

# NATIONAL TEAM OF GREECE: GENDER, SPORTS, AND THE RECESSION

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## ABSTRACT

*National Team of Greece* (2015) was a dramedy broadcast on Greek television revolving around a group of women's efforts to establish the first Greek women's curling team, amidst a number of personal challenges and societal obstacles, as much as against the backdrop of a country in deep political and economic crisis. Building on scholarly

approaches to the ideological role of popular culture in turbulent times, this article examines the infiltration of recession themes in the content of television fiction, while centralizing a gendered reading of the narrative of the case at hand. Specifically, it provides a critical reading of the main narrative strategies of the programme – the female narrator, the female ensemble, and the metaphor of sports – in order to register the ways that the series enters into a dialogue with familiar gender tropes, such as questions of female agency, coping, and empowerment. Finally, it discusses the concept of empowerment and the ways it is accomplished or impeded within television in the (post) recessionary cultural moment, by focusing on aspects of the series' production and reception.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Global Economic Crisis (hereafter GEC) and its regional and national manifestations since 2007 kept media scholars eager to follow the ways that moments of heightened societal tension find their way into media discourses. Entertainment in general and television fiction in particular have been consistently present in this endeavor focusing on the ideological dynamics created between a society in crisis and its representational footprint. The argument that television fiction constitutes a significant site for the negotiation of social issues, problems, or crises is not by any means original (see, for instance, Aitaki 2018a, Dittmer 2005, Wodak 2010). Television entertainment maintains a central role in both theoretical and empirical evaluations of how popular culture helps make sense of moments, events, and periods of exceptional societal tremors.

Scholars have elaborated on television fiction's "orientation role" by providing interpretative frames that help viewers understand ongoing political issues and controversies while also providing a sense of direction and purpose (Porto 2005). Specifically, recessionary film and television have been theorized as "a seismograph that registers the traumas of collapse, locating their artifacts along a spectrum of ideological fantasies, social erasures, and profound anxieties [...]" (Boyle & Mrozowski 2013: xii). Television fiction has also been addressed as accommodator and shaper of "hot moments", i.e. critical moments where a given society enters a state of introspection and self-reflection (Aitaki 2018b). These approaches are in line with a broader understanding of televisual stories as "interpretative practices" that essentially constitute a tool for people to make sense of "the flow of events that would otherwise be chaotic, and cognitively and emotionally out of control" (Buonanno 2008: 72).

In times of uncertainty, it is important to approach popular culture as complex texts, rich with ideological and cultural connections. Extant research has captured a variety of representational responses to GEC and recessionary culture, including the positioning of "the private" and the home as the epicenter of financial crises (Aitaki 2018c); the gendered politics of recession and austerity (Davies & O'Callaghan 2017), and the trope of the "failing man" and the "adaptive/coping woman" (Negra & Tasker 2014), as well as the moralizing of the recession through cautionary tales and melodramatic aesthetics (Schuyler 2015).

In line with the above critical approaches to the study of fictional narratives in times of heightened societal ten-

sions, this article offers a close reading of a series outside the usual analytical focus on Anglophone entertainment; it zooms in on a Greek television series, entitled *National Team of Greece* which was broadcast in 2015 – in the aftermath of the European debt crisis or during the "Greek crisis" as this period came to be known. The Greek crisis is widely understood as triggered by the GEC and marked by the implementation of heavy austerity measures, while also framed as a result of both structural weaknesses of the Greek economy and cultural "flaws" of the Greek people (Mylonas 2012, 2014). In terms of its research enquiries, this study looks at the intersections between fictional and real worlds through the lens of "gendered recession"; it is not only interested in the infiltration of recessionary themes and discourses in popular culture, but is also sensitized to the meaning of (representations of) gender for recessionary culture (Negra and Tasker 2014). As such, it contributes to ongoing debates around how complex depictions of gender within recessionary contexts can provide vehicles for feminist critique (Davies & O'Callaghan 2017) and problematizations of the notion of empowerment both on-screen and off-screen.

The section that follows constitutes a brief presentation of the show, introducing the reader to the fictional world under examination, as well as locating its place in the Greek television universe during the crisis years. The three analytical sections that come directly after are specifically dedicated to the dissection of the main narrative strategies of the show and their interpretation through the theoretical lenses of female agency, coping, and empowerment. The concluding section reflects more broadly on the concept of empowerment and the ways it is accomplished or impeded within television in the (post)recessionary cultural moment, focusing on key aspects of the series' production and reception.

