**Having its Cake and Eating it Too:**

**Contemporary American ‘Indie’ cinema and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* Reframed**

**Yannis Tzioumakis and Lydia Papadimitriou**

**Introduction**

An industrial ‘rags to riches’ story, the phenomenal box office success of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (Joel Zwick, 2002), a small ethnic romantic comedy with an unusual production and distribution history, has rendered it an anomaly in the context of American indie film. Written by and starring Greek-American Nia Vardalos, who prior to that film had a handful of acting credits, primarily in television, and no writing or other credits in film, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* attracted significant producing power in the form of two well-capitalised independent companies, Gold Circle and PlayTone. With only partial finance by HBO for a negative cost of just $5 million, and a theatrical release by niche film distributor IFC Films, the film nonetheless connected with a huge theatrical audience in the North American market. Released on April 19, 2002 in just 108 theatres, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* played for 51 weeks (until April 13, 2003), with 43 of these weeks featuring in the list of the Top 20 films in the North American Box Office chart. Its final theatrical domestic gross was $241.4 million, placing it in the Top 5 films for 2002, and its worldwide gross was $368.7 million in total.

This remarkable performance places *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* in a very small group of similarly low budget films that for a number of different reasons defied industry expectations and performed disproportionately well in the marketplace. *The Blair Witch Project* (Myrick and Sanchez, 1999), *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Moore, 2004) *The Passion of the Christ* (Gibson, 2004), *Juno* (Reitman, 2007), *Slumdog Millionaire* (Boyle, 2008), among a few others, have had a similar trajectory in terms of connecting to a vastly larger audience than anticipated by their producers and distributors, while also attracting wide media and other attention.[[1]](#endnote-1) However, partly because of their extraordinary commercial success, all these films have also faced strong criticism, with some even becoming the subject of a backlash, especially with regard to their status as independent.[[2]](#endnote-2) With discourses of low budget quality cinema dominating in the construction of ‘independence’ in American cinema (Tzioumakis 2011a and 2011b), it is perhaps not surprising that films that perform like blockbusters at the box office attract often dismissive critical scrutiny. For films that reach a wide audience seem to radically counter Emanuel Levy’s often cited definition: ‘ideally, an indie is a fresh, low-budget movie with a gritty style and offbeat subject matter that express the filmmaker’s personal vision’ (1999: 2). It is for such reasons that scholarship on American independent cinema has either ignored *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* or dismissed it as a film with no aesthetic value and a surprise hit with nothing to contribute to the understanding of the field. J.J. Murphy, for example, has called it ‘pseudo independent’ and its politics ‘pure Hollywood hokum’ (2007: 4-5), while King (2005: 163 and 166) and Berra (2008: 17 and 25) have stressed the film’s conventionality and kinship to Hollywood, respectively.

In this chapter, we argue that there is another implicit reason for the film’s critical dismissal, and that is its perceived authorship, which in contemporary American independent cinema traditionally lies with a film’s director - in this case Joel Zwick. A veteran television director with dozens of credits, especially in American television sitcoms and with just one film credit before directing *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*,[[3]](#endnote-3) Zwick’s contribution as director was often critically regarded by reviews following the film’s theatrical release. With his television background constantly highlighted, reviewers often compared the film to a feature length sitcom, dismissing it as the product of a sitcom director and failing to identify any redeeming features. For instance, a review in *New York Times* talks about the film’s ‘pedestrian direction’, linking it to ‘television veteran Joel Zwick’ (Kehr 2002), while *Variety* labelled the film ‘familiar and sitcom broad’ thanks to a ‘visually uninspired, workmanlike competency that doesn’t transcend helmer Joel Zwick’s TV roots’ (Harvey 2002).

Such attention to the director’s contribution, however, shifted attention away from Vardalos’ involvement with the production of the film, especially with regard to its creative and aesthetic dimensions. Besides writing the screenplay and starring in the film, Vardalos was also involved at all stages of its production and promotion, and has been credited widely for bringing this small project to fruition and for its unlikely global success. However, despite being considered as the ‘architect’ behind *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* this perception rarely extended to questions of film authorship per se. As a result, narrative, aesthetic and other textual dimensions of the film have rarely been discussed as Vardalos’ creative choices. For most critics, such matters were attributed to Joel Zwick, the film’s director, whose training and long career in television marked the film as banal, pedestrian and sitcom like and as such not worthy of sustained discussion and inclusion in the canon of quality American independent cinema.

