

University Seminar 703: Modern Greek

April 11, 2013

Speaker: Álvaro García Marín, Marie Curie Postdoctoral Fellow, Program in Hellenic Studies, Columbia University

Haunting (the) Self: Uncanny Greece, or the Economy of Revenance

Presiding Chair: Vangelis Calotychos (Columbia)

Rapporteur: Alexis Radisoglou (Columbia)

Attendees: Suzy Vuljevic (Columbia), Evelyn Pappas (CUNY), Paul Elias (York University, Toronto), Chloe Gogo (Barnard), Malvina Kefalas (Barnard), Dimitris Antoniou (Princeton), Soo-Young Kim (Columbia), Christina Vlahos (Columbia), Joanna Wang (Columbia), George Fragopoulos (CUNY), Beatriz Velazquez (Columbia), Stathis Gourgouris (Columbia), Karen Van Dyck (Columbia)

Summary of Presentation:

In his presentation García offers a psychoanalytic and deconstructive reading of the linked discourses about the origin of Modern Greece and Greece as origin of modernity, as these manifest themselves in both western Philhellenism and the internal discourse of Greek nation-building itself. The aim of his presentation, García explains, is to “consider substantial connections between the Freudian concept of the uncanny and the idea of Greece as the discursive space of modernity.” García argues that a “reciprocal haunting” has been at work “between Europe and Greece from the outset of modernity,” which “manifests itself in diverse narrative and rhetorical structures.”

Since the 18th – and even 16th – century, Greece has only been conceivable, for the West, “in terms of repetition and return,” García contends. Greece’s status as “the figure and the name of a return” – always already a re-appearance – thus challenges the very notions of originality, continuity and metaphysical presence. For García, therefore, “the imagery of regeneration, revivification or recovery is haunted from the outset by its already implicit, disturbing reverse side: a rhetoric of resurrection, undeadness and revenance.” Lord Byron’s poem *The Giaour*, as García demonstrates through a close reading of the text, is one of the clearest manifestations of this dynamic: “’tis Greece, but living Greece no more,” Byron writes. “If Greece is to be the origin,” García explains, “it already contains a remainder: an irreducible element in supplement to its purity that splits it into two by reference to a phantom precedent. Such an origin cannot but be a repetition, a return from death that has to include the repressed body unaccounted for in the equation linking Ancient Hellas to the contemporary West.”

García then proceeds to offer a re-examination of Freud’s concept of the “uncanny,” which he considers “inseparable from modernity and its reconfiguration of the self,” as indeed one expression of the “profoundly ambiguous nature of modernity itself.” For Freud, García explains, the uncanny is “what has undergone repression and what subsequently returns in a different context and time to disturb us with a strange

familiarity.” Interestingly, García contends, Philhellenism and the concept of the uncanny emerged at around the same time. Probing into the possibility of an “inherent connection” between them, García argues that indeed “the uncanny seems thinkable only within the epistemological model that claims Ancient Greece as its foundation.”

Having introduced a number of contemporary conceptualizations of the uncanny, García then asks, “How could Greece, in its modern reconstitution both as the genealogical origin of the West and as a new nation, fit in some or all of these aspects of the uncanny?” The answer, once again, lies in Greece’s status as “the figure or the name of a return,” in the fact that Greece’s emergence “is already a re-appearance.” García links this to the Derridean concepts of ghosts, specters, and hauntology, and contends that ultimately, the “signifier ‘Greece’” unsettles “any conceptual delimitation or semantic transparency.”

Through a brief analysis of Hegel’s essay “On Classical Studies,” in which García detects “motifs of displaced repetition, decentering of the subject and disjointed temporality” – the study of antiquity as “a kind of productive self-alienation for the modern mind” – García arrives at the concept of “derealization”: “The relationship between modern Europe and Greece” he argues, “may thus be formulated in terms of derealization.” In order to illustrate his argument, García offers a close reading of Freud’s text “A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis,” in which Freud speaks of “the appearance before us in reality of something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary.” “Is not, García asks, the Acropolis Freud contemplated “a purified and fictitious creation, an uncanny reinvention both haunted by the Byzantine and Ottoman memories extirpated from it, and haunting the present with a displaced, that is, modern image of antiquity? The specters of post-classical remains disturb the monochord narrative of a continuity between the classical Acropolis and the modern model.” Rephrasing this in a Lacanian terminology, García explains that it is “the realization that there, where the void of Hellenic culture was perceived as a constitutive stimulus, to be filled with the resuscitated culture of the West, a living corpse was already staring back at our side of the mirror, dissociated from the image projected. Contemporary Greece, the actual existence of the Acropolis in a displaced context, was thus found to stand for the Real, the uncategorizable abjection unsettling European culture exactly at that point where its semiotic place in the imaginary realm had been voided and was expected to lack forever.” Modern Greece, for García, is the irreducible “surplus that haunts modernity and is haunted by it.”

