

***Cyprus is an Island* (1946) – Ethnographic Reflections on a Colonial Documentary**

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Abstract

*The late Andreas Sophocleous discussed with the author many British colonial texts, from John Thomson's photos (1878) to Lawrence Durrell's prose in *Bitter Lemons* (1957). The documentary, *Cyprus is an Island* (1946), by Laurie Lee and Ralph Keene, intrigued us, since little had been written about it and its accompanying book *We Made a Film in Cyprus* (1947). This essay, in tribute to Andreas, considers the value of ethnography in the articulation of 'lived stories' about texts and experiences of the past. This is far from trivialising British colonialism in Cyprus (1878-1960). As a discourse (and a system) of dominance and subjugation, colonialism needed texts (travelogues, documentaries, commentaries, photographic works or novels) to justify it ideologically, politically, and morally. These discursive endeavours represent forms of propaganda, from 'soft' to 'hard'. Seldom studied is the interaction between 'makers' (in this case film documentary) and participants (the filmed or framed subjects). Ethnography is one way to explore this through the concept of history as 'lived experience', to be invoked through inquiry.*

Keywords: colonial texts, documentary, Cyprus, discourse, ethnography, lived text,
Laurie Lee

Introduction

Texts, despite what their authors might declare, are seldom innocent of purpose. They do not just happen, as implied in *Bitter Lemons* where Lawrence Durrell declares from the outset, 'Journeys, like artists, are born and not made'.² On the contrary, texts are a product of the context from which they emerge, and are evidently ideologically and politically woven and bound to setting. A recurrent problem with reviewing past texts, in this case a documentary made about Cyprus in 1946 titled *Cyprus is an Island*, is a kind of academic laxity that regards such texts as

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² L. Durrell, *Bitter Lemons* (London: Faber & Faber, 1982) p. 15.

'historical' or significant without rigorously examining their discursive content with regard to matters of representation, ideology and power. I encountered this kind of approach when researching John Thomson's photos of Cyprus, first published in 1878 (Hajimichael, 1998; 2006). Durrell's *Bitter Lemons* also represented a kind of complacency, with some audiences seeing the book merely as an interesting travel novel (Hajimichael, 1998). So the fact that some readers simply take texts from the colonial past through the motions of a superficial reading has always been problematic. This essay is an effort to bring history to life in an organic manner, which is an issue that fascinates the author for a number of reasons. Forms of media analysis on representation, questions of absence/presence, who speaks/who does not speak in media texts (Hall, 1997), and a methodology relying on Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995) are significant inspirations to the current text.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) recognizes media play a significant role in information distribution, which is more evident in the form of documentary film because it claims to represent real life. The approach also argues texts play a crucial role on the formation of ideas and discussions about particular contexts and people, which can be defined as problematic, due to issues of bias, misrepresentation and inaccuracy, all of which is driven by the notion of ideology. Ideological practices treat a phenomenon as so self-evident as to exempt it completely from critical inspection and to render it inevitable, as a kind of 'common sense' or as something that appears 'naturalised' – just like colonialism or the impact of advertising – in everyday life.³ These beliefs remain unquestioned because they reflect absoluteness. Ideology is there for all to see and is invisible because of its obviousness. In this sense, ideology exists in texts as assumptions that remain untold, but are presupposed. For example, the famously notorious (due to its historical pervasiveness) stance of the Conservative Minister of State for Colonial Affairs Henry Hopkinson took in 1954 in the British Parliament stipulated: 'there can be no question of any change of sovereignty in Cyprus... certain territories have to be dealt with in particular ways, and that it is not possible to treat every British Colonial Territory in exactly the same way..⁴

³ T. Streete, The Semiotics of Media https://www.uvm.edu/~tstreete/semiotics_and_ads/ideology_intro.html.

⁴ CYPRUS (CONSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS) HC Deb 28 July 1954 vol. 531 cc504-14 <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1954/jul/28/cyprus-constitutional-arrangements>.

How and why colonies existed was always justified in ways viewed as unjust by colonised peoples. In this context, the ideology of colonialism and its continuation always had an unquestioned and absolute character. This is the way it is, accept it, Cyprus would never be totally decolonised.⁵ Through the lens of CDA it is possible to view a particular text, in this case, *Cyprus is an Island* as a form of social practice within a specific historical context. How this text is positioned and positions itself is of interest particularly within the specific context of Lythrodontas, where part of the documentary was filmed. This leads to an explanation of the linkage to ethnography, driven largely by a desire to bring the text to life in an organic manner, by attempting to trace surviving villagers in Lythrodontas, through interviews, who had recollection or experiences of the documentary at that time. This exploration of recollections and memories of human interaction represents agency, how people related to each other in a given context in 1946. Combining this with CDA, through the text of *Cyprus Is An Island* represents a method that extends the text through a denser contextualization and provides deeper understanding of how things may have happened. Izabel Magalhães has adopted such an approach for the last 20 years, which she defines as ‘discursive ethnography’.⁶

Cyprus is an Island was created in what is known as the post-war period, when a newly-elected British Labour government under Clement Attlee embarked on welfare reforms, redistributing wealth through taxation and beginning a process of significant decolonisation, starting with India and Pakistan in 1947.⁷ Properly locating the text within such an historical setting took me back initially to the seminal work of Berger and Mohr.⁸ The relationship between those doing the ‘surveying’ and the ‘surveyed’ was informed by this approach in my earlier analysis of Thomson, the British colonial photographer who toured Cyprus in 1878 taking ‘sun pictures’ (Hajimichael, 2006). Much of that analysis was speculative, even conjectural, as

⁵ Evident as well by the reality of British sovereign bases in Cyprus since 1960, remnants of colonialism manifest as British Overseas Territories (BOT) that represent a practice of neo-colonialism H. Yusuf and T. Chowdhury, ‘The persistence of colonial constitutionalism in British Overseas Territories’, *Global Constitutionalism*, 8(1), 157-190. doi:10.1017/S2045381718000369 (2019).