## 2. NATIONAL TEAM OF GREECE: CASE AND METHOD

*National Team of Greece* (hereafter *NToG*) is the title of a television dramedy broadcast on Greek television between 13 January and 9 June 2015 by the private (commercial) broadcaster MEGA Channel. It ran for a total of 15 episodes and, although it was planned for a second season, unexpected circumstances related to economic factors forced the abrupt ending of the show on a cliffhanger, leaving audiences and critics without closure. Coinciding with the implementation of capital controls and banking restrictions introduced to the

country in June 2015, the production of the second season (including at least 8 more episodes) was eventually permanently cancelled.

*NToG* follows the lives of a heterogeneous group of women in their attempt to establish the first Greek women's curling team. Apart from curling not being a particularly popular sport in Greece, the aforementioned efforts are also impeded by a number of personal and societal obstacles at the backdrop of a country in deep political and economic crisis. The group consists of four women: Niki, Froso, Fivi, and Stallo. Niki is a divorced mother of two (a teenage girl and a younger boy with mobility impairment), who used to work as a fashion designer but lost her job as a result of personnel cuts in the beginning of the crisis; she is the one who takes the initiative and leads all the efforts to bring the team together, with curling becoming a vehicle for her to reset her life and get in touch with her goal-oriented former athlete self. Niki's sister, Froso, is a submissive woman in an abusive marriage with a racist man; Froso is the owner of a small hair salon and mother of two boys, one of which has joined the extreme right-wing party of Golden Dawn. Fivi is a popular actress whose status as rich and famous is compromised by the decadence suffered by the national star system, as well as a dark secret of the past; similarly to Niki, Fivi is enthusiastic toward the possibility of curling giving some additional meaning to her life. The fourth member of the team is happy-go-lucky Stallo who originally comes from Cyprus; her joining the team is consistent with her general philosophy of not taking life too seriously and, instead, enjoying every moment of it. The ensemble of four is joined by Christos, a former professional curling athlete and coach. Despite his initial resistance, Christos – a gay man raised in Canada by Greek parents – is not only convinced to teach the women how to master the sport, but also to join their fight against the corruption of the political system as it is reflected in the sports sector and to lead them to the participation in the European championship.

The show was met with positive reviews by local television critics, emphasizing the bold way in which creator and screenwriter Giorgos Kapoutzidis (also playing the role of Christos) manages to address a number of topics drawing from the reality of Greek society, including unemployment, domestic violence, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, the rise of extreme right-wing parties, political and media corruption, and more (Alexandris 2015; Ioannou 2017). Despite critical acclaim, *NToG* was not as popular as Kapoutzidis' previous series, a fact that was mainly attributed to the discrepancy between the heavier nature of the topics addressed in *NToG*

and light-hearted humor and goofy characters characterizing the creator's earlier works, *Savvatogennimenes* (2003-2004; transl. *Born Lucky*) and *Sto Para Pente* (2005-2007; transl. *In the Nick of Time*). *NToG* did, however, mark the creator's decisive shift toward difficult topics, as his most recent series, *Serres* (2022-2024) deals with the struggles of being a homosexual man in the Greek periphery and is currently one of the few Greek TV series featured on Netflix.

Interestingly enough, *NToG* was not the only instance of Greek television fiction drawing heavily from the social reality of a society in crisis. With Greece at the epicenter of the European economic crisis roughly between 2009 and 2018, narratives of the crisis were not monopolized by information media; they also circulated on prime-time slots through entertaining programming, mainly fiction (but also reality television). Notable examples include the family comedy *Piso sto Spiti* (2011-2013; transl. *Back Home*), which told the story of a family in serious debt who are subjected to domestic austerity measures by their creditor, the youngest son's German girlfriend, Angela (a rather unsubtle reference to Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany at the time); the comedy *Me ta Pantelonia Kato* (2013-2014; transl. *With Pants Down*), an adaptation of the Spanish programme *Con el Culo al Aire* (2012-2014), describing the everyday life of people of different backgrounds who decide to move to a camping site as a way to cope with the high cost of living in crisis-hit Greece; and the black comedy *Kato Partali* (2014-2015) following the adventures of a former golden boy in a village of the Greek periphery.

The close reading of case studies makes it possible for researchers to provide in-depth explorations of cultural products of unique sociocultural weight and/or national significance which can then contribute to identifying general patterns and contextual variations of the intersections between popular culture and recessionary times. The present study contributes to this effort by centralizing a case of heightened national resonance, in the hopes of illustrating how global phenomena transform into localized interpretative practices facilitated by popular culture. Following a critical dissection sensitized to intersections of recessionary themes and feminist criticism, the study provides an analysis of the main narrative strategies of the programme, i.e. the central pillars of its narrative construction as serialized fiction. From an empirical point of view, this is pursued primarily through an analysis of concrete narrative mechanisms and excerpts of increased relevance alongside a holistic reading of the series' 15 episodes; the latter is based on a wider contextual and in-

tertextual reading that includes the circumstances in which a cultural text is produced, broadcast, and consumed, as well as other relevant texts and genres.