This assertion brings García to the last part of his paper, in which he engages with the figure of the vampire. The massive interest in the figure of the vampire around the 18th century serves as a “blank screen on which every discipline attempted to resolve the obstacles to its totalizing power. The vampire disrupted ontology by blurring the limits between some elementary binary pairs: life and death, subject and object, body and spirit. It was the figure of a compulsive return disjointing the notion that words, things and persons fit into a balanced symbolic order.” It is no coincidence, in this sense, García argues, that “the first undead known in the West was the Greek *vrykolakas*,” a “repressed abject body that seems to emblemize the uncanny revenance of Greece.” The vampire

“would become the signifier binding together all the dimensions of the disturbing difference of Greece and its paradoxical position in European modernity. Backwardness, Balkanism, orientalism, and religious schismaticism come together in this monster, who embodies the historical and ontological discontinuity between Ancient and Modern Greeks and the irreducible remainder of their uncanny persistence in the present.” Charting the early history of vampire narratives and the veritable obsession with these across Europe through a number of texts, García emphasizes that initially the vampire functioned as “a signifier articulating the discussions on Modern Greek identity during the nineteenth century.” “Travel accounts, narratives and ethnographic studies in Europe and America continued to turn the *vrykolakas* into the token of Greece’s difference and impurity until well into the twentieth century.” In Greece itself – where the founding fathers of the nation aimed at obliterating “the dimensions of uncanniness associated to modern Hellenism” and at conforming “to the ideal projected by Western philhellenism,” the widespread appearance of vampire narratives likewise became, as García argues, a “symptom”: “the compulsive, undesired return of such spurious corpses breaks the ideal mirror of the self that it is sought to build. The vampires in those fictions perfectly represent the return of the repressed, since they almost always bring with them strata of Greek identity denied in the process of unifying the national narrative.”

That vampire narratives have more or less disappeared and that their history is largely unknown today in Greece may point, García argues, to an anxiety about the “unsettling structure of Greek uncanniness itself,” about the “constructed nature of the nation.” In precisely this sense however, he concludes, one could ask: “Are not the Gothic and the uncanny, in sum, an effective mode for re-reading Greekness?”

Summary of Discussion:

Q.

What struck me as very interesting is that in order for this to work we have to presuppose the identification or the establishment or perhaps incorporation of the notion that we’re all Greeks for the uncanny, vampiric element of the Neohellenic to be ever in effect. And I’m thinking also more of the notion of the living dead. I’m trying to think of the theoretical elements of these arguments. Because one of the things that strikes me in Freud’s argument is that though the “unheimlich” does mean something that is strange and not of the home, the thing that makes the experience uncanny is in fact the recognition of something familiar. So it’s not alienation, or it’s rather in the experience of alienation, the sense of actually having been there before, of knowing it. The thing that then becomes interesting in this argument is that the problem of the uncanny – think about the living dead figure – is not that it’s dead but that it’s living. So it is, again, the thing that you’re familiar with that’s a little... So I think there is a lot that you can do with this aspect of the haunting and so on as something that is living, which would send us back to the original: We’re all Greeks! Whatever is supposed to be ancient is still living. Even though we don’t want to actually admit that it is living because if it were, then who are these people, these degenerates. That’s the incredible logic of the uncanny.

So in a sense the punishment is that the contemporary Greeks are here to remind us Europeans that whatever is ancient is still living.

A.

I agree. The fact that the modern Greeks have to be Greeks and cannot be just Orientals, they have to be Greeks, and that implies that they have to be in some sense also ancient Greeks. So you cannot invent them totally, you have them before, they are alive. You are right that it's the fact that they are living that is really uncanny about the living dead. I think this idea of repetition compulsion, of the death drive in Freud also, has this implication, that it returns continuously without agency. It's interesting, because I have been watching some horror films – Italian, American – with a Greek setting, and it's really interesting, because you always have some kind of instance that embodies this kind of death drive, the fact that a sense of agency or consciousness keeps returning even if you kill them. A lot of them are related to archaeology, and it's interesting, someone digging up something living that is not as dead as they thought it was.