This chapter reframes *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* as a film predominantly authored by Nia Vardalos and, in doing so, repositions it in the context of contemporary American indie cinema. Taking as a starting point Geoff King’s tripartite definition of independence in American cinema as a concept that can be approached in terms of a film’s industrial location, the aesthetic strategies it adopts and its ‘relationship to the broader social, cultural, political or ideological landscape’ (2005: 1-2), the chapter highlights a number of industrial, textual and ideological complexities that point to closer ties to indie cinema than normally assumed. Key to understanding them all is the film’s unusual focus on an ethnic Greek female, played by Vardalos herself, and the narrative and aesthetic emphasis placed on her cultural identity. Industrially, the difficulty in anticipating the potential market for the film and its crossover appeal complicated the film’s distribution; textually, the romantic comedy generic conventions were adapted to incorporate the spectacle of ethnic difference; while ideologically, the drive to assimilation and conformity is complicated by an acceptance and celebration of otherness. The chapter therefore argues for *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* as a limit case indie film, and as a film authored by its Greek female writer-star, whose vision and sensibility, and arguably progressive politics, permeate the film. For such an approach to bear fruit, however, one needs to scratch beyond the surface and transcend traditionally constructed authorship models.

**Testing the Boundaries of Production and Distribution in the Independent Film Sector**

The industrial history of the film’s making and release is particularly relevant in trying to assess the location of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* in relation to concepts of independence in American cinema. Relevant to this is also the extent to which Vardalos successfully resisted pressures to make key changes to the film that were deemed to render it more saleable. In her detailed and highly illuminating article on the film’s independent status, Alisa Perren (2004) foregrounds a number of distinguishing characteristics, arguing for its status as a mainstream Hollywood film. While reviewing the same field, we offer here a counterargument, demonstrating, first, that the film’s production history was much more typical of the indie scene of the early 2000s than often assumed; and, secondly, that the initial difficulty in securing theatrical distribution rights in the US was partly due to uncertainty about how to market a film deemed thematically marginal, as it was situated within an ethnic community rarely represented in American cinema. In the process of the discussion that follows Vardalos’ crucial decision-making role at key stages in the film’s production becomes evident too.

For a small independent film, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* had the financial, production and institutional support of strong industry players. Based on a play under the same title written and performed by Nia Vardalos, initially in a six week run at the Hudson Backstage Theatre in Los Angeles in 1997 (*10 Things*), the writer-actor quickly sold film rights to her play to MPH Entertainment, a company specialising primarily in television series, for $60,000 (Grace, 2003). However, Vardalos also received interest from Greek American actress Rita Wilson and Playtone, a recently established independent production company co-owned by Wilson’s husband Tom Hanks, which at that time had a finance deal with HBO and was prepared to co-produce the film. Furthermore, another recently established independent production company, Gold Circle Films, set up by billionaire Norm Waitt and specialising in genre films, especially romance and horror, also approached Vardalos. Noticing these companies’ high calibre, MPH Entertainment sold the rights to Playtone and Gold Circle for a percentage of profits and a co-producer credit, and the two production outfits co-financed the picture for $5 million (ibid.). With Vardalos retaining writing and acting credits and with the rest of the above the line credits filled in by inexpensive talent primarily known from television (with *Sex and the City*’s John Corbett being the most recognisable participant), it was clear that the film was conceived as a small production. Indeed, its main selling point seemed to be the romantic comedy genre, with the ethnic Greek American community expected to provide a sizable enough core audience for a small profit. While such emphasis on genre and advance considerations of marketing potential may seem to contradict concepts of independence, it should be stressed that since the 1990s elements that could attract what Annette Insdorf had called ‘commercial money’ (1981: 58) had become commonplace in the indie scene (Tzioumakis 2012: 8). The film’s commercial orientation, therefore, cannot in itself act as an argument against its indie status, since it represents a much wider direction in the field.

To keep costs down, the production was relocated in Canada, with only some exteriors shot in Chicago, where the story is set (Fleischer 2008). With the production process streamlined under a tight budget, the film’s producers turned their attention to distribution and marketing. Just like many independent films, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* had been put into production without a theatrical distribution deal in place. However, by 2001 this was becoming increasingly rare, especially for films supported by significant production muscle, as the American independent film sector was entering in its indiewood phase, which was characterised by higher budgets, bigger stars, and stronger genre and institutional frameworks (Tzioumakis 2015: 292). In this climate, the absence of a theatrical distributor for a film with the commercial appeal of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* was indeed somewhat of an anomaly, and Alisa Perren provides some good explanations for this. First, she highlights that, given the film’s co-finance by HBO, it could have been optioned by any of the three theatrical distributors operating under Time Warner (HBO’s parent company): Warner Bros., New Line Cinema or Fine Line Features. She stresses, however, that the film’s subject matter and style did not suit any of these companies as each specialised in different types of film (2004: 21). A further obstacle was the fact that the producers had already pre-sold other distribution rights for the film – for instance, in exchange for putting up half of the film’s budget, HBO had secured both home video and cable television rights in the US. Furthermore, Gold Circle had acquired the film’s theatrical distribution rights outside the North American market as part of the co-finance and co-production deal with Playtone (Perren 2004: 20). Any distributor interested in acquiring the film’s theatrical rights would therefore have to take high risk, as the exponential rise of the costs of a theatrical release since the late 1980s, meant that by the early 2000s it was very difficult for a distributor to recoup their investment without access to ancillary markets.