In the empirical sections that follow, the analysis is structured around three inductively identified narrative tropes, i.e. the female narrator, the female ensemble, and sports as a metaphor; questions of female agency, coping, and empowerment are discussed in a way that combines empirical observations and theoretical anchoring, thus offering three self-contained, yet interconnected, takes on the ways that the programme enters into a dialogue with familiar recession and gender tropes.

### 3. NARRATING THE CRISIS: FEMALE VOICE-OVER AS FEMALE TAKE-OVER

The use of voice-over in *NToG* has a number of different functions relating to both narrative goals (such as introducing the characters and setting the tone) and ideological layering (emphasis on the female perspective). A close examination of some illustrative instances can provide an overview of the ways that voice-over works as a narrative mechanism, condensing background information about key characters and events, but also conditioning the reader into a particular mode of emotional engagement with on-screen events. The voice belongs to one of the female protagonists, Niki, who is the first person we see in the opening sequence of the first episode. The scene shows Niki in her bed in a dreaming state while the voice-over talks about dreams in a general, almost philosophical manner (most Greek viewers would be able to match the image of Niki with the voice of popular actress Smaragda Karydi, allowing no space for confusion about who the narrator is):

There are two kinds of dreams. The ones that we see in our sleep and are a sequence of images, memories, and feelings which create a baffling story. [...] And then there are the ones that we see when we are awake. We make them ourselves, consciously. They are our goals, the dreams that we strive to realize, the dreams we had – I had – when I was little. [...] Sometimes, they also form a baffling story. In many cases, the ones that come to life even without putting in too much effort are the dreams that come in our sleep, deep from our unconscious. Whereas the goals that we consciously dedicate

our whole life to remain an unattainable dream. That is so weird. And maybe unfair too!

Niki's narration is heard over a montage of scenes including Niki sleeping in her bed at night, having a nightmare where she encounters a committee of humans wearing animal masks, remembering her childhood dreams, back to sleeping in her bed, and waking up by her alarm clock at 7:36 a.m. The scenes that follow show Niki frantically getting ready for job interviews, with the rest of the episode focusing on her agony about landing a job and accentuating her disappointment over consecutive rejections. Additional scenes of the episode centering on the character of Niki inform the viewer about her broken marriage and her ex-husband's indifference and unreliability when it comes to responsibilities (and expenses) related to their two children, as well as young Niki's career as a handball player. Niki's voice-over also wraps up the episode and provides an overall evaluation of how she currently experiences life, i.e. in a state of complete lack of dreams and goals. At the same time, however, comes the realization that she needs to get back on her feet:

I had made a lot of dreams about my life. I saw some of them becoming true, some of them being forestalled, others falling apart. The worst was when the day came that I stopped having dreams. When the only dreams that I had left were the ones that were coming in my sleep. It's a weird thing about dreams after all. In order to see them, you have to fall asleep. But in order to live them, you have to wake up. I am awake.

The order of appearance in combination with the voice-over establish Niki as a *prima inter pares* character (similarly to the case of Carrie Bradshaw in *Sex and the City* [1998-2004]) who, although part of a character ensemble, appears to be assigned with additional roles. Generally speaking, narratologists have observed the "privileged status of narrators vis-à-vis narrated character: because the narrator's acts literally bring the story into existence, his or her word carries greater authority than the word of a character" (Lanser 2004: 127). However, Niki's status as a homodiegetic narrator, i.e. a narrator that is also actively involved in the fictional world, is a restricting factor when it comes to her knowledge about the inner universe of the other characters, as well as future events (Allrath et al. 2005). As a result, Niki gets to know the other characters together with the viewers, inviting them in

a collective decoding of their personalities; this usually takes place with an introductory description of a given character as a kind of a riddle which, by the end of the episode and after having observed the character's behaviors and actions in a variety of contexts, is enriched with additional data which hopefully contribute to a more comprehensive understanding about why they are the way they are. For example, in episode 4, Niki introduces us to Christos, providing some information about his routines:

I had known Christos Melitis for about a month. I knew that he never smiled. Or at least I had never seen him smile. And I also knew that he had imposed to himself a strict schedule. Every day, at the same time, he prepares his breakfast himself because he wants his diet to be perfect. Every day, at the same time, he exercises with consistent energy and discipline because he wants his physical condition to be perfect. And he meticulously chooses his clothes because he wants his outward appearance to be perfect. I also knew that he spent most of his time alone, in a perfect house, perfectly decorated by himself, listening to music, reading on his computer, cooking, watching a film, and going to bed at 12:30 sharp. Once a week he goes to a gay bar. He never flirts, he doesn't allow anyone to flirt with him, he has two drinks – never more – and returns home at 2 a.m. at the latest and always alone. Yes, I knew a lot about Christos Melitis. But I didn't know the most important thing, why he wanted to be perfect.

