously employed in a more metaphorical way too. One could argue that avant-garde filmmaking is primarily engaged in producing un-suturing – in undermining visual and other stability, from how it handles framing to the way it structures shots, persistently avoiding reverse shots (thus distancing itself from one of the major suturing mechanisms in classical Hollywood cinema). Crucially, if in the new queer cinema of someone like Derek Jarman a process of un-suturing came in as an obvious link to his avant-garde aesthetics, it soon became a marker of his films' new queer aesthetics too. Often new queer

cinema after him revelled in a wider process of un-suturing, a practice of ‘exploiting existing gaps in order to create openings’ (Papanikolaou 2015), as in Isaac Julien’s *Looking for Langston* (1989, UK), Gus Van Sant’s *Mala Noche* (1986, USA), or Constantine Giannaris’s *A Place in the Sun* (1995, UK/Greece) and *Trojans* (1990, UK/Greece).

*Xenia* inverts closure in more than one way: in its very storyline, in the brothers’ quest, as well as in what it says about Greece and the Crisis economies, about Greekness and the economies of citizenship, about otherness and racism. As it does with much else, it provides a *mise en abyme* here too, placing a process of symbolic un-suturing at its centre. In what is a playful reference to the processes of creating visual/psychological stability, as well as the tradition of their queer undermining, Dany has been throughout the film attached to a pet rabbit, Dido. He takes it with him; he talks to it often in the presence of others (in a clever handling of the shot/reverse shot that avoids including the living rabbit in both shots). Just before the two brothers reach their Xenia hotel refuge, Dany asks Odi to kill his rabbit, crying that it has been wounded in the preceding altercations. There, in a painful confrontation that culminates in a right-to-left panning shot from one brother to the other, we realise for the first time that the rabbit is only a stuffed children’s puppet, an inanimate object. Unwilling but pressed by his brother’s crisis, Odi will rip it apart, stuffing feathers filling the air.



*Figure 10.3* Unsutured but still there: Dido the rabbit appears as a queer fairy to reassure Dany (Kostas Nikouli) in *Xenia* (2014)

*Source:* *Xenia* (2014), directed by Panos H. Koutras © 100% Synthetic Films, Wrong Men, Entre Chien et Loup, and Peccadillo Pictures (2016).

On the realist plane, we have just seen a transitional object being sacrificed in the process of a traumatic reconciliation with reality. Yet, from that moment on, the 'killed' rabbit will follow the couple for a while, now as a huge oversized living puppet, of course with his head unhinged and falling off and feathers dropping from his torn body. Dido the rabbit has come un-sutured, yet it remains no less present; if anything, it appears to Dany as a queer reassuring fairy in a later scene. No one tries to mend or suture it together again – the point, it seems, is to let it remain like this, even if Dany has to confront the reality of it being just a puppet now. Un-suturing, after all, is in this film a way to deal with its overall story and the traumas nestled at its core. Rather than a suturing mechanism that would promote detachment as a way of making sense, un-suturing proposes attachment as a way of making do. There is another way of telling a story of migration and queer, ethnic, and racialised trauma, and one could do so without looking for the stability and familiarity of a conclusion. There is another way of confronting one's traumas, one's account of the self, one's search for citizenship and belonging, without looking for suture.

### **The (queer) site of hospitality**

What nominates a site as a queer site? How do bodies which act in a non-heteronormative way affect the space they are in, how do they turn it into a queer space (Betsky 1997)? These have in various ways been central questions in queer activist practices, queer art, queer theory, and, of course, queer cinema, at least since the 1980s. Films like João Pedro Rodrigues's *O fantasma* (2000, Portugal), Ana Kokkinos's *Head On* (1998, Australia), or Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau's *Drôle de Felix/The Adventures of Felix* (2000), can be seen as studies in queering urban (or, in the last case, national) space. Dany's body is filmed walking around with a similar aim. As Dany 'discovers' the world around him, constantly orienting himself while being disoriented, one is again reminded of Sara Ahmed's point about queer phenomenology – the idea that the queer body's orientation towards objects-in-the-world redirects them as it is itself informed by non-normative desire and the experience of difference; and that in this interaction it allows the world to be seen in a different light (see Ahmed 2006).