On the other hand, the producers needed a theatrical release both in order to recoup costs and to maintain prestige. For this reason, they approached a theatrical distribution company with a view to making a service deal. Such deals usually involve the producers paying the distributor an upfront fee and a percentage of box office returns in order to get the film into theaters, while the cost of publicity and advertising lies with the producers rather than the distributors. While service deals were ‘once considered a mark of shame, a last resort for films,’ as production increased exponentially since the 2000s service deals have become more common (Goldstein 2010).

Playtone and Gold Circle approached IFC Films for such a deal. Set up in 2000 as a theatrical distribution spin off company from the Independent Film Channel (IFC) - itself a subsidiary of Rainbow Media Holdings, which was a joint venture by Cablevision Systems Corporation, NBC/General Electric and MGM (Perren 2004: 22) IFC Films was not a standalone/ independent company but a specialty film division established to trade in the independent film market. However, although Perren uses the company’s strong corporate links to major entertainment conglomerates to argue against the independent status of the film (ibid.) we would like to argue instead that this need not be the case. For IFC Films was no different to other specialty film divisions established in the late 1990s/early 2000s, in the wake of indiewood. As both King and Tzioumakis acknowledge, speciality-oriented distributors and/or producers owned by the major studio companies were central to the independent film industrial landscape of these years.[[4]](#endnote-4) Suggesting that IFC Films is not an independent film distributor because of its corporate links to a conglomerate is therefore inconsistent with understandings of the indie and indiewood scene of the period. Indeed, this company’s profile was both distinctive and in tune with such trends. While in many ways similar to the 1999-established USA Films, unlike this short-lived company’s focus on easily marketable films, IFC Films prioritised less commercially obvious films akin to early 1990s indie films, as well as non-English language fare (thus resembling the 1992 established Sony Pictures Classics). It is also worth noting that within IFC Films, the marketing campaign for *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* was largely decided by Bob Berney, one of the most well-known independent film marketers (Kilday, 2013), which further underlines the film’s independent status.

The service deal between the producers of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and IFC Films was unusual. According to reports, IFC Films did not receive a percentage of the film’s box office gross, agreeing instead to distribute the film for a flat fee of $300,000 paid by the film’s producers - which eventually went to ‘seven figures’ following a bonus payment after the film’s incredible theatrical success (Broderick, quoted in Rebort 2005). Indeed, the deal was so unusual that IFC Films’ competitor Sony Pictures Classics’ president Tom Bernard called it ‘the best deal any producer ha[d] made in the history of movies’ (quoted in Susman 2002). However, despite the hefty remuneration for all producing partners in the film, the film’s marketing campaign had cost substantially, dramatically even, for an independent film. Perren describes how the film’s producers had invested close to $20 million in marketing costs by September 2002, and uses this as further evidence in arguing against popular and industry press discourses that considered the film small and independent (2004: 28). It should be stressed, however, that by the early 2000s, several small budgeted indie films (such as *The Blair Witch Project* and many Miramax acquired films) were aggressively and expensively marketed with very positive financial returns.

In this deal Vardalos also played a significant role. Given that the film’s original P&A budget was set at a very low level (approximately $1 million [Seiler 2002]), the film’s writer and star was identified and became the key focal point in IFC Films’ early grassroots marketing efforts to position *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* in the US market. These efforts involved Vardalos “travelling town to town and making appearances at Greek organisations and bridal shows” (Susman 2002), spreading the word to and mobilising the film’s two core demographics, Greek-Americans and adult women. Once these practices showed very promising results, the film’s producers immediately upped the ante and committed the necessary funds required to make the film competitive in the national marketplace. As we have argued elsewhere, the film’s marketing campaign focused strongly on a stereotypical representation of Greek American ethnicity in the generic context of a romantic comedy aiming to appeal to two core audiences, the Greek American community and adult women (Tzioumakis and Papadimitriou 2015: 39), but it soon became clear that the film was embraced by a host of other demographics, which helped make it a box office smash.

Although the film’s marketing emphasis on ethnic stereotype and generic features suggests conventionality akin to Hollywood, and a distance from the independent film sector, in the next section we will argue for a more nuanced understanding of the film’s textual and ideological qualities. Taking our cue from the other two elements in King’s definition of American independent cinema, we will argue that the film is permeated by both progressive politics and some uncommon aesthetic choices, which arguably can be attributed to its star-writer Nia Vardalos and the ways in which she conceptualised – and celebrated – otherness as ethnic difference in a story about a female Greek American’s effort to marry outside her ethnic group. Furthermore we will explore its generic construction arguing that, like many other indie films of the time, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* undermines several of the conventions associated with its genre, in this case the romantic comedy.