Niki's consistent presence in the role of the narrator shapes a more intimate attachment with the viewers, who become dependent on her for background information about the other characters. As Kozloff has argued, the voice-over then becomes a humanizing device, transforming an "impersonal narrative agency" into a familiar and trustworthy resource, addressing the viewers directly in a mode of intimate exchange, rather than by keeping them at a distance (Kozloff 1988: 128). This should be understood as a conscious creative choice, as the presence of such a narrator is meant to assign additional value to the story. Specifically, the narrator's gender offers the story a level of subjectivity, a perspective that associates gender with a particular view of the world. Such a gendered narrative analysis has been adopted in Stefanie Hoth's reading of *Sex and the City* where Carrie's voice-over

(alongside other narrative structures of the show) is associated with a particular focus on female issues, which Hoth identifies as the realm of the private encapsulated in relationships and friendships (2010). This is not the case for *NToG*, however, which does not appear to be that bothered about the female protagonists' experiences with love, romance, and sex, nor does it give space to one of the protagonists to unravel her self-indulgent personality. Rather it focuses on a journey of transformation and redefinition of the protagonists' place in a world that is in a state of flux. Placed within a (post)recessionary sociocultural context, Niki's voice-over captures the current emotional state of the characters which is meant to help the viewers decode the ways in which (some of) the on-screen individuals address the existential anxieties described in the main body of the episode and which are primarily caused by economic and political exigencies.

In some cases, Niki provides a psychoanalytically informed description of the characters by providing information about their childhood or more recent past, focusing on their thoughts, feelings, memories, and desires. Thus, in episode 1 we are introduced to her own feelings of frustration, in episode 2 we are informed about Fivi's emotional disconnection, apathy, and lack of sense of purpose, in episode 5 we find out about Froso's loss of *joie de vivre*, and in episode 14 we get a little more information on Stallo's perpetual positivity. The four women's unsatisfying lives, but also the need to free themselves from all kinds of (patriarchal) pressures and demands, as they are psychoanalytically framed through the voice-over and dramatized in the characters' interactions in the main body of the episodes, corroborate the foursome as the central focus of the story. Although the voice-over does not exclusively focus on the female protagonists – in fact each episode's voice-over is assigned to a different character –, the strategic placement of Niki as the leading narrative agency of *NToG* can be understood as a counterweight to the dominant narrative strategies adopted by other cultural texts circulating during recessionary times in Greece and abroad, namely the family comedy (Aitaki 2018b) or the man-centric sitcom (Leonard 2014).

#### 4. THE FEMALE ENSEMBLE: COPING WOMEN IN RECESSIONARY TIMES

The previous section pointed out the gendered dimensions of the voice-over by registering the ways that a dominant narrative agency assigns specific subjectivity to the on-screen

characters and events, functioning at the same time as a channel for a gendered framing of the sociopolitical context of the series. This section focuses on the narrative trope of *the female ensemble* within the scope of the genre of dramedy, examining the ways that a constellation of female characters creates the space not only for the fictional reconstruction of the Great Recession as a collective (female) trauma, but also for the orientation toward decisive responses to critical crisis-related problems.

Generally, scholarship has studied the female ensemble in fiction as part of what Brunsdon has termed “heroine television” which is:

[c]entrally about female characters living their lives, usually working inside and outside the home, usually not in permanent relationships with men, sometimes with children, and ‘trying to cope’. It is this ‘trying to cope’ which is critical. These shows are all, in some fundamental way, addressing feminism, or addressing the agenda that feminism has made public about the contradictory demands placed on women (Brunsdon 1997: 34).

Building on this idea, Ball has concretized the core of the female ensemble trope as encapsulating “alternative lifestyles for women based upon meaningful social relationships with other women” (2012: 246). As O’Connor additionally explains,

The traditional female life course is normative, socialised and supported by the ideology of compulsory marriage and motherhood [...] The recognition of women’s ability to enjoy themselves with other women obviously implicitly undermines a romantic-love ideology which stresses that true pleasure is only possible in the arms of a man. It challenges social control over women’s behaviour, especially their access to public areas; it undermines the equation of femininity with maternity, domesticity and the private area, and the culturally legitimated tendency for women to base their identities on such ‘caring’ relationships (O’Connor 1992: 182).