⁶ I. Magalhães et al (2017) *Análise de Discurso Crítica: um método de pesquisa qualitativa [Critical Discourse Analysis: A Qualitative Research Method]*, University of Brasília Press.

⁷ The creation of the documentary needs to be viewed in this context as it was a process that started with the filming in 1945, as the War ended, and continued with its screening in Cyprus and England (1946-7) as well as the publication of the accompanying book *We Made a Film in Cyprus* (1947).

⁸ J. Berger and S. Mohr (1989) *Another Way of Telling*. Penguin Books/Granta. This work proved invaluable to in 1997, when finishing my PhD thesis.

it was not possible to interview participants in Thomson's photographic exercise over a century later. We can hypothesise however on the relationship between the 'photographer' and the 'photographed' and a number of possibilities on these relationships. *Cyprus is an Island* provides a different challenge ethnographically, as some people, in particular from the village of Lythrodontas where significant scenes in the documentary were filmed, are still alive today and they provide valuable insight into the documentary and their village.⁹ Furthermore, Thomson offers scant references to Cypriots in his text in terms of his relationship to them, and their selection. Lee and Keene in contrast wrote a book shortly after the documentary giving an account of its making, where they filmed, who they met, and even how they set up specific scenes. Ethnographically, people from the village today provide a valuable, informed description of where and how the film was made, and how villagers interacted with the makers, the crew and the film itself as a finished and released text. This is considered important because it sheds some light on the ways people interacted in the making of the documentary, how its makers were perceived and received in the village and how villagers reacted and interacted with it after its release. I will return to these matters later in this article. How I came across the film in the early 2000s is also an interesting point of reference. Dave Edmonds, a videographer and archivist in London somehow located the documentary in Pathé's extensive archive and uploaded it onto YouTube (in four instalments).¹⁰ What happened to it the years between 1947 and 2000 is a mystery; Edmonds deserves credit for making it available to a more global online public because a much more limited audience in Britain and Cyprus before this had seen it. This curiosity took a new turn in 2015, when Jonathan Stubbs wrote the first academic article that referred to *Cyprus is an Island*.¹¹ His work has proved valuable for my

⁹ Lythrodontas is located at the foothill of the Machairas mountain area in the district of Nicosia. In 1946, the population of the village was about 1,300 people (<https://www.cyprusisland.net/cyprus-villages/nicosia/lythrodontas>). The current population is estimated at around 3,000. <https://el.wikipedia.org/wiki/%CE%9B%CF%85%CE%B8%CF%81%CE%BF%CE%B4%CF%8C%CE%BD%CF%84%CE%B1%CF%82>.

¹⁰ At the time, YouTube had a rule about content over a certain length. Dave Edmonds, also known as Dave Efthyvoulou, well known in London for his extensive video archives, has a YouTube Channel under the tag 'Grokked': <https://www.youtube.com/user/grokked/videos>.

¹¹ J. Stubbs (2015) 'Did you ever notice this dot in the Mediterranean? Colonial Cyprus in the post-war British documentary'. In *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, DOI: 10.1080/01439685.2015.1027561.

research, particularly in terms of who (which audiences) viewed the documentary shortly after its release.

I must also make an auto-ethnographical confession on how I accidentally stumbled upon links to Lythrodontas, one Sunday in 2008 over dinner with my father-in-law, George Toufexis, who after hearing my idea of writing about a documentary made in 1947 confessed: ‘Yes, I was there when they made it, they filmed it in Lythrodontas.’¹² Some time later, having studied the documentary online, the book that accompanied it was duly purchased and I found myself with the challenging prospect of analysing and comparing the two texts, along with ethnographic interviews that could somehow give a different interpretative life to the texts. That led back to George Toufexis, who shared some photos given to his family during the filming of the documentary in the spring of 1945. Many of these photos, made from stills from the film, became a source for a different kind of visual ethnography. Who were these people in the photos? Were any of them still alive? How might they be approached about the documentary? How did they interact with the makers/crew of the documentary? Moreover, most crucially, when did they view the documentary and how did they react to it? Again reflecting on my previous challenges of posing such questions with Thomson’s photos from 1878, *Cyprus is an Island* had a different kind of dynamic as a lived text. Before addressing these findings, I would like to refer to the context of Cyprus at the time, notably during the Second World War and the post-war conjuncture.