**Having Its (Wedding) Cake and Eating It Too: Gender, Narration and Ethnic Politics in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding***

The first major distinguishing point from the perspective of the film’s politics is its focus on an ethnic group rarely depicted in American cinema, mainstream or independent: Greek Americans. Despite its sizable number (approximately three million people or one percent of the US population [US Department of State 2012]), Greek Americans have enjoyed much less cinematic exposure than similar ethnic groups originating from the European mass migration to the US in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries – especially Italian Americans, Irish Americans and Jewish Americans. And while certain high profile Hollywood films such as *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Garnett, 1941 and Rafelson, 1981), *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973) and *Charlie Wilson’s War* (Nichols, 2007), have featured American characters of Greek descent, these have tended to be supporting roles with little or no emphasis given to the characters’ ethnicity. Indeed, one has to go almost 20 years prior to the release of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* to find a film that puts a Greek American at the centre of the narrative, Paul Mazursky’s *The Tempest* (1982), starring John Cassavetes, and another 20 years before that for a film that focuses squarely on the Greek-American experience, Elia Kazan’s *America, America* (1963).

As such, the release of a film with a Greek American character – a female one for that – at its centre was almost unprecedented, pointing to its novelty and departure from American cinema norms. Vardalos has been quoted several times stating that she had other proposals to adapt her one woman play into a film but most requested that the ethnic context would be changed to the more commercially appealing Italian- or Hispanic-American. Indeed, her decision to accept the Playtone/HBO-Gold Circle arrangement had a lot to do with their guarantee that that they would respect the ‘integrity’ of her play and screenplay, which were built around the peculiarities and particularities of Greek American ethnicity (Strickler 2002) especially in relation to women. The fact that Vardalos successfully resisted pressures to homogenise ethnic American representations and further commercialise her film by adapting it for a larger demographic, indicates not only the extent to which she managed to maintain control over the film’s content, but also – and as a consequence – the film’s strong independent status. For, as Peter Krämer has demonstrated, control of form and content by a film’s key creative authors when working within commercial structures constitutes a crucial marker of a film’s independence (2012: 154).

However, giving a voice to an ethnic minority and representing it from a female perspective do not necessarily result in progressive politics. In fact, in the context of independent cinema, progressive politics tend to be associated with edgy representations questioning the status quo, combined with character-driven complex narratives supported by a distinctive visual style. But while these are often markers of political radicalism and critical success, the majority of films made in the margins of the independent film sector do not necessarily conform to this ‘ideal’, in Levy’s term (1999: 2). Countering the critical consensus on *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* that saw the film as ‘conventionally assembled […] but with an ethnic spin’ (King 2005: 163; 166), or fitting ‘into the Hollywood production mould’ and permeated by ‘conservatism,’ that ‘strives for novelty value that will distinguish an independent film from a studio film but at the same time does not wish to alienate or offend any potential ticket-buying demographic’ (Berra 2008: 17; 25) we will argue that the film is more complex and less conservative than such observations suggest. This is primarily because of the ways in which the film openly celebrates Greek(-American)ness as an ethnic identity and takes a very unusual, even radical, position when it comes to questions of ethnic assimilation. In this respect, it is clear that film’s authorship rests with its ‘creative nous,’ Nia Vardalos.

It should be acknowledged that, at first sight, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* does indeed appear conventional. Its romantic comedy attributes are registered early in the story, while it adheres to many, though not all, key generic qualities identified by Jeffers McDonald (2007): in terms of ‘visual characteristics’, it takes place in an urban location, its iconography revolves around a wedding, while all its stock characters are present, including a host of unsuitable partner characters that are presented in an entertaining montage sequence. (2007: 11) In terms of ‘narrative patterns’, the film employs the ‘meet cute’ trope (2007: 12), which foreshadows the couple’s later union, though here the union takes place early in the film, immediately after Toula and Ian’s second meeting (a first less cute meeting at the very beginning of the film acts as an early indicator) and there is no initial hating of each other, a trope that many romantic comedy couples start with. On the other hand, however, the couple never splits (the boy does not lose the girl and so does not need to find her again), despite efforts on the part of the couple’s families to convince them that they are unsuitable for each other. No one tries to derail the wedding – at least not consciously – and there is no masquerading and no public humiliation ‘to prove that love is more important than dignity’ (2007: 13) - even though, as we will explore in more detail later, Ian’s Greek Orthodox baptism might qualify as humiliation.