In the case of *NToG*, the trope of the female ensemble is a central vehicle for action, but also a valuable ideological platform. The fact that the narrative terrain is mainly covered by female characters is self-evident since the story is centered around a women’s curling team. The primary foursome (Niki,

Froso, Fivi, and Stallo) constitute a character constellation, a sum of characters and relations, that can provide valuable information about “collective dispositions, problems, wishes and fears in a certain time and culture” (Eder et al. 2010: 27). The different class backgrounds that they embody allow for the presentation of the multiple ways women have been traumatized during recessionary times and multiple ways they have been failed by patriarchal structures and institutions. We see Niki struggling to find a job after 7 years of unemployment and lying about her age at job interviews because companies do not want to hire women of her age. We follow Froso’s painful everyday life, trapped as she is in an abusive marriage. We witness Fivi’s dependency on a celebrity culture that requires women to always look young and happy. And while Stallo is seemingly immune to such societal pressures and demands, she still sees her close friends struggling and empathizes with them.

Through their participation in the curling team, the four central female protagonists rediscover the joys and pleasures of having goals that are located outside the realm of family and romance. Even though Niki and Froso remain good and affectionate mothers, even though Fivi is romantically involved with a sports journalist, even though Stallo keeps dating new men all the time, the pursue of self-fulfillment primarily takes place through female companionship and a common sense of purpose. It is worth mentioning that next to the main female ensemble, a smaller constellation of characters contributes to the female take-over of the narrative space, involving Froso and her three friends: Grace, Raya, and Yue Yue. The four of them constitute an ethnically diverse group of working women in a central neighborhood of Athens who enjoy playing cards together, behind the back of Froso’s racist husband, Thodoras. While this secondary ensemble does not take up equal screen time as the primary one, it functions as a tool that diversifies the ways that coping women support and learn from each other. As such, the minoritized characters should not be read as a tokenistic strategy promoting the empowerment of the main (white) character, but rather as a necessary, active representational choice that highlights the interwoven networks of care and support found in female friendships.

These two versions of the female ensemble trope, blending class and ethnic backgrounds, form a synthesis of the coping woman in recessionary times, defined by ethnic and class diversity. Concurrently, the female ensemble functions as a system of empowerment through the notion of female friendship which is presented as a safe space where they can



reconnect with themselves and other women without the burden of any expectations. What is more, the female ensemble can be read as a mechanism for transformation, as the interaction with other women is depicted as having a positive impact on the foursome's attitude toward life. As a result, the characters evolve and, while their complexity remains, they often proceed to actions which are not entirely consistent with their initial presentation (provided through Niki's voice-over).

Dramedy is a form of storytelling known for, apart from the fusion of elements coming from drama and comedy, the particular attention it pays to character development. We described earlier how the voice-over can be understood as the first glimpse into the characters' current emotional state and backstory. *NToG* makes use of an additional narrative device in order to demarcate the starting point of a character's trajectory, that of *the featured character*. The featured character device constitutes a particular way of episodic organization of serialized television according to which each episode focuses on a given character. Without necessarily involving them in all of the sub-plots of the episode, the featured character is placed at the center of the narrative which is often communicated to the viewer through a blend of incidents from the character's present situation and flashbacks which provide insight into the character's past. In the case of *NToG*, the feature character device is facilitated by the voice-over which both introduces and wraps up the episode, contributing to the development of characters by processing and suggesting specific frames through which their personality traits, motives, and behaviors can be understood. It is important, however, to notice that the featured character trope provides only a tentative reading of how a certain past has contributed to the current state of the character; as the characters evolve, they are free to make choices and proceed to actions in the present that are not limited by the past selves.