Culminating in the scenes in the Xenia hotel, this reorientation and nomination of queer space becomes crucial in building the film's functioning allegory. Hospitality, to the extent that its metonymical site occupies the centre of this film, is happening, as it were, in a heterotopic and queered space. And it becomes intertwined with it. It is there that the two brothers can *be* together, as they dance together, as they make that space together, nominating it with their bodies. This is how the symbol of Greece's abandonment and noxious debt is turned into a queer refuge – with a possible future. Like the national hotel which the two brothers may make their own in the end, co-producing it as a place for a future economy, hospitality in *Xenia* is not

a 'structure', but a matter of co-managing throughout. It is not something given by some to others, it is not something that is bestowed by the state in the end, or that the state needs a push in order to bestow. Hospitality is, like queer space, what bodies make when they orient towards one another, ethically, with a view to co-belonging, queerly.

Making hospitality so central a concept in a film about migration, identity, and citizenship might seem problematic to some, and for good reason. As an argument, even though used widely by Left and Right, it cannot avoid a tendency to eventually be linked to essentialist and nationalist rhetoric, according to which it behoves a 'progressive' nation to be hospitable to 'others' who are thus castigated to remain, perennially, others. Not in this case. Not a given, not preexisting, not, even, presupposed, hospitality is in this film to be shared, to be co-managed, to be reinhabited, to be redrawn. It is very much the result of constant practices of un-suturing, of destabilising, and then trying to rebalance. The site of hospitality – Athens and the other Greek cities 'revisited' through the eyes of Dany and Odi in this travelogue, and as their metonymical extension the Xenia hotel – is one we constantly remake, and it is exactly the performativity of its queerness that also affects the constitution of this *we* as, itself, the result of a similar queer phenomenology. Hospitality, in this scenario, is not based on rules and pre-arrangements – it is instead the product of a disorientation, and a constant reorientation: of one towards the other, of every one to every other.

### The (queer) time of citizenship

When will Dany and Odi become Greek citizens? Towards the end of the film they decide not to pursue the demand of a paternity test from the politician they have ambushed. The option of a different, queer kinship is open to them – as their mother's queer friend Tasos has already offered, in a previous scene, to sign their papers instead (and 'adopt them, together with [partner] Ahmad'). They may, equally, decide to continue their journey. Because what matters, it seems, for the film, is to finish by underlining citizenship not as a specific, limited application, a right for *some* people, but as a constant demand – one that extends equally to the past and the future, that is reiterated and reinserted in the narrative of polity, all the time, every time. This does not preclude a recognition of the specificity, topicality, and urgency of particular demands.<sup>4</sup> It means, though, a leaving open of the demand, in order to realise that only by keeping it open can one conceptualise a citizenship based on inclusion and not on exclusion, a citizenship that is recognised and recognises at the same time. In the queer poetics of this film, this leaving-open is also, like so much else of its central points, a matter of both content *and* form.

In a last scene, the neofascist politician who is possibly the boys' father keeps repeating: 'I am not the one you are looking for; you are making a mistake; I am not your father'. The two brothers respond by revisiting in

front of him the trauma of their abandonment as kids. Dany, with the film's script poking queer fun at key recognition scenes of the *Odyssey* or of Greek tragedy, asks him to strip, in order to see if his hairy chest is the one he still constantly dreams of. He was not the one with the hairy chest, Odi corrects him; 'what you are remembering is the chest of [our mother's queer friend] Tasos, who used to put you to sleep when we were young' – deep recognition shown here again to have been a process of queer over-appropriation. 'Your brother has lost it. . . . He is saying that I'm your father [but] look at me, do you remember me? Do you really remember *me*?', screams the politician. At which point Odi quips: 'No, *you* tell me, do *you* remember me?'<sup>5</sup> And then he, this elder brother, who *remembers* but also *demands to be remembered*, with a focus and composure belying the fact that the importance lies not so much in extracting any confession from this older man, as in doing exactly this retelling in front of him, narrates in detail the scene 12 years before in which he saw the father abandoning them, early one morning, taking all their savings with him.

What is happening here is not a simple reversal of the scenario of recognition, but the reframing of the very question of recognition: from the 'who are you to me?' to a 'who are you to (be able to) recognise me?' (cf. Butler and Athanasiou 2013; Butler et al. 2016). Recognition appears here vulnerable to language, as it is also bound up to the ghostly traces of mis-recognition and loss (cf. Athanasiou 2017). Viewed within the realist frame of the story, the two boys are thus deciding to give up their willingness to establish a patrilineal, direct bloodline – a heteronormative recognition of citizenship. They are fed up. Other options are presented to them. They are no longer interested in a DNA test or a confession from the right-wing dealer-abuser-turned-politician. But as this scene, and the whole film, so persistently work at the level of (national) allegory too, the phrase directed to the father, 'do *you* remember me/do *you* recognise me', is left hanging, underlining the openness in the politics of recognition and citizenship that *Xenia* has so far been mobilising.