Arguably the strongest narrative trope in the film is one that romantic comedy shares with other genres: the makeover. When we first see Toula Portokalos, she is a 30-year old woman with a full rounded figure, wearing big glasses, ordinary clothes, no make-up and un-styled hair. She has ‘no life’ as she confesses to her mother when questioned about her constant presence in the family’s restaurant business. Her father tells her openly that she looks ‘old’ and that she needs to ‘marry soon,’ implying that if she does not she will stay ‘on the shelf.’ However, Toula sees her family’s obsession with her getting married (and having children) as a strong register of her ethnic background about which she had been feeling ambivalent all her life. Toula wants to assimilate, to be more like the non-ethnic (blonde, slight-figured, white) girls she went to school with, of which, we are led to believe, no matrimonial and procreational demands are made by their families and surrounding communities.

Putting her ‘frump phase’ behind her, while also escaping her ethnically determined fate become one and the same narrative goal for Toula. We see her gradually paying increasing attention to her looks while also, and despite her family’s initial disapproval, registering in the local college to gain professional qualifications and seek a different job than restaurant seating hostess. These efforts pay off quickly as she is soon accepted by the blonde, slight-figured women she now studies with, while her IT and tourism studies land her a job in her aunt’s travel agency – still within the family fold but outside the direct purview of her oppressive parents. It is there that she meets Ian Miller, a WASP American from a wealthy family. Toula can now complete her assimilation and perform her gender role within a dominant, ethnic free and thus (apparently) non-oppressive white environment, through her wedding with Ian.

As it turns out, then, Toula’s problem is not with ‘getting married and having babies’ but it is doing these things within the cultural milieu of her strongly ethnic family and broader community. It is at this point that another key element of the romantic comedy genre emerges: ideology. While it endorses firmly the Western ideas of monogamy, stability and procreation, it also promotes the American Dream – that anyone can escape their background, can assimilate, can find happiness – as Toula’s voiceover at the end of the film underlines: ‘Sometimes I am afraid that it didn’t happen! I am scared that I will wake up and still be battering up garlic bread, waiting for my life to start! But it did happen! It did!’

However, such a straightforward reading of the film does not take into account a number of narrative complications, some of which undermine its validity and support alternative interpretations. Principal among them is Toula’s firm placement at the centre of a narrative that, as indicated before, diverges from some generic conventions – including the conventional use of omniscient narration in the genre. Instead, in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* Toula is the spectator’s guide to a narrative, in which the narration is almost obsessively restricted to her own perspective. From the opening flashback sequences where she explains in voiceover the problems she has with her ethnic heritage, to the closing scenes where, again in voiceover, she confirms that she has found happiness, the narrative is filtered almost entirely through her viewpoint and her physical presence in the events depicted. Even when she is not initially present while other people talk about her future, she soon joins in and is therefore able to present these narrative events from her viewpoint too. Such a narrational choice, which clearly shows Vardalos’ control over the ordering and structure of the narrative, makes Toula the spectator’s only guide to the narrative world and thus a conduit through which the film can present certain complex and progressive political positions.

Arguably the most important, even radical, proposition that *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* makes via this strategy concerns the nature of Toula’s assimilation. Despite her early rant about the backward-looking Greek American traditions, which are later accentuated through stereotypical depictions of Greek customs that are played for laughs (lamb on a spit, heavy ouzo drinking, lack of boundaries and privacy, spitting to take away the ‘bad eye,’ etc.) Toula gradually realises that she does not really want to break away from her family and her ethnic background. In a key scene in the film, her brother Nikos tells her: ‘Don’t let your past dictate who you are but let it be part of who you will become,’ which introduces Toula to a world where cultural identity is flexible and controlled by individuals, through their ability to transform themselves with consumption and makeovers.

However, if this looks like a convenient way for Toula to escape an ethnically determined gender identity and partake into one in which the markers of ethnicity are all but erased, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* surprises by the way it also reverses this strategy by taking Ian from the fold of the default whiteness that his WASP status suggests and providing him with an ethnic identity. In a rather unexpected turn in the narrative and in order to make Toula and her family happy, Ian agrees to be baptised Christian Orthodox in the Greek Orthodox Church so that the wedding can take place in the Greek Church and according to the Greek tradition and customs. In a scene that is played for laughs and borders on the kind of humiliation that Jeffers McDonald argues takes place ‘to prove that love is more important than dignity,’ [see Fig 1] Ian in a pair of boxer shorts is christened in a huge inflatable pool in the middle of a church. As soon as he is dressed and meets Toula for the first time after his baptism, the first words he utters are ‘I’m Greek now,’ which, however ironically uttered, also suggest that he has chosen to become part of Toula’s ethnic group. <INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE>

Ian’s ritual assimilation was preceded by a scene, in which, for the first and only time, the narration breaks away completely from Toula’s point of view and becomes omniscient.[[5]](#endnote-5) While at work, Ian explains to his friend and colleague Mike that he cannot ask him to be Best Man in his wedding as, for the church ceremony, the Best Man needs to be Greek Orthodox. Mike understands but questions the extent to which Ian is prepared to compromise for the benefit of Toula and her family stating ‘no offence, but this girl’s family’s got you by the short ones. They say ‘jump’ and you pull out the trampoline,’ to which Ian makes a playful ‘jump’ gesture to show that he is indeed ready to do whatever it takes, including becoming a member of an ethnic minority group by adopting their religion, in order to make Toula happy.

