

The Greek American Image in American Cinema

How American films depict Greek Americans tells us more about American culture than about Greek Americans. Cinema generally reflects contemporary cultural beliefs. By presenting those values in vivid forms, cinema reinforces them. The general rule is that screenwriters, directors, cinematographers, and actors do not have any special knowledge of Greek America and reproduce the dominant negative and positive cultural stereotypes. Far less common is an attempt to consciously reshape those perceptions.

The following filmography, which offers an account of the image of Greek Americans in American cinema, reveals how mainstream America has perceived Greek Americans at any given moment and how American cinema has reacted to that perception. For our purposes, Greek America is composed of immigrants and any offspring who self-define themselves as Greek.

In order to make the filmography useful, we have created five rating categories of one G to five Gs. These are not aesthetic or approval rankings; they are indicators of the nature of the Greek American dimension of any given film.

GGGGG: Indicates a film whose major character is a Greek American and whose Greek heritage is the central element in the film's plot line. Few Hollywood films fit into this category while almost all independent films made by Greek Americans do. For an example, see the entry for *Beneath the Twelve Mile Reef*.

GGGG: Indicates a film with a major or minor character whose Greekness is integral to the film, but that Greekness is not the film's dominant cultural concern. There are a considerable number of these films. For an example, see the completed full entry for *City Hall*.

GGG: Indicates a film with a major or minor character who is clearly identified as a Greek American, but whose ethnicity is not vigorously explored. This is a common practice. For an example, see the completed full entry for *Mr. Lucky*.

GG Indicates a film with a minor Greek American character whose ethnic identity is barely noted. Greekness often is only indicated by the character's name. Whether a film's Greek character is GGG or GG is often a close call. For an example, see the completed full entry for *Milk*.

G: Indicates a film with a very minor character who could be of any ethnic heritage and may not even have a speaking role. This designation also indicates films based on another medium in which a character who was originally Greek has been given a different ethnicity or a mainstream identity. For an example, see the completed full entry for *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

The filmography that follows is a work in progress. Presently, we are offering the titles of American films with Greek American characters, their date of production, and their Greekness ranking. Over the course of the next year, we will offer full production credits and plot summaries for each film. Our filmography includes both Hollywood and mainstream fiction films; but we have not included documentaries or films made by producers in other nations.

This filmography has been compiled by the Center for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies at Queens College-City University of New York and the Modern Greek Program at the University of Michigan.

Anyone wishing to comment on the films or add to the list is invited to e-mail:

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Greek Americans in American Cinema (1912-2009)

Achilles Heel—GGGG
(aka Achilles Love)
2000

A Dream of Kings--GGGG
1969

America, America--GGGG
1963

The Arrangement--GGGG
1969

A Sea Apart--GGGG
2003

Astoria—GGGGG
2000

Before and After-GGG
1996

Beneath the Twelve Mile Reef—GGGGG

1953 Color 102 minutes

Producer: Twentieth Century-Fox

Director: Robert Webb

Writer: A.I. Bezzerides

Cast: Robert Wager, Terry Moore, Gilbert Roland, Richard Boone

Synopsis: Tony Petrakis (Robert Wagner) is a cocky Greek youth living in Tarpon Springs in a stereotypical traditional family who undergoes a manly rite of passage. Tony's father, Mike Petrakis (Gilbert Roland) is a sponge diver who is having a hard time finding sponges in the area traditionally harvested by Greeks. He decides to make an early morning run to Key West waters that are considered the territory of non-Greek fishermen led by Thomas Rhys (Richard Boone). When the locals discover the presence of Greeks, there is violence and a dramatic face-to-face between the Petrakis and Rhys families. The story takes another turn when Tony becomes romantically interested in Rhy's beautiful and rebellious daughter Gwyneth (Terry Moore). Terry's boyfriend (Peter Graves) takes offense. The ensuing fight is partly about sponges, partly about jealousy, and partly about whether Greeks can be considered as equals by native-born Americans. Much of the film is shot on location and explores the skills and dangers involved in sponge diving. Mike is killed diving in dangerous waters. After more violence, Tony and Terry elope. Her father pursues them with a vengeance, but the film ends with the feuding communities coming to terms with one another, mainly due to the attitudes embodied in the younger generation. The Greek characters are portrayed as courageous. The script is by A.I. Bezzerides from his own short story. Bezzerides, son of an Armenian mother and a Greek father, was born in Asia Minor. Rock Hudson, then at the onset of his career, provides a brief narrative introduction in the opening sequence. This early Cinemascope production is noted for its innovative underwater photography (cinematographer Edward Cronjagger got an Oscar nomination for his work). This is one of two films about Greeks made by Twentieth-Century Fox in 1953. Perhaps not coincidentally, the studio was then headed at this time by Spyro Skouras.