Episode 5, for instance, is dedicated to Froso who, as we saw in the previous section, is depicted as unhappily married to Thodoras, an abusive man whose racist ideas often target his wife's immigrant friends. In this particular episode, Thodoras sees his wife at one of her usual evening get-togethers at the hair salon, playing cards with her friends, laughing and enjoying each others' company. When she returns home, he waits for her and as soon as she closes the door behind her, he punches her in the face. The episode also contains scenes where he verbally attacks and humiliates her, by asking her to go out and buy him some beers even though there are visible signs of abuse on her face. Thodoras also establishes a state

of fear in the apartment, by monitoring when Froso uses her phone and showing his disturbance whenever it rings. His abusive behavior causes Froso to keep her curling activities a secret, forcing her also to lie to her children and sister about what happened to her (even though she eventually admits the abuse to Niki). A few episodes later, in episode 14, we watch Raya, Grace, and Yue Yue closing down their stores in the middle of the day because a group of people associated with Golden Dawn are preparing one of their usual patrols of the neighborhood, handing out racist flyers and attacking immigrants. The three women seek refuge at Froso's hair salon, but instead of hiding them and laying low, Froso stands at the door of her store and fearlessly confronts the patrollers:

- PATROL GIRL: *We are the patrol team. I want to leave these.*
- FROSO: *I don't want them, thank you.*
- PATROL GIRL: *Why not?*
- FROSO: *Because I don't want them.*
- PATROL LEADER: *I see you have weird people in your store.*
- FROSO: *Is he talking about you, Lula?*
- LULA: *Please, leave me alone. I am just here to get my hair dyed.*
- PATROL LEADER: *Why don't you want this? It's about the patrol teams around the neighborhood. It won't cost you anything to read it, to open your eyes. It's our views written on this paper.*
- FROSO: *I am aware of your views and I don't want them in my store. This is my view.*
- PATROL LEADER: *And we may not want your friends in our neighborhood.*
- FROSO: *The neighborhood is not your own property so that you can decide who will come and who won't. But my store is.*
- PATROL LEADER: *Are you Greek?*
- FROSO: *Yes.*

- PATROL LEADER: *Yes? And are you not ashamed?*
- FROSO: *Now that I am looking at you, I am a bit.*
- PATROL LEADER: *No no stop it stop it! [A member of the patrol team breaks Froso's shop window using a Greek flag pole]*
- FROSO: *And now I am even more ashamed. Boy, I raised the Greek flag high. I don't use it as a weapon to break shop windows or anybody's heads. And now take your views and go with Godspeed. This time I will only call the glazier to fix the window. But next time I will also call the police.*
- PATROL LEADER: *Alright. Ok then. But, just so you know, I will be back.*
- FROSO: *You don't have to. Your hair is short. You don't need a haircut.*
- PATROL LEADER: *Let's go.*

It is worth mentioning that Froso's character is the only one involved in both aforementioned female ensembles, as well as in a sisterhood with Niki. The above excerpt constitutes a defining moment for her character development, the moment where she not only reaches the emotional strength to defend herself but also to protect others. Froso's newfound sense of empowerment is expressed in the ways that she takes control over her life and rediscovers who she is outside marriage and motherhood; her thirst to engage in play (in the context of the curling team), to experience joy (through newly defined goals and community with other women), and to stop living in a state of fear constitute an inspiring representation of how recent traumas caused by recessionary times and deeply felt failures by patriarchal structures can potentially be overcome.

## 5. THE METAPHOR OF SPORTS

Apart from the female narrator and the female ensemble, a third narrative mechanism that defines *NToG* to a large extent is *the metaphor of sports* and more specifically the trope of the sports team, evident already from the title of the show. The central idea of the trope is the collaboration

of a (typically heterogeneous) group of people, under the guidance of an experienced figure, toward the pursue of a common goal. The trope has appeared with various levels of centrality in global film and television history which can be explained by the fact that "sport offers everything a good story should have: heroes and villains, triumph and disaster, achievement and despair, tension and drama" (Poulton and Roderick 2008: 107). In that sense, sport in fictional narratives can be considered a central organizing principle for the structure of the story, a key frame for the construction of characters, and a catalyst for action. At the same time, sport is a powerful cultural code which corresponds to the affective modes of fiction. It has been argued that sport has "extraordinary affective and connotative power, making many people feel deeply moved and also encouraging them to translate sporting values and measures of success and failure to other spheres", while at the same time "can be used readily as the vehicle for the fictional handling of many pivotal social issues" (Rowe 2004: 193). Along these lines, sport is used as a springboard for addressing difficult or complex topics and as a tool for increasing audience engagement.

The aforementioned can be observed in a number of examples with important cultural footprint. In the cinematic realm, the iconic cases of *A League of their Own* (1992) and *Cool Runnings* (1993) could be identified as definitive shapers of the genre providing powerful iconography about the dynamics between the female sports team and the male coach in the former, or the underdog trope, embodied in the Jamaican bobsled team in the latter, while both cases are placed against the backdrop of issues of respect, pride, and glory. Contemporary television has most strikingly revived the above trope in *GLOW* (2017-2019), a Netflix dramedy focusing on a women's professional wrestling league (Chairetis & Aitaki 2023), as well as in the remake of *A League of their Own* (2022). Apart from the above globally resonant examples, Greek television fiction can also showcase the example of *Asteras Rahoulas* (2016-2017), the story of an underdog men's football team, which, under the training and direction of an idiosyncratic coach, manages to become an organic whole.