Context – benevolent colonialism

Towards the end of World War Two, a film crew arrived to make *Cyprus is an Island*. They filmed in various locations throughout the island. The timing may seem odd, given the war was still going on. However, the Colonial Office, on advice from the Governor of Cyprus, decided to proceed. Lee had been to Cyprus before the war and so together the team set out to make a film ‘about people as yet unfilmed’.¹³ The place where they stayed the longest, preparing and filming, was Lythrodontas. The crew lodged at what they called the ‘village inn’ for two weeks.¹⁴ The villagers called this place *To Xani* – which simply means ‘the inn’. It stood as a central building in the village up to its demolition in the 1990s, after which the site became a municipal

¹² Conversations and interviews with George Toufexis, Lythrodontas, Cyprus 2008-present.

¹³ L. Lee and R. Keene *We Made a Film in Cyprus* (Longmans, Green and Co. 1947) p. I.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

car park.¹⁵ Keene describes the last day of filming in Lythrodontas in a section of the book about the technical making of the documentary. Lee's focus, in the first part of the book, is more descriptive and literary; after all, he became an accomplished writer.¹⁶ He describes the last day of filming, on Easter Monday 1945, over ten pages (Lee and Keene, 47-57). The date was historic as it marked the official end of World War Two in Europe, on 8 May.¹⁷ Lee downplays this momentous event in a passage on the elderly people in the village, which is worth quoting:

'But to the old ones living in this valley, so seldom left and so seldom visited, what did it mean? It meant the end of a bad game, and they were glad. But the whole war been to them a thing of unpronounceable names, and they had seen nothing of it. They would not have known there was a war but for the garrison soldiers who stole the stones from their terraces and left their daughters in miserable conditions.'¹⁸

Interestingly, the phenomenon of the end of the war is not included in the film, despite its historical significance. In contrast, I would like, as part of our understanding of context, to focus on the war with regard to Cyprus and Lythrodontas in particular.

Cypriots, like many colonised subjects, participated in the Second World War. They enlisted in the Cyprus Regiment from 1940, with around 25,000 people applying.¹⁹ But the process of enlisting Cypriots was not straightforward, as Kazamias states:

¹⁵ Based on an interview with Clitos, from Lythrodontas, a grandson of the man cast as 'Nikos' in the documentary.

¹⁶ Lee wrote numerous books, plays and poems, his most celebrated work being *Cider with Rosie* (1959), which sold over 1 million copies in paperback: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jul/04/laurie-lee-cider-with-rosie-interview-1977>.

¹⁷ 'German Surrender Documents ending World War II' <https://web.archive.org/web/20080517100354/http://www.law.ou.edu/hist/germsurr.html>.

¹⁸ Lee and Keene, p. 53.

¹⁹ Figures vary on this from 20,000 – 30,000. Many Cypriots also enlisted around 10,000, from communities outside Cyprus where Cypriots lived, such as London. (www.cyprioveteransassociation.com). It is difficult to estimate the exact population at the time in 1941 as a census was carried out in 1931 and 1946. But it is significant to note the total population was 450,114 in 1946. As such 20,000 volunteers from Cyprus is considered to be a sizable amount in relation to the total population. Source: Statistical Service of the Republic of Cyprus, figures for 1946, https://www.mof.gov.cy/mof/cystat/statistics.nsf/populationcondition_22main_keyfarchive_en/populationcondition_22main_keyfarchive_en?OpenForm&yr=193193C6CBFCB5F1ABCFF7A0B363854FDEA4&n=1931.

Despite the efforts of the authorities and a relaxation of the recruiting (as well as the criminal) standards in March 1941, the rejection ratio continued to be high: it was estimated that by March 1942, over 56.4% of the 19,179 persons who had applied since the beginning of recruitment had been rejected.¹⁶ The rejection ratio continued to be high: by July 1944, 55.15% of the 23,861 applicants had been rejected.²⁰

Furthermore, this testament of generic ‘bad health’ conditions amongst young Cypriot males aged 20-35 along with the high incidence of crime indicate a lot about the contextual situation of Cyprus during and after the Second World War, namely that of ‘a colony with an impoverished population’.²¹

I traced the phenomenon of recruitment through a series of official correspondence and exchanges to the 1930s in the British National Archives and several issues stood out. In the lead-up to the Second World War, there was concern about Cypriots joining the British armed forces, largely based around issues of skin colour and political leanings. In one line of the communiqués, for example, an official named Fletcher-Cooke who was involved with recruitment in the British Army concludes:

The Inspector of Recruiting explained to me the view of the Air Ministry, and said there was now no objection to a Cypriot joining the Royal Air Force provided he had the necessary educational and physical qualifications, had a good knowledge of English, and was European in appearance and habits. The Air Force will not consider anyone who has, for example, long curly black hair, is of dark complexion, or is Asiatic or African in appearance. There is as you are well aware still considerable prejudice in the service against Cypriots, Maltese, Indians, etc, etc, and it may be some time before this prejudice is finally removed.²²

Before World War Two broke out, Britain, in the form of its Empire, controlled 25% of the world’s population with 30% of its land mass.²³ With the advent of war, the colonial administration across the Empire sought to recruit its subjects.

²⁰ G. Kazamias. ‘Military Recruitment and Selection in a British Colony: The Cyprus Regiment 1939-1944’ In E. Close, M. Tsianikas and G. Couvalis (eds.) *Greek Research in Australia: Proceedings of the Sixth Biennial International Conference of Greek Studies, Flinders University June 2005*, Flinders University Department of Languages - Modern Greek, Adelaide: 333-342.