Ian’s casual admittance that he is ready to ‘jump’ is particularly interesting because it is uttered away from Toula’s knowledge. At that point he could have said anything: that he does it for ease rather than because he wants to, that it does not mean anything, that despite the perceived extremity of his action he is still ‘in charge,’ or anything similar in order not to lose ‘face’ and credibility with his closest friend. But he does not. Instead, it becomes clear that Ian is ready to leave his WASP identity (and masculinity) aside and embrace the culture and customs of an ethnic minority group. Furthermore, the choice in this particular scene of omniscient narration in a film that is otherwise organised in restricted narration allows for this unusual political position to be presented as ‘natural’ rather than filtered by the film’s main narrative agency, that is, Toula.

Irrespective of how it is communicated, such a position also aligns with female-driven politics that once again betray who the film’s author is, while at the same time highligthing *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*’s independent credentials given that such politics are rarely seen in a patriarchal institution such as Hollywood cinema. Writing on *Groundhog Day* (Ramis, 1993) Kristin Thompson noted how ‘certainly unusual ... for a Hollywood film’ was that, after a while, the film’s main male character’s narrative goal was to ‘become the ideal of a modern, liberated woman’ (1999: 147). And while in *Groundhog Day* this means that the character played by Bill Murray becomes a kind and much nicer person than the ego-centric careerist we experienced at the start, identity pillars such as class, ethnicity and sexuality are certainly not touched. But in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, they are.

Indeed the kinds of representations that the film offers are extremely rare. After all, Toula decides not to assimilate and instead converts Ian to the minority she belongs, a proposition that ideologically places the film firmly away from most of Hollywood cinema and next to films that challenge the status quo. Furthermore, the fact that this representation could be found in a film released in the early months of 2002, within a socio-political climate of intense suspicion of ethnic minorities following the 9/11 attacks, makes its presence in the film and its spectacular embrace by such a wide audience unprecedented and almost radical. As *New York Times* reported, ‘since the attacks, people who look[ed] Middle Eastern and Muslim, whatever their religion or nation of origin, ha[d] been singled out for harassment, threats and assaults’ (Goodstein and Lewin 2002), often condoned by the US government’s initiatives and laws that, despite aiming to stop terrorism, they also enabled practices of ‘stereotyping and scapegoating’ (Bakalian and Bozorgmehr 2009: 2). And even though Greek-Americans as an ethnic group were not Muslims and modern Greece has belonged historically to the Western political and cultural sphere, its geographical position in the Balkans amongst nations with significant Muslim populations, its close proximity to the Middle East, and the Greeks’ darker skin colour compared to other ‘whiter ethnic groups’ certainly made inclusion in this stereotyping and scapegoating possible.[[6]](#endnote-6)

This is especially as the film does not shy away from many of these characteristics but often juxtaposes them with non-ethnic whiteness setting up binary oppositions and underlining the cultural difference of the Greek Americans. As mentioned before, at the beginning of the film, Toula is depicted twice as a dark-coloured ethnic girl and later woman who is ‘different’ from the others in terms of her looks and her food. Later on, Toula and her family are joined by her *yaya*, a stereotypically clad in black clothes and headscarf grandmother, who cannot cope easily with life in her culturally alien surroundings, often wanders in other people’s gardens and is delivered back home in disdain by non-ethnic neighbours such as ‘Mrs White’. Arguably the most interesting such juxtaposition is the one between Toula’s Greek American and Ian’s WASP family. With the latter also stereotypically presented as quiet, emotionally reserved, culturally refined and with a very US-centric view of the world in which Greece, Armenia and Guatemala are interchangeable, in contrast Toula’s family appears even louder, with no understanding of boundaries and with suspect customs such as roasting a whole lamb on a spit in the front yard of their house. ‘They look at us and they think we are from the zoo’ Toula’s father proclaims after their first encounter, while also being quick to label Ian’s family ‘dry as a toast.’

Clearly, the film made few – if any – concessions in terms of glamorising the ethnic Other or removing sensitive marks of ethnicity that could have rendered Greek Americans vulnerable in the immediate post-9/11 climate. Under these circumstances, Ian’s complete espousal of such cultural identity is even more astonishing as, according to Benshoff and Griffin, ‘the most common designation of whiteness in the United States is the term WASP,’ an identity from which Ian flees, and that ‘people of non-Anglo Saxon European ancestry have historically had to negotiate their relation to whiteness’ (2004: 53), including of course the Greek-Americans who become Ian’s people.