Existing literature has discussed the extensive utilization of sport as a metaphor for life, attributing it to the prominent theme of struggle and the perceived function of sport as a tool for triumphing over challenges (Crosson 2013). It has also exposed the metaphor of sports in film and television as a vehicle for maintaining patriarchal hegemony and hegemonic national structures (ibid). Sports can be understood as one of the central forms through which masculinities and mascu-



line action is represented (Whannel 2008), while the (male) coach and the style of coaching has been directly linked to styles of (Hollywood) masculinities (Hills and Kennedy 2013). Feminist perspectives on sports have considered the simultaneous function both as a “technology of power” signifying the disempowerment of the individual as a result of oppressive power and as a “technology of the self” as a strategy of resistance, transgression, and empowerment (Jones and Aitchison 2007).

NToG makes use of the metaphor of sports and the women’s sports team to connote a journey toward empowerment. The four women experience curling as a way to reinvent themselves and, through building a female network, to live more satisfying lives. Additionally, it is rewarding to explore the dynamics that develop between the female team and the male (gay) coach, especially since the two groups are often placed at the margins of sports culture typically characterized by hegemonic national structures:

Both the depiction of women outside the normative roles of housewives and mothers, or of gay men outside of the stereotypes of weak and effeminate ‘queens’, threatens to destabilise a national identity dependent upon the ideals of strong, active masculinity and frail, passive femininity. Indeed, it is precisely in this direct contradiction of their assigned role as ‘Other,’ and the display of physical and mental strength embodied by the athlete protagonist, that we find barely concealed fissures in the national fabric (Bonzel 2013).

The interplay of a variety of identity positions at the backdrop of the deceptively unifying concept of the nation is insightfully addressed at a dinner table discussion in episode 2. Niki, after Christos has rejected her more than once, finally gets him to come over to her place for dinner, joined by Froso and Fivi:

NIKI: *Will you take on? I know that we don't fulfill your expectations, but we are here to try. Even the fact that we achieved to make Safetas build a stadium for us shows how warmly we have committed ourselves to that. And we could have contacted a foreign coach. But we chose you. A Greek person who has done so well abroad, and above all, is aware of what it means to have a 'Greek heart'.*

CHRISTOS: *But I don't know what the Greek heart is about. I haven't heard its beat since I've been here. Nobody has opened their home to me. Everybody's considered me an outsider. I was cheated, I was mocked, when I was willing to help I had to deal with a swindler. I didn't find justice or meritocracy anywhere. I only found racism and inequity. I know from my parents and the way they raised me that there is such a thing as the Greek heart. But, here, no, I didn't find it. Unless 'Greek heart' is about going to the bouzoukia [Greek nightclubs] and throwing flowers to one another. If this is the case, it's not going to be useful for curling. We don't throw the stone and the flower the same way.*

NIKI: *Yes, you aren't wrong.*

CHRISTOS: *I know I'm not wrong. And also, in curling there is no such a thing as being wrong. There is no referee to check for any violations. It's you who must admit your fouls if you make any. Nobody checks on you beside yourself. It is a game of honesty, dignity, respect to any opponent, and courtesy. We shake hands before each game and at the end of it, no matter the result, we shake hands again. It is a very difficult game both physically and mentally, and so honest that I am really concerned that it might cause a heart attack to your Greek heart.*

In this scene, Niki attempts to build a common ground for the two sides to work on by playing the card of national identity and cultural exceptionalism. Her argument is that specific cultural values assigned to the ‘Greek heart’, such as insistence and passion, can function as proof of the team’s commitment. Christos is not impressed. Bringing up the question of incompatibility between the sport’s ethics and the lived experience of his stay in Greece, he aggressively shuts down the possibility of considering this particular sport as a metaphor for the Greek nation. The essentializing notion of the ‘Greek heart’ breaks down into pieces through Christos’ emotional reactions which reveal the non-inclusive dimension of national identity that he has experienced as a diasporic gay man. As such, he differentiates himself from the notion of the nation as it is implied in Niki’s discourse. The heated discussion is interrupted when Niki’s children return from the movies, say hello to the guests, and retreat to their rooms. Niki, evidently overwhelmed by Christos’ response, explains

to him that he is not the only one experiencing the consequences of injustice and inequality, but her way of coping is to keep fighting. In one of the following scenes, Christos rings Niki in the middle of the night to announce that he has decided to help the team without elaborating on the reasons of the decision. Eventually, the two of them seem to bond over sports as a vehicle to overcome structures of oppression and injustice. Leaving the idea of sports as a metaphor for the (patriarchal) nation behind, the team brings together coping women and gay men on the road to empowerment, with curling functioning both as a technology of the self, but also as a technology of community.