²¹ *Ibid*, footnote 16 p. 342.

²² ‘Enlistment of Cypriots in H.M Forces 1936’: letter 116/1936 (CO 67/256/8).

²³ S. Leacock, *Our British Empire; Its structure, its history, its strength* (Right Book Club, 1941) pp. 266-75.

Hitchens reports that the colonial government in Cyprus ‘issued recruiting posters in the Hellenic blue and white, urging young Cypriots to volunteer and “Fight for Greece and Freedom”.’²⁴ I found a poster from that time, attributed to the artist Telemachos Kanthos that has a similar ‘patriotic’ Greek tone, illustrated below:²⁵



Image 1 Poster attributed to Telemachos Kanthos

While studying these archives, I was also fortunate enough to conduct detailed interviews with several Cypriots who served in the British Armed Forces during the Second World War. One of those was Giorgos Pefkos²⁶ who described the raids

²⁴ C. Hitchens, *Cyprus* (Quartet Books, 1984) p. 37.

²⁵ Found on a Twitter feed entitled ‘Cyprus in UK’, hosted by the Cyprus Ministry of Foreign Affairs at https://pbs.twimg.com/media/DrkriNrWoAEM_TM.jpg.

²⁶ Giorgos Pefkos (1911-1994) was from the village of Lefkoniko. He emigrated to England in the 1930s and was one of the founders of the left-wing newspaper *Vema*, the first Greek Cypriot newspaper

by colonial authorities on left-wing PSE trade unionists, their prosecution and imprisonment in Cyprus in December 1945²⁷ with a heavy sense of bitterness:

‘Sheer blasphemy and anathema to us who fought and died during the Second World War. We felt such bitterness, such humiliation. There stood our comrades, before our eyes, all charged with “propagating class struggle”. Nine were sentenced to 18 months and the other nine to two years in prison. That was British colonialism’s “thank you” for all the blood we had spoilt fighting Nazism and Fascism... such bitterness... How can I describe it to you... I still feel it today.’²⁸

Even the demobilisation of the Cyprus Regiment had a political agenda. Michalis Poubouris, a veteran of the war and an author (this writer’s uncle), described it as a ‘disgrace’. Members of the newly-formed leftist party AKEL who enlisted in the war were sectioned off and sent to the Hapta internment camp in Egypt until 1946, a year after the war ended.²⁹ The trials of trade unionists and ideologically selective ‘demobilisation’ ironically took place under the watch of the newly elected Labour government of Attlee, who came to power in May 1945. It is also significant that Churchill had visited Cyprus in 1943 where he declared, as recollected by Pefkos: ‘When this bloody war is over, the Cypriot people will take their rightful place amongst the free world.’³⁰ A letter by Takis Michael, a London-based Cypriot, found in the National Archives, on how the state perceived Cypriots in the decades between the wars did not reach its final destination due to the strict censorship laws that were imposed during the war. Michael depicts a process of inclusion and exclusion on attitudes to Cypriots in the armed forces in the following terms: ‘Now we are not foreigners because they are in need of an Army. But before the

based in London. Pefkos served in the Cyprus Regiment during the Second World War. I interviewed him over a period of six weeks in the summer of 1986, after his retirement to Cyprus.

²⁷ A. Alecou, *Communism and Nationalism in Postwar Cyprus, 1945-1955* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) p. 16.

²⁸ Giorgos Pefkos interview, 1986.

²⁹ Poubouris described these experiences to the author on many occasions. See also his funeral oration by the General Secretary of AKEL, A. Kyprianou, on 3 September 2018: <https://www.akel.org.cy/en/2018/09/03/funeral-oration-by-the-general-secretary-of-akel-a-kyprianou-for-michalis-poubouris/>.

³⁰ Giorgos Pefkos interview. I have found it hard to substantiate what Churchill actually said on his visit to Cyprus in 1943 but this is what I was told by Pefkos, who had contemporaneous recollections of the event. There are a variety of sources online documenting the visit, such as <http://www.militaryhistories.co.uk/unpa/churchill>.

declaration of war we were foreigners; now we are Englishmen; after the war we shall be foreigners again...³¹

Contextually, the bigger picture after the war marked the start of decolonisation, with India and Pakistan getting independence in 1947. Attlee's government attempted, through Lord Winster, Governor of Cyprus (1946-49), a measure of constitutional reform in 1947 which failed for a number of reasons. Greek Cypriot nationalist parties and the Orthodox Church refused to accept any form of Consultative Assembly (a form of self-governance) without the colonial administration accepting *Enosis* (the union of Cyprus with Greece).³² AKEL (the Communist Party) and others attending the meetings with Lord Winster felt the proposal was too limited, and did not go far enough in terms of self-governance.³³

Life in Lythrodontas during the Second World War was a reflection of the rest of Cyprus. Although the island was not affected by the war like the rest of Europe, life was harsh due to the rationing of key goods³⁴ and in rural villages, life expectancy and infant mortality rates reflected this. Mamas, for example, the 'Vassos' character in the documentary, was the father of 15 children, nine of whom survived beyond birth or their first year of life.³⁵ Cyprus was bombed 34 times during the war, mainly after 1940, largely by Italian and later German air forces.³⁶ Generally, the colonial administration sought to protect the Cypriot civilian population from potential aerial attacks using sirens before and after raids. Additionally, windows and doors on houses were blacked out, lights were turned off and the movement of vehicles was prohibited after nightfall.³⁷ This hardly conforms to the picture of tranquility in the village portrayed by Lee and Keene.