What astonishes in this film is how undermined nationally sanctioned linear time becomes – and this includes, in the end, the linear time of citizenship and kinship. The two main characters do not accept a heteronormative redrafting of (their) kinship and (their) national identity. They do not finish by positing a set of papers for Greek citizenship, in the same way that they do not want the recognition from a father they remember; they demand instead, in a queer time reversal, to be the ones remembered. Exactly where the realist reading of this scene cuts across the allegorical, they insist on a model of citizenship that comes out of co-presence – constant recognition as an ethics of belonging together. This can only happen in a different type of time, in a time that recognises return, cruel optimism and insistence, traumatic revisions, fixations. A queer time that can allow, instead of the promise of a future assertion (I (will) recognise you), the very radicalness of the question: do *you* remember me?

A neofascist politician who cannot play in this game of inverted recognition cedes his place at the end of this film to another figure, no longer a figure of authority, nor of a state and stable recognition, but a figure of queer emergence. Patty Pravo will emerge in the end out of nowhere, because, as happens with all ‘little queer gods’ and goddesses (Sedgwick 2011), she knows how and when to appear and offer queer reassurance, before fleeing again. After having left the politician’s house, and while the brothers walk towards the city, there she comes, Patty, in a black limousine. She opens the window, smiles to Dany and exclaims ‘Ciao, amore!’. She is, of course, as a realist reading would have it, again a fantasy, a projection of Dany’s own mind, one more in a series of his projections we have seen in this film. It is he, the queer boy who learned to obsess about her songs in order to endure, the one who now ‘brings her to life’. It is he who sees her, he who recognises her, not the other way round.

Yet we are, as I have said, well into the intersection between the realistic and the allegorical. Patty Pravo, who has appeared in all her camp aura, provides the final queer cinema allusion in a work insisting that this reference should be taken as an important political statement. She is there, the ultimate diva-citizenship statement, in Dany’s queer world which has been persistently, throughout the film, sometimes ironically, sometimes realistically, sometimes allegorically, doubling up with the xenia-world, this film’s



*Figure 10.4* ‘Ciao, amore!’: Patty Pravo (herself!) appears as a queer *dea ex machina* at the end of *Xenia* (2014)

*Source:* *Xenia* (2014), directed by Panos H. Koutras © 100% Synthetic Films, Wrong Men, Entre Chien et Loup, and Peccadillo Pictures (2016).

Xenialand. And at this transborder of realism with allegory, it is not that important whether Pravo, who remembers to come in the end, who smiles, who *recognises*, is actually there or not. What matters is that, in this queer time, in this un-suturing film, in this queer space of hospitality that it has turned into, she, as well as they, as well as us, share an understanding of citizenship created there and on the spot. Like trauma, citizenship here is not something one has, nor even something one is bestowed, once and for all, but a way of being implicated, again and again, in continuing practices (including the un-suturing practices of queer cinema), in lived durations, in places experienced. Or, to borrow Cathy Caruth's words on trauma and history paraphrasing them slightly, in the queer logi(sti)cs of this Xenialand citizenship too, like 'history, like trauma, is never simply one's own' (see Caruth 1996: 24). Citizenship becomes 'precisely the way in which we are implicated' in each other's histories, in each other's history, in each other's trauma.

## Notes

- 1 Celebrated as the symbol of a modern(ist) Greece and its most iconic cultural expression, the Xenia hotels were a project overseen by famous architect Aris Konstantinides and bore a signature modernist aesthetics. With time many of them became either too difficult to manage, too run down, or else abandoned. They have been seen by critics as an index of the state's chronic managerial failures and in need of privatisation.
- 2 Directors have been playing along with this, with Yorgos Lanthimos directly referencing the myth of Iphigenia in *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2017, Ireland/UK), and Koutras queering Oedipus in *Strella*.
- 3 For a different, 'un-queering' reading, see Karalis (2015).
- 4 In promotional interviews for the film, Koutras repeated how important it was to change the Greek legal framework and offer immediate citizenship to at least all those people born and raised in Greece. In protest that this legal framework had not yet been adopted, he even refused to accept any accolades for *Xenia* from the Greek film academy in 2015, a gesture that attracted wide publicity.
- 5 In colloquial Greek, the question «με θυμάσαι», even though literally meaning 'do you remember me?', also retains the strong nuance of 'do you recognise me?', and is often used to mean that.