**Conclusion**

Despite its apparent conventionality, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* is industrially less mainstream, textually more complex, and ideologically more challenging than previously assumed. For these reasons, we have argued that it deserves to be considered as part of an inclusive canon of American independent cinema, alongside many other films produced and circulated during the indie and indiewood years of American independent cinema that may – or may not – be explicitly sophisticated in form and oppositional in content. We have also demonstrated the decisive role that *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*’s writer-star has played in informing its subject matter, aesthetic sensibilities, and cultural priorities. Indeed, while almost all accounts of the film were quick to construct Vardalos as the film’s author in terms of the *process* of bringing it to the screen and creating a global smash from an one woman play, they nonetheless steered clear of extending this authorship to the film’s formal and stylistic elements, opting instead to dismiss them on account of the film director’s TV background. Reframing American independent film, therefore, requires not only to target gender prejudices but also to question the automatic privileging of a film’s director as its sole author. For, as our discussion of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* has shown, creative control and cultural influence can be exercised from other positions too.

**Bibliography**

Benshoff, H. and Griffin, S. (2004) *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality in the Movies*, Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Berra, J. (2008) *Declarations of Independence: American Cinema and the Partiality of Independent Production*, Bristol: Intellect.

Caro, M. (1999) ‘Frightfully, Frightfully, Frightfully Real: The Bewitching Story Behind The `Blair Witch Project'’ in *Chicago Tribune*, 14 July, online, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1999-07-14/features/9907140115\_1\_daniel-myrick-myrick-and-sanchez-blair-witch-project (accessed on 15 April 2015).

Bakalian, A. and Bozorgmehr M. (2009) *Backlash 9/11: Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans Respond*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Eller, C. and Munoz, L (2003) ‘'Wedding' Party Leaves Some Behind’ in Los Angeles Times, 23 March, online, http://articles.latimes.com/2003/mar/23/business/fi-greekmess23 (accessed 15 April 2015).

Fleischer, D. (2008) ‘Reel Toronto: *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*’ in *Torontoist*, 23 September, online, http://torontoist.com/2008/09/reel\_toronto\_my\_big\_fat\_greek\_weddi/ (Accessed on 15 April 2015).

Goldstein, G, (2010) ‘Service Deals Becoming a Hit at Sundance’ in *Hollywood Reporter*, 26 Jan, online http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/service-deals-becoming-hit-sundance-19985 (accessed on 15 April 2015).

Goodstein, L. and Lewin, L. (2001) ‘A Nation Challenged: Violence and Harassment,’ *New York Times*, 19 September, online, http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/19/us/nation-challenged-violence-harassment-victims-mistaken-identity-sikhs-pay-price.html (accessed 15 April 2015).

Grace, F. (2003) ‘'Big Fat Greek Wedding' Lawsuit’ in *CBS News*, 2 July, online, http://www.cbsnews.com/news/big-fat-greek-wedding-lawsuit/ (accessed on 15 April 2015).

Harvey, D (2002) “Review: *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*” in Variety, 15 April, online http://variety.com/2002/film/awards/my-big-fat-greek-wedding-3-1200550281/ (accessed on 16 July 2015).

Insdorf, A. (1981) ‘Ordinary People, European Style: How to Spot an Independent Feature’ in *American Film*, Vol. 6, No 10, Sep, pp 57-60.

Jeffers McDonald, T. (2007) *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl*, New York: Wallflower Press.

Kehr, D (2002) “Film in Review: *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*” in *New York Times*, 19 April online, http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9D03E7D9153FF93AA25757C0A9649C8B63 (accessed on 16 July 2015).

Kilday, G. (2013) ‘Bob Berney Relaunching Picturehouse, Signs Output Deal with Netflix’ in Hollywood Reporter, 15 January, online, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/bob-berney-relaunching-picturehouse-signs-412732 (accessed on 15 April 2015).

King, G. (2005) *American Independent Cinema*, London: I.B. Tauris.

King. G. (2009) *Indiewood USA: Where Hollywood Meets Independent Cinema*,London: I.B. Tauris.

Kostaki, M. (2002) ‘Nia, Rita and Tom too: Nia Vardalos & Her Big Fat Greek Wedding’ in *Odyssey*, May/June, pp 43-45.

Krämer, P. (2012) ‘The Limits of Autonomy: Stanley Kubrick, Hollywood and Independent Filmmaking, 1950-53’ in King, G., Molloy, C, and Tzioumakis, Y. (eds) *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond*, London: Routledge, pp. 153-64.

Levy, E. (1999) *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film*, New York and London: New York University Press.