³¹ 'Cypriot Forces UK 1943' (CO 67/318/12). Translation of a letter from Takis Michael to Michael Christodoulou, intercepted and censored.

³² M. Michael *Resolving the Cyprus Conflict: Negotiating History* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

³³ T. Morgan, *Sweet and Bitter Island: A History of the British in Cyprus* (IB Taurus, 2010).

³⁴ George Toufexis interview.

³⁵ Interview with Clitos, a grandson of Mamas. Clitos elaborated further on this: 'Babies would have one sneeze and a lot of them would die, there was no medicines like we have today, and there was no means, no cars say, for them to get driven to the hospital in Nicosia from the village.'

³⁶ Charalambos G. Charalambous, 'Όταν Ο Άξονας Βομβάρδισε την Κύπρο' – 'When The Axis Powers Bombed Cyprus': Special Issue of *Χρονικο Politis* Newspaper (Publication Delta), Issue 1, 4 March 2018, p.7.

³⁷ George Toufexis interview.



Image 2 *Cyprus Is An Island* (1946) – Title frame

The documentary and the book and colonial depiction as propaganda

When viewing *Cyprus is an Island* for the first time, what struck the author from the outset is the patronising colonial tone of ‘speaking on behalf’ of the native/colonised people, achieved through a narrator who tells the story from beginning to end. Like any documentary, there are different layers of meaning that can be unpacked semiotically, ranging from the tone and content of the narrated discourse, filmed images and character building, to the use of music. A comprehensive analysis is beyond the scope of this essay so I would like to focus mainly on the key colonial discourses and issues of ‘who speaks’ and how in the text. The book about the making of the documentary, to which I will also refer, highlights key parts of my argument. There is a need as well to address the issue of how to define such documentaries in terms of genre, how they relate to issues of what is being represented, particularly with respect to colonialism and modernity, progress, development and adaptation from more traditionally based and ‘disorganised’ societies to more modern and ‘organised’ ones. Another prerequisite, before looking at the documentary in depth, is specifically how such texts refer and relate to Cyprus.

Chan suggests the following with regard to a genre or label for defining such documentaries:

“official film,” “official documentary,” “colonial documentary,” “empire film,” “colonial film,” and “imperial propaganda film,” among others. Crossing a variety of genres including dramatic, documentary, instructional, amateur, news-reels, travel, and ethnographic films, these films shared a common objective—they were films made by the state (or individuals and institutions associated with the state) that sought to teach audiences the fundamentals of good colonial citizenship.³⁸

Largely situated in a humanist tradition, this approach to documentary filmmaking was championed by many people in the Colonial Information Office and British Government who believed the path to modernity by the colonies was through development, change and adaptation. Chan defines this as the ‘Griersonian mode of documentary filmmaking’³⁹ named after John Grierson, who in 1926 first coined the term ‘documentary’ with reference to Robert Flaherty’s *Moana*.⁴⁰ The purpose of colonialism in terms of documentary film was to modernize colonies, educate the colonised and raise awareness about the colonies ‘at home’. In this sense documentary acted as a form of propaganda:

The documentary film (a misleading title, which has cast a specious mantle of objectivity over some highly tendentious productions) may well turn out to be a document less of what it purports to record than of the values and purposes of its makers and the manipulations of reality to which these drove them, often, paradoxically, in the interest of the true reality as they saw it.⁴¹ With specific reference to colonial documentaries and Cyprus, limited bibliography is available however an article by Jonathan Stubbs sheds some light on the matter:

The island of Cyprus, which was ruled by Britain between 1878 and 1960, was the subject of some 12 British films. The majority were funded by various departments of the British Government, and although they do not share a continuous production history, they reveal a dynamic relationship between Britain and a territory which it occupied amid rapid and tumultuous political change...

³⁸ N. Chan, *Colonial Educational Film* (Oxford Bibliographies, 2019) DOI: 10.1093/OBO/9780199791286-0319 [https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199791286/obo-9780199791286-0319.xml].

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ A. Curthoys and M. Lake *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective* (ANU E Press, 2007).

⁴¹ P. Smith *The Historian and Film* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

Their chief function, therefore, was as a showcase for Cyprus and for the modernising benefits of British rule.⁴²