## 6. CONCLUSION: THE MANY FACES OF EMPOWERMENT

*NToG* was praised by television critics for its brave incorporation of difficult topics. In the previous analytical sections, we saw how this was not exhausted to a dramatic representation of a scene of domestic violence or a passing reference to the rise of right-wing ideologies and racist actions. Rather, *NToG* illustrated how such topics tapped into the reality of a country in deep societal crisis and proposed specific courses of action through the emphasis on the female perspective. However, TV ratings were considered disappointing; although they were not spectacularly low, they did not reach the viewership of Kapoutzidis' earlier works. Asked about the above in a personal interview roughly a year after the final episode aired, Kapoutzidis did not seem to be bothered about ratings, but admitted that he consciously differentiated *NToG* from his previous two shows, based on how he chose to position himself in relation to the sociopolitical context of the time:

*Born Lucky* and *In the Nick of Time* were [made] to entertain people. Not *NToG*, it starkly had a clearer message. [...] It was clearly empowering. It was other things too; castigating, judgmental, harsh with certain things. *NToG* chose its viewers and it didn't wait to be chosen by them. The series was made for you and the others don't need to watch it (Kapoutzidis 2016).

Commercial television's dependency on advertising revenue has traditionally made it a hostage to ratings. Successful recipes tend to be repackaged, recycled, and repeated while innovative ideas are often addressed as risks that producers

and channel executives are reluctant to take. As such, successful creators and actors are often trapped in non-creative cycles of production whose priority is to sustain their audience. By prioritizing innovation and differentiation, *NToG* could be read as a case that disappointed a part of Kapoutzidis' audience that perhaps expected to connect with the creator in the usual codes of entertainment.

Interestingly enough, apart from empowerment emerging in Kapoutzidis' discourse as his chosen type of fiction in times of societal turbulence, he also reflected on his own empowerment that came from freeing oneself from the tyranny of ratings:

[...] I tried to say some important things but not in a pretentious way. The specific channel showed that it wanted to take a few steps further. But I also gave them a specific suggestion. I did not go there fearing they might not accept and ready to make it more 'commercial'. I went there, I gave it to them and said, this is it, if you want it [...] You take a risk. There is no progress in playing it safe. If I wanted to play it safe, I could write a new comedy every year. So I do not share the opinion that the channels set the tone, no, you also have responsibility for what you offer to them. The truth is in the middle. Especially for people who have some successes under their belt, this is not true. They are just afraid of going the extra mile or losing their viewers. I lost my viewers, half of them. *In the Nick of Time* did 60%, *National Team of Greece* did 30%. It doesn't matter, this is what I wanted to do. I gained myself. And I gained something out of it. I wouldn't change it for the world. For my own empowerment and progress as a human being, [*NToG*] changed my world (Kapoutzidis 2016).

While recessionary themes gradually took a back seat toward the final episodes of the season, *NToG* remained a series about ordinary people surviving turbulent times and transforming thanks to a sense of common purpose. The main characters are seen evaluating what matters the most to them in life, with some of them making important decisions about their private lives (Fivi considers adopting a child), their professional lives (Froso and Niki explore new professional opportunities), as well as where they feel most at home (Christos feels the need to extend his stay in Greece). We will never know exactly how the characters' journeys would

have continued, as *NToG* was never completed. Broadcast by MEGA Channel during the years of the country's financial turbulence and during a period when both the quantity and quality of domestic television fiction was severely affected by low production budgets, *NToG* was cancelled but celebrated as one of the good moments of Greek television fiction. The analysis offered in this article zoomed in on the intersections between fictional and real worlds through the lens of "gendered recession" (Negra and Tasker 2014) and highlighted the ways that narrative tropes and mechanisms are used to facilitate interpretative practices centered on recessionary culture. By registering the ways that entertainment navigates (representations of) gender in recessionary culture, we can enrich our understanding of the cultural impact that turbulent times have on national (media) landscapes and creative processes. By extending beyond the Anglophone focus, we are able to capture how global transformative phenomena are worked through in less visible or extrovert media cultures, which in turn can inform broader debates around how popular culture is involved in processes of cultural introspection and empowerment.

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