Lyman, R. (2002) ‘A Big Fat (And Profitable) Cinderella Story; 'Greek Wedding' Courts A Prince Named Oscar’ in *New York Times*, 28 November, online, http://www.nytimes.com/2002/11/28/movies/big-fat-profitable-cinderella-story-greek-wedding-courts-prince-named-oscar.html (accessed on 15 April 2015).

Murphy, J.J. (2007) *Me and You and Memento and Fargo: How Independent Screenplays Work*, New York: Continuum.

Newman, M. Z. (2011) *Indie: An American Film Culture*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Perren, A. (2004) ‘A Big Fat Indie Success Story? Press Discourses Surrounding the Making and Marketing of a Hollywood Movie’ in *Journal of Film and Video*, Vol. 56, No 2, pp 18-31.

Rebort (2005) ‘Rethinking Film Distribution’ in *iofilm*, 15 November, online, http://www.iofilm.co.uk/io/mit/001/film\_distribution\_20051115.php (accessed on 15 April 2015).

Seiler, A. (2002) “Their Big Fat Success Story” in USA Today, 28 August, online, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/movies/2002-08-27-big-fat-story\_x.htm (accessed on 17 July 2015).

Strickler, J. (2002) ‘Truth Sillier than Faction in ‘My Big Fat Greek Wedding’ in the *Star Tribune*, 9 May, online http://www.startribune.com/lifestyle/11473461.html (accessed 15 April 2015).

Susman, G. (2002) ‘My Big Fat Greek Wallet’ in *the Guardian*, 29 November, online, http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2002/nov/29/artsfeatures (Accessed on 15 April 2015).

*10 Things You Never Knew About ‘*My Big Fat Greek Wedding’, online, http://screen.answers.com/movies/10-things-you-never-knew-about-quot-my-big-fat-greek-wedding-quot (accessed on 15 April 2015).

Thompson, K. (1999*) Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Tzioumakis, Y. (2011b) ‘Academic Discourses and American Independent Cinema: In Search of A Field of Studies, Part 2 – The 1990s and beyond’ in *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, Vol. 9, No 3, September, pp 311-340.

Tzioumakis, Y. (2011a) ‘Academic Discourses and American Independent Cinema: In Search of A Field of Studies, Part 1 – From the Beginnings to the 1980s’ in *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, Vol. 9, No 2, July, pp 105-131.

Tzioumakis, Y. (2012) *Hollywood’s Indies: Classics Divisions, Specialty Labels and the American Film Market*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Tzioumakis, Y. (2015) ‘Between Indiewood and Nowherewood: American Independent Cinema in the 21st Century’ in *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics*, Vol. 10, No 3, pp 285-300.

Tzioumakis, Y. and L. Papadimitriou (forthcoming) ‘Marketing Greekness: Aspects of Greek Identity in the Marketing Strategies for *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002) and *My Life in Ruins*’ (2009) in N. Mingant, C. Tirtaine and J. Augros, (eds.) *Film Marketing into the 21st Century*, London: BFI, pp 36-46.

US Department of State (2012) ‘US Relations with Greece’ online, 2 October 2012, at http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3395.htm (accessed on 15 April 2015).

**Notes**

1. For instance, for *The Blair Witch Project* see Caro 1999, while for *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* see Lyman 2002 as well as Kostaki 2002 and Susman 2002. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See for instance the discussion of the strong backlash against *Juno* in Newman 2011: 240-245. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Among the many TV shows for which Zwick directed episodes, one could find *Perfect Strangers* (1986-1993) and *Full House* (1987-1995), both with Greek interest due to particular characters’ and/or actors’ ethnic background, which might have helped Zwick land the director’s job in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The term indiewood has been used in slightly different ways by scholars. For King, ‘Indiewood’ (with a capital I) is an industrial/institutional phenomenon in the 1990s and 2000s that has produced a number of films with particular textual qualities that stem both from the mainstream and the independent sector (2009: 1–4). For Tzioumakis, ‘indiewood’ (with lower case i) is a period in the history of contemporary American independent cinema that starts from the mid-/late-1990s in which the dominant expression of film-making is characterized by many of the elements identified by King (2012: 10–12). With the exception of direct quotes from King, here we use Tzioumakis’ approach to indiewood. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. There are two other scenes that are arguably also coded as omniscient moments and both involve a short discussion between Ian and Toula’s brother. In the first of these Nikos teases Ian that he would ‘kill him’ if he makes his sister unhappy while in the second Nikos plays a prank at Ian by asking him to use Greek swear words. But despite the absence of other people in these two short scenes, they both take place in geographical proximity to Toula and therefore can easily be missed or misunderstood as also filtered through her perspective [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. For an excellent discussion of stereotyping and representation of Europe originating ethnic groups in American cinema see Benshoff and Griffin 2004: 54-73. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)