The opening scene of *Cyprus is an Island* is long and drawn-out. Starting with a sombre song (described in the book as ‘A Cypriot song, sung by solo male voice’)⁴³ the titles fade away⁴⁴ leaving a background map of the Mediterranean with the narrator. The narration has an official or formal tone of voice, taking the form of a history lesson about the island. The music changes at this point to an equally sombre classical piece as waves greet the shore at the birthplace of Aphrodite, ‘the Goddess of Love’.⁴⁵ We are then told about ‘pagans’ converted to Christianity by Paul and Barnabus followed by tales of King Richard and the Crusades, all with accompanying images that match each historical epoch – the seashore, the Temple of Venus, across Mesaoria plain, the Holy Cross and Stravrovouni, Kyrenia fortress, and Kolossi Castle. After this, something interesting occurs, with key words repeated three times in the space of the opening few minutes.⁴⁶ The repeated phrases are ‘the people’, ‘know’ and ‘nothing’; the repetition sounds poetic and signifies a trait common in rhetorical language. It is also important because here we have a first in a documentary colonial film. Up until this time, local people were not included in any significant manner. So implicitly, the intention is to provide this knowledge. Accompanying the phrase, an image repeats itself each time, with a pair of worn-out peasant shoes accompanying the extended history lesson. The peasant’s shoes represent in a semiotic sense those absent people: the peasants never actually speak in the first person to camera throughout the documentary. They are simply objectified through these worn-out shoes. Then, the narrator’s voice takes on a different tone: ‘In 1878 came the British; Cyprus, now, is an island of the British Commonwealth.’⁴⁷ The timing of this phrase fits perfectly, as a pair of feet wearing black socks (one of which has a large visible hole in it – a reflection of poverty) finally fills the shoes.

⁴² J. Stubbs ‘Did you ever notice this dot in the Mediterranean? Colonial Cyprus in the post-war British documentary’. In *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, (2015) DOI: 10.1080/01439685.2015.1027561.

⁴³ Lee and Keene p. 81.

⁴⁴ Interestingly, the title appears first in Greek as «ΚΥΠΡΟΣ - ΤΟ ΜΕΓΑΛΟ ΝΗΣΙ» followed by *Cyprus is an Island*. In English, the first title translates as ‘Cyprus – The Big Island’.

⁴⁵ The song is described as ‘historical’ music in the book. It is a piece called ‘Greek Suite’ by Petros Pierides. Lee and Keene p. 81.

⁴⁶ Lee and Keene p. 82.

⁴⁷ Lee and Keene p. 82.



Image 3 *Cyprus Is An Island* (1946) – stepping into the shoe

The narrator continues: ‘These are the Cypriots, and they have been here a long time’. A pair of feet casually step into the shoes, and walk away into a field. The scene sets the prescriptive tone of the documentary with its implication that despite its long history, the island of Cyprus, and its people are finally here. They only become significant in modernity as represented by ‘the Commonwealth’ or British Colonialism. Stubbs characterises this scene succinctly: ‘The message seems clear: enlightened British imperial rule has at last recognised the status of the Cypriot public and given them a place in the history of their island.’⁴⁸

Cyprus we are told is like a ‘ring that has passed from hand to hand’ of changing empires, and now the island is British. These objects, the shoes, the ring, are metaphors for history, the passing of time (with empty shoes) and an implicit gift symbolising a union (a ring) giving legitimacy to the British claim to own Cyprus. What follows is a soft form of propaganda justifying this rule under the legitimisation of modernity. To explain this in a prescriptive sense, the authors and makers of the documentary have to construct a problem, and ironically, it centres on goats. After images of the cosmopolitan town of Nicosia and other parts of the

⁴⁸ Stubbs p. 5.



Image 4 *Cyprus Is An Island* (1946) – Heated Discussion about goats in Lythrodontas

island, we shift to the people in the rural hinterland, to the village of Lythrodontas. After this, the main themes of the documentary are elaborated, as Keene states in the book:

We stayed in Lythrodhondha [*sic*] for two weeks and shot a great part of the film there – the village meeting, the people in their homes and in the fields, the irrigation work, the corn harvest, and the goat. The goats were an important theme in our story, and we had to get shots of them eating the trees and crops, and generally behaving as they shouldn't.⁴⁹

Goats are anathema to the farmer, 'Nikos', who spends a lot of his time arguing with goat herder 'Vassos' about his free-ranging flock. The first scene where Cypriots actually speak is when Nikos' 'wife' (who is given no name) catches the goats eating their crops while Vassos sleeps under an olive tree. In the script, this pans out in a rather dramatised manner through the use of music, with the direction 'Start "goat" music – harsh, discordant and agitated'⁵⁰ and a shouting match between Nikos and Vassos. Once the problem of the free-ranging goats and the threat they pose to

⁴⁹ Lee and Keene p. 33.

⁵⁰ Ibid p. 84.

farming is defined – the narrator states this clearly as ‘In half an hour, one flock could devastate a year’s harvest’⁵¹ – then the solution has to also be established. In the next scene, a village council assembles, which also turns into a wild shouting match between Cypriots – a clear stereotype is forming here. ‘Vassos leaps up, shouts and smashes chair to the ground’ and heads for the hills with his herd of goats.⁵²

Vassos’ roguish action, his self-imposed exile from the village, symbolises a kind of personal protest. He goes to the mountains seeking a bit more understanding. However, even there he and his goats are not welcome, so he decides to start a fire as an act of revenge. This scene sees forest rangers hunt down Vassos who is eventually caught and sent to prison for his actions. So far, the goat has been depicted as a key issue but the ‘perennial problem’ is water.⁵³ The narrator then elaborates on how a dam project was developed by the villagers with support from the colonial government. The dam provided water for most of the year, and by the end of the story, which coincides with an Easter feast, everyone is happy. Even Vassos is dancing with Nikos in celebration. Towards the end of the documentary, the narrator delivers a passionate solution, colonial modernity:

After centuries of poverty and decay a new plan is at work to build up the fertility of the island. The poisoned tooth of the goat is being drawn. Trees are being put back in the villages and forests. Yet Cyprus is still dry and there is still much to be done. But among the rocks, on the plains and the hills, in the orchards and terraced vineyards – wherever there is water and earth, there the Cypriot finds his food and livelihood.⁵⁴

Beyond the text, Lord Winster, Governor of Cyprus (1946-49) endorsed this view of colonial development and the baleful influence of the goat, even as late as 1954 in the House of Lords.⁵⁵ This view of agriculture drew on the advice of officials at the time. Reference is made in the book to a half-hour meeting with the Governor, who in 1945 was Charles Campbell Woolley,⁵⁶ and several consultations

⁵¹ Lee and Keene, p. 84.