Q.

The contemporary condition of the crisis in Europe would underline the fact that these people just don't die. They are the living dead.

Q.

Is that the argument you're also trying to make about the etymology, that it is the living language that has all these loan words and other things, and that it's trying to be tied to the ancient language.

A.

Yes, I think what Korais is trying to do is cleansing it of oriental and alien elements. He tries to make the *vrykolakas* and the vampire into an ancient Greek phenomenon. There are a lot of false etymologies of the *vrykolakas*. When they made a film, they didn't even know how to spell the word, and they keep saying it that way throughout the film.

Q.

What is the false one?

A.

The false one is by Korais who says it's from "mormolix" or "mormolax," some ancient word I don't know. He tries to make this phenomenon ancient. The mormolix is some creature in ancient texts. I don't really know what it means.

Q.

You have me convinced that the vampire is originated in Greece but I'm wondering why that's something I didn't know, how it is that the vampire became so displaced from Greece and became more of a far Eastern European thing, you think of Transylvania. I don't know if that's because of the commercialization or because of Dracula. Do you know why it is not associated with Greece?

A.

It's the first that gets known in the West, and it's interesting that no one in the West really knows now that there are Greek vampires. Actually, in Transylvania they have other traditions about vampires but maybe that's more of an invented space, from Stoker.

Q.

The explanation you gave was a very interesting historical one, that by the end of the 19th

century essentially the work against the Ottomans is conducted by the West, and that Philhellenism does not need to do this work anymore. It's just pure colonialism, and therefore the exotic moves elsewhere in the Slavic sphere or the Balkan sphere, hence Count Dracula is supposed to be from Transylvania. It's interesting that it's two British writers, the first says it's Greece, the second says it's Romania.

A.

Yes, it's a theory. In European vampire literature the place of origin is displaced from Greece. Of course you can't say that there were no vampires in Serbia and other parts of the Balkans, but I think they are trying to cleanse this – the vampire represents superstition, it can't come from Greece. I haven't found any Greek now who knows about the *vrykolakas*, who has heard folk stories about this. They are surprised. The epidemics of vampires used to happen mostly in places like Santorini and Mykonos, these places that now you wouldn't associate with some dark horror. In Romania they have used a kind of Dracula Park for tourism, in Greece instead they have tried to cover this.

Q.

It seems to be a really important lynchpin in the argument how Papadiamandis translates Bram Stoker and moves the vampire out of Greece. It goes underground, and this is the argument that some of these people who are doing the translations are showing: There is a lot of vampiric imagery in Papadiamandis. So it's happening but it's gone underground.

A.

There are a lot of short stories by Papadiamandis that have these themes, the revenant and so on, and there is one I think, where there is a church and some ancient ruins: Are there some kind of ghosts, he suggests. He also has this story about a Greek woman who can't speak anymore after she sees the ghost of a Turkish woman. There is a lot of this in Papadiamandis.

Q.

Is a translation also a kind of vampire figure, something that is and isn't the same thing, and the way translations are figured in these stories? It would be interesting to see how it works there. You can say things that you can't say in your own texts in the translations.

Q.

I want to ask about the role of exhumation, and the politics of exhumation. Because it seems to me that the Eastern Orthodox Church, and these places you describe – Romania, Serbia, Greece... I don't know, the exhumations go back to classical times, but then obviously around the split with the Western church there must be disagreements on the issue of exhumation – exhuming bodies, bringing bodies back, reading bodies, reading their decomposition, and interpreting the reasons for decomposing or not decomposing etc.

A.

That's the reason why there are vampires in Greece, because they used to – or still do – exhume bodies. That's why when they found a body that wasn't decomposed, they thought there was something wrong with him, only the excommunicated people didn't decompose. There is a whole theory of undecomposed bodies.

Q.

Nowadays you have many diaspora Greeks who want to be buried in Greece, which

means you have to send them back to Greece on the plane and they have to get embalmed, which means they won't decompose. So there's an area on the cemetery for undissolved bodies. So you're taken out of the coffin, and they put you in the earth like that, because in a year in the earth you are going to get nicely decomposed. I would be interested to hear from you in the future about this Western/Eastern thing, the politics of exhumation.

Q.