The Carolina Caper-GGG

1967

Charlie Wilson's War—GGGG

2007

City Hall—GGGG

1986 Color 111 minutes

Producer: Pressman Film Corp., Lipper Productions, Castle Rock Entertainment

Director: Harold Becker

Script: Ken Lipper, Paul Schrader, Nicholas Pileggi, Bo Goodman

Cast: Al Pacino, John Cusack, Bridget Fonda, Martin Landau, Danny Aiello

Synopsis: John Pappas (Al Pacino) is an idealistic mayor of New York with presidential ambitions. Although Pappas' Greek ancestry is noted from time to time, only one sequence has a Greek dimension. When a black boy is accidentally killed in the cross fire between a drug dealer and a white narcotics detective in a predominately black

neighborhood, a riot is in the offing. Pappas eases tensions with a funeral speech at the boy's church that explicitly references an address by Pericles to the Athenians and the mayor's own Greek heritage. During the course of the film, a mayoral aide (John Cusack) uncovers seedy elements in the mayor's political rise to power. The film, however, mainly focuses on a Brooklyn council member (Danny Aiello) with considerable reference to Italian American culture.

Collision Course—GGG

1989

Crank—GG

2006

Crime School-GGG

1938

Daredevil—GGGG

2003

Dark Odyssey—GGGGG

1961

The Deep End of the Ocean—GGG

1998

Destination Tokyo—GGGG

1943

Do You Want To Dance?—GGGGG

1997

Double Indemnity—GG

1944

Down to the Sea-GGGGG

(aka Down Under the Sea)

1936

Elektra-GGGG

2005

Eleni—GGGG

1985

Everything for a Reason—GGGG
2000

The Exorcist—GG
1973

Fifteen Minutes—G
1998

Final Analysis--GGG
2001

Five Aces—GGG
1999

Fletch Lives-G
1998

Flying Down to Rio—G
1933

Frankie and Johnny—GGG
1991

The Glory Brigade—GGGGG
1953

Go Naked into the World—GGG
1961

Goodbye, Miss Fourth of July—GGGGG
1988

The Great Gatsby—GGG
1949

The Great Gatsby—GGG
1974

The Great Gatsby-GGG
2001

The Greek Tycoon—GG

1978

The Heart is a Lonely Hunter—GGG

1968

Heat—GGG

1995

The Imposters—GGG

(aka *Ship of Fools*)

1998

Juke Girl—GG

1942

King of America—GGGGG

1983

Kiss Me Deadly—GGG

1955

Land Raiders—GGG

(aka *The Day of the Landgrabber*)

1969

Mad Bull—GGGG

British title: *The Aggressor*

1997

The Man from the Diner's Club—GGGGG

1963

Milk—GG

2008 Color 128 minutes

Producer: Focus Features

Director: Gus Van Zant

Script: Dustin Lance Black

Cast: Sean Penn, Jeff Koons

Synopsis: This biopic explores the life of Harvey Milk, the first openly homosexual politician to be elected to office in San Francisco. Milk was subsequently murdered by a homophobic fellow politician. Early in his career, Milk (Sean Penn) has a political debate with Art Agnos (Jeff Koons). Agnos expresses no animus whatever to Milk's sexual orientation, and after their debate, he tells Milk that he will never win until he

begins to tell people what he is for as fervently as what he is against. Milk will take this advice to heart and make it central to his future (successful) political campaigns. The film never notes that Agnos is Greek, Audiences would only know so because of his name. The real-life Agnos eventually served as mayor of San Francisco (1988-1992).

Mister Lucky—GGG

(Remade as *Gambling House* in 1950)

1942 B&W 98 minutes

Producer: RKO

Director; H.C. Porter

Script: Milton Holmes and Adrian Scott

Cast: Cary Grant, Lorraine Day, Charles Bickford

Plot line: Cary Grant plays Joe Adams (Joe Bacopolous). His Greekness is noted from time to time, but Grant makes no attempt to Hellenize his usual persona. He remains Cary Grant with a Greek name. Bacopolous is a gambler who assumes the identity of a dead gangster in order to avoid the draft. He then schemes to use a war charity as a cover for his gambling operations. When he falls in love with one of his victims (Lorraine Day), he has a change of heart. This film is one of many in the studio era that portrayed Greeks as gamblers. Although a rascal at the onset, Bacopolous is transformed into a Hollywood “good guy” by the end of the picture.

My Big Fat Greek Wedding—GGGGG

2002

My Life in Ruins—GGGG

2009

My Palikari—GGGGG

(Video release as *Silent Rebellion*)

1982

The Naked City—GGG

1948

Napatia, The Greek Singer—GGG

1912

Nicky's World-GGGGG

1974

A Perfect Couple—GGG

1979

Pizza Palace

2004

The Postman Always Rings Twice--GGG

1978

The Redemption of Greek Joe—GGG

1912

Sands of Iwo Jima—GGGG

1949

Shelter—GGG

1998

Smart Money—GGG

1931

Summer Lovers—GG

1982

A Streetcar Named Desire—G

1951 B&W 122 minutes

Producer: Charles Freedman

Director: Elia Kazan

Script: Tennessee Williams from his play of the same name.

Cast: Marlon Brando, Vivien Leigh, Kim Hunter

Synopsis: One of the men who plays cards with the main character (Brando) is identified as a Greek

Strike Me Pink—GGG

1936

The Tempest—GGG

1982

Thieves' Highway—G

1941

The Thin Man—G

A series of six films beginning in 1934

The Thin Red Line—GGGG

1998

Tiger by the Tail—GGGG
1968

Tribute to a Bad Man—GGGG
1956

Twelve Hours to Kill--GGG
1960