⁵² Ibid pp. 85-86.

⁵³ Ibid p. 88.

⁵⁴ Ibid p. 90.

⁵⁵ “Cyprus.” *House of Lords Hansard*, [<http://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/1954-02-23/debates/0f-3c2ee5-3386-4ba8-8c7e-8a919e57b41d/Cyprus>].

⁵⁶ Governors of Cyprus source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_colonial_governors_and_administrators_of_British_Cyprus].



Image 5 *Cyprus Is An Island* (1946) The Village Dam as a sign of Progress

with colonial government officials, notably Fergusson.⁵⁷ This leads Lee to tell us: ‘The goat, then, was both a social and agricultural problem, and I was to hear more of him before I left Cyprus.’⁵⁸

So the two key subjects of the documentary, ‘the goat’ and ‘water’, lead to a conclusion that progress and development is being achieved under British rule after centuries of ‘poverty and decay’.⁵⁹ There remains an outstanding question, though: what about ‘freedom’? This is hinted at in the book, with a scene in a house in Lythrodontas on the day war is declared over. Drinking with the villagers, Lee, Keene and the crew hear a different perspective:

‘Jacobus, who had some English, grew fanciful and outspoken, shouting us all down. We were his friends, yes. He would tell us something, yes. Cyprus did not belong to Britain, no; it was an old ship boarded by pirates, plundered and anchored in poverty. One day, he said, we will throw these pirates into the seas, we will cut the cables of our island and sail it home to Greece.’⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Lee and Keene pp. 12-22.

⁵⁸ Ibid p. 14.

⁵⁹ Ibid p. 90.

⁶⁰ Ibid p. 55.

This scene is important for two reasons. It obviously did not make its way into the film, even as the hint of an idea: inevitably, given this was a documentary sanctioned and funded by the Colonial Office. Thus, ‘decolonization’, the end of British rule, albeit by uniting with Greece through ‘enosis’⁶¹, was something mentioned in passing in the book but, obviously completely omitted from the documentary. The scene described in the book foreshadows by a decade Durrell’s *Bitter Lemons*, where such encounters are commonplace, again involving an Englishman drinking with locals, this time in a tavern in Bellapais.⁶²

A final area I would like to consider is audiences. Stubbs’ article is interesting on this subject, and he discusses it extensively with regard to outlets in Britain and Cyprus at the time, explaining the contested nature of the documentary’s main theme of ‘progress’ and the reality of repression under colonialism.⁶³ What I would like to explore however is ethnographic, with reference in specific to the village of Lythrodontas and some of the interviews I conducted there more recently.

Cyprus is an Island was exhibited twice shortly after its release in the village. It’s not clear exactly when this occurred but Eftychis Saladas says that in 1946, when he was seven years old, a big white sheet was erected in the central square of the village in front of ‘the Inn’ (where Lee and Keene stayed) and the documentary was shown.⁶⁴ George Toufexis also confirmed this.⁶⁵ Probed on the reaction of the villagers, Saladas says: ‘There was so much enthusiasm after it was shown. It was the first time the villagers had seen themselves and their village in a film on a big screen. It meant a lot to the people in the village at the time to be able to see their faces on a big screen in the village square.’⁶⁶ There was also another screening in 1947, recalled by George Toufexis, when someone called Themistos (also from the village) brought the film from England to be shown in the village square.⁶⁷ More recently, Saladas recalled a screening at Pallas Cinema in Nicosia, which he also

⁶¹ ‘Enosis’ – Union with Greece – is a complex subject, beyond the confines of the current essay. But the plebiscite of 1949, albeit carried out by the Orthodox Church, resulted in 95.7% of the people voting in favour, numbering a total of 224,747 out of 250,000. Source: <https://www.sudd.ch/event.php?lang=en&id=cy011950> .

⁶² L. Durrell, *Bitter Lemons*.

⁶³ Stubbs p. 6.

⁶⁴ Eftychis Saladas interview, 2019.

⁶⁵ George Toufexis interview, 2019.

⁶⁶ Eftychis Saladas interview.