I might be completely wrong on this, but my impression is from these sources you gave us that at least after a certain point and especially outside of Greece a distinction is being made between high art and low art, that the vampiric tends at least to manifest itself in lower forms, popular culture, the operetta and these kind of things. It seems to be curiously absent from kind of high-brow figurations...

A.

Yes, you're right, very soon it turned to popular culture. It's very clear in the theater in France. After the publication of a play in 1820 there were simultaneously five or seven plays about vampires on stage. There's a book about this, and the author says that the public sometimes was very young, teenagers, like today, who go and see horror films. Now what the relationship is between this and the fact that it's Greek, I don't know.

Q.

You referred to certain epidemics taking place on Greek islands, and that brought to my mind a chapter by Charles Stewart on the epidemics of dreaming and of healing, religious icons. He tries to place them in the context of a local economy, and usually the story is that the island is simply too poor, and is in need of an epidemic of this sort, so that it has a possibility of establishing itself as a center in the religious universe of Greece. And this is why you have all these miracle-performing icons being found so that cathedrals are established, so that it attracts visitors but also officials from the Greek state. So I suspect it might be useful for you to think of these incidents in the context of local economies.

A.

Thank you for your suggestion. I think, for example, in Mykonos at the beginning of the 18th century it's the opposite. It's not useful to have a vampire epidemic because all the visitors go away to other islands, they move to other islands. It's really a compromising situation because they have to burn the body in the end, and the Ottoman authorities then punished people for it. It's embarrassing for the island.

Q.

I was also thinking, because you mentioned the *doppelganger*: Dimitris Vardoulakis has written a book on the *doppelganger*, particularly on German Romanticism, but there's a chapter on Papadiamandis, about Papadiamandis's Gothic element.

Q.

We read, with Álvaro and a couple of people here, Karkavitsas's *O zitianos*: there is an attempt to burn the body in the house.

Q.

I was going to say something on exhumation, at least as it goes into propagating the myth of the vampire, at least in Slavic regions, in that after someone had died, they would

check after three days to see how the body was decomposing, to see if it was a vampire or not. And they would mistake those normal signs of decomposing – first you get small and then you obviously blow gases and so on, the body does actually burp and fart and so on, and the body is full of gases – and they would mistake those for mumbles and would assume that the body was actually reanimating, while it was going through the most natural thing. And the interesting way they treat what they think is a vampire: you bury it at crossroads, you set this part of it on fire. There's this whole tradition of how you deal with this neighborhood nuisance. I'm wondering if Greeks did anything like that?

A.

Yes, in Greece they did all of these things. Usually it was done by some liturgy, the church, for the rest of the soul, then when this had no effect – the French book describes this in much detail – they used to take out just the heart, and when that had no effect, the whole body. Or sometimes they used to take the priest with a lot of food, and the priest says to the dead, Would you eat this, and they would organize some ritual. There are horrible things they did.

Q.

In these 16th and 17th-century texts, what's the word that is used?

A.

It's *vrykolakas*, in various spellings. After that in the 18th century, after all the criticism of vampirism, they use the word vampire and say that this comes from the Greeks.

Q.

And what was the distinction with the revenant?

A.

The revenant is a broader category of someone who at death returns. I think it's the most general category, it includes specters. It's interesting that while in the West the specters and revenants are just spirits and ghosts and disembodied, in Greece and in all the Balkan spaces they have a body. But all of them are revenants.

Q.

I'm totally convinced by your argument that vampires are almost ideal figures to understand Europeans' othering of Greece. But what do you make of these kind of appropriations of these figures and these ideas through [passage not understandable]. And I just wonder then what happens when the *vrykolakas*, for example, was used by Papdiamandis. So the question I had is, What do we do with that kind of agency? How does these artists using that image change it? And the second thing I have is – I am glad you mentioned the movie *Alps*... At what point could we also say that this compulsion to repeat, this trauma, might actually be non-traumatic. Is there something about this agency with these authors, and fans, that can be said to in some sort of way make this a less traumatic experience?

A.

In some of the fictions by Greek authors where there is a *vrykolakas*, there's not an atmosphere of horror. Sometimes even in the genre of ethnographia, they take a distance, the author has to show that he is an intelligent person, a Westernized Greek, who despises these kind of stories. The important thing here is that the vampire is used in Greek literature, but it's really marginal. In some decades, you have some texts, but they

disappear. But you don't have any of this in the Greek canon, you don't have anything about fantastic literature or something other than realism. It's symptomatic that vampires return right when the Greeks are trying to rediscover this struggle to justify the continuity.