⁶⁷ George Toufexis interview.

attended.⁶⁸ The two showings in the village were greeted enthusiastically and although villagers did not indicate in interviews who had attended, it would surely have been seen by people featured in the documentary, notably those who played the parts of ‘Nikos’ the farmer (real name Tilliris) and ‘Vassos’ the shepherd (real name Mamas). Both these people have, in some ways, entered into village folklore due to the documentary. ‘My grandfather Mamas played in that’, said Clitos in another interview.⁶⁹ One of Mamas’ sons, Costantis, even told me candidly: ‘Yes, my father played in that film, where the British made the villagers look like we was the Mau-Mau’.⁷⁰ Both characters who played protagonist roles in the documentary returned to their ordinary village lives. Since then, the story of the documentary has formed part of local folkloric wisdom, articulated mainly in conversations by elders in various coffee shops in Lythrodontas. Mamas later played a bit part in the film *Αγάπες Τζαι Καημίοι - Loves and Sorrows* (1967), decades after the documentary was filmed in Lythrodontas.⁷¹ The two films, although entirely different - one a romance story, the other a colonial film text - remain as key landmarks for villagers in Lythrodontas to this day. There is a sense of pride when villagers recall stories about them.⁷²

Conclusions

Interpreting a colonial text like *Cyprus is an Island* seven decades after its release is precarious because like any media text, the documentary is obviously open to multiple possibilities of reading. Some might see this as a sign of pluralism and diversity of opinion. That heterogeneity of opinions however indicates just how polysemic such texts are.⁷³ This is a different argument that recognises how audiences read things differently and at times are at odds with each other over their interpretation. Concurrently, the text analysed did not just appear at random,

⁶⁸ This occurred around 2009 although during the interview Eftychis Saladas could not be precise about this.

⁶⁹ Interview with Clitos, 2019.

⁷⁰ Not stated in an interview but, while I was interviewing Clitos, a nonchalant remark was made by his uncle on another table in the from the corner of the coffee shop where the interview was conducted.

⁷¹ This ethnographic information was provided by Charitos, who runs the Olympus Cinema in Lythrodontas. I was also told Mamas had a brother called Girokos Xilidis, who was an amateur actor playing in theatre performances around the towns and villages of Cyprus.

⁷² As a recognition of their significance, Charitos recently approached me to co-organise a screening of these works in July 2019.

⁷³ S. Hall, 1973 *Encoding and decoding in the television discourse* (CCCS, 1973).

spontaneously, in 1946: it is socially situated. We have recognised the key themes reflecting a soft form of British propaganda as a modernizing force on Cyprus, which by the 1950s, with the start of an armed anti-colonial struggle in obviously hardened. These differ radically from a resident of Lythrodontas saying this was a film about ‘our village’ - and it was pioneering, from a villager’s viewpoint, as it was the first time Lythrodontas was captured on film. The power element retains its position in the creative process, because the Colonial Office sponsored the documentary, and inevitably had a certain agenda, to (as Hall would say) create ‘fixed’ meanings. However, audiences will always matter in these processes and their interpretations will differ. One criticism of the documentary at the time was that it lacked detailed reference to urban life, as it focused mainly on rural settings.⁷⁴ It is also unclear whether the film Greek or Turkish versions exist. Various people from Lythrodontas informed the author it was in Greek – one could speculate that perhaps someone added subtitles – but Stubbs’ characterisation of an ‘English-language film screening’ means it had an elite audience in terms of appeal.⁷⁵ There is also a need for a more detailed analysis of what happened to the film. It seems that for one or two years it was on release, then it vanished in a general climate of the sun starting to set on colonialism, starting with India in 1947.⁷⁶ Another area of the documentary deserving further research is the music. In the credits, John Hollingsworth is presented as ‘Musical Director’⁷⁷ and a credit is given to Petro Petrides for ‘the Greek Suite’⁷⁸ but the rest of the musical content remains a mystery. What interests me is how specific sections of music were chosen with definitive categories such as ‘peasant’, ‘goat’, ‘forest’ and ‘traditional’. Finally, what has inspired me most about this research is the value of ethnography as a lived experience and the stories which can be found through people’s recollections. Negotiating with the past through villagers in Lythrodontas formed the basis of this paper. Bringing characters in the documentary to life, who they were, how the documentary affected their lives, and what it means to people in Lythrodontas today are important elements of audience studies on the documentary we have

⁷⁴ Stubbs makes this claim with reference to an article in *The Cyprus Mail* 26 February 1947.

⁷⁵ Stubbs p. 6

⁷⁶ Ibid p. 6

⁷⁷ Lee and Keene p. 79. Hollingsworth was also the musical director for Hammer Films. <https://jon-man492000.wordpress.com/2018/02/04/john-hollingsworth-unsung-hero-of-the-silver-screen/>

⁷⁸ Ibid p. 79. Petrides was an eminent Greek classical composer and music critic. <https://oxfordindex.oup.com/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.21469> .

looked at. This was by no means an easy negotiation process. During interviews, I found myself seeing things differently, developing new lines of questioning and reasoning. Visual ethnography also featured through key photos, memorabilia and scenes. Visiting some of the places from the documentary in the village (or even being told where they used to stand, the inn now being a parking lot) was relevant. I grasped the impact on people of having seen themselves on screen in the late 1940s for the first time. That fascination transcends debates about dominant and preferred readings of colonial texts and takes us into a different kind of folkloric domain, notably the idea of ‘our village’ being ‘on a screen’. That village is now also on YouTube and people are seeing themselves in that context; seeing their relatives and ancestors is of value to local ethnography, oral history and the development of documentary film in Cyprus. The dichotomy that exists between my own readings of a soft propaganda text made under British colonialism at the end of the Second World War, and how villagers themselves have experienced the documentary, exemplifies the polysemic quality of documentary film texts.

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