

University Seminar #703: Modern Greek Studies
November 10, 2005
Speaker: Constantine Giannaris

Presiding Chair: Vangelis Calotychos, Columbia University
Rapporteur: Karen Emmerich, Columbia University
Attendees: Karen Van Dyck, Columbia University; Elena Tzelepis, Columbia University;
Mark Mazower, Columbia University; Christos Tsiamis; Liana Theodoratou, NYU;
invited students

This University Seminar meeting was organized in conjunction with screenings of Constantine Giannaris's three films. *From the Edge of the City* (*Apo tin akri tis polis*) was screened on November 6; *One Day in August* (*Dekapentavgoustos*) was screened on November 9; and *Hostage* (*Omiros*) was screened on November 10, immediately following the Seminar meeting.

Giannaris: At three or four years old in Australia, I remember first visiting a movie theater during an Indian film festival. At that time in the 1960s, Indian films and actresses such as Nargis were all the rage in Greece and among Greek immigrants in Australia. My parents were not accustomed to going out to movies, so father was very agitated when my brother and I asked to be taken to the festival to see *Mother India*. As a strange result of the trip, I had a memory of my father hitting me after the show. This was my first association with film.

I did not see my next film until I was 15.

At some point later, I acquired a Super 8 machine and some video cameras, which drew me to the idea of filmmaking. I prefer the term "filmmaker" to "director." Eventually, this led in 1995 to one of my films being shown at Cannes and being picked up by Miramax for one million dollars. (Of course, that amount did not entirely go to me but to producers, agents etc). But I did very well with this and was then firmly in the filmmaking business.

Question: You write your own screenplays and it must be said that the screenplay for *A Day in August* is very complex and elaborate. Did you ever think of being a writer, a novelist?

Giannaris: Film has the advantage over the book of sharing emotion with an audience in a more vital way. It is difficult with a book—each reader reading separately by his own fireside—whereas with a film, you manage to palpably fill the space and the alienation that separates you from the audience.

Question: But today, with the prevalence of viewing films on VCR or DVD, much film viewing is just so privatized.

Giannaris: You're right. Peter Greenaway said that film changed in 1981 with the inception of video and the ability for the viewer to freeze-frame and pause. This marks the intervention of the viewer and the audience. Of course this also takes us to older mode of communication as far back as Homeric poetry and its transmission. The oral formulaic method sees the rhapsode engage with his audience and, consequently, tailor his materials to a specific audience, to the performance of specific day, and often in response to the intervention of audience members.

Question: Your early films were shot in the United Kingdom and were English-language films. Your three Greek films (*From the Edge of the City*; *One Day in August*; and *Hostage*) came later. What differences do you see in filmmaking in the United Kingdom and in Greece?

Giannaris: There was certainly more money in the U.K. In some ways, however, the infusion of private capital into the British business in 1997-8 killed off independent filmmaking. The whole process was skewed to appeal to American tastes and play to the American market. It was indicative that *Four Weddings and A Funeral* did not fare very well in U.K., but was a runaway success in the United States. This all had an effect on morale in the U.K. and a generation of filmmakers were treated with some disrespect. In Greece, despite all the technical problems in so small an industry, the director, as a creator, is accorded greater respect.

When I had my early success with Miramax, I was whisked away to Hollywood, where it took less than 15 minutes for to realize that I did not fit in. I don't drive for one, and this was a severe handicap. Everyone in Hollywood is characterized by a very short attention span and somehow my own temperament did not fit in there. So, I returned to Greece where I set out making commercials/advertisements for television. I shot a film titled *A Place In the Sun*, with very roughly hewn actors, off-the-street as it were. The early *Zalmas* is a case in point: difficult to find such energy in the ranks of the more professional sets of United Kingdom. Indeed, I would get into trouble with the Actors' Union for using actors off the street.

My film *From the Edge of the City* was planned as a documentary as I interviewed streets kids in and around Omonia Square in Athens. I was fortunate that, before I had really advanced with the project, a producer showed interest but impressed on me that he would prefer it go forward as a feature-length movie. I agreed; I set about writing the screenplay based on some of the street kids I had met, and completed it in four weeks. I then spent two months working with the kids; and there then followed 5 weeks of filming.

Question: Are there any difficulties that are especially acute for young Greek film directors?

Giannaris: Theo Angelopoulos and his body of work has been disproportionately influential on the Greek film business and affected a whole generation of young Greek directors, who were lamentably less gifted than him. In some ways, his work produced an angst in them and they were led down paths that they could not follow. This alienated a large section of Greek audiences. A related issue here is the very appalling level of Greek

film criticism. This has done little for filmmaking or for nurturing and engaging a filmgoing public.

Question: Your last film, *Hostage*, provoked some outrage in Greece. And while it was well received in some of the main newspapers and is welcomed at foreign film festivals and so on, it only sold 17,000 tickets in the whole of Greece.

Giannaris: The public turned its back on the movie as it did not want to see a film that took the perspective of Albanian immigrants in Greece. Of course, 17,000 is not especially bad for a Greek film in Greece—many only attract nationwide audiences of 2,000 – 3,000. But, yes, the film did not do well at all. It is clear to me that Greeks are unable to sustain this kind of self-criticism in an environment of xenophobia and racism in the country that is best embodied by Greek-Albania relations in the 1990s. Of course, the movie also focuses on the most traumatic moment in that relationship: the hijacking of a Greek bus by an Albanian immigrant. The bus was allowed by the Greek government to cross over the border to Albania—can you believe that the Greek authorities allowed a bus full of its own citizens to be passed over to jurisdiction of a foreign government, the hands of a foreign police force?—where the hijacker was shot and killed, as was a Greek passenger, mistakenly shot—as it turned out—by the Albanian police. At the time of the movie's release, this Greek man's father appeared on TV talk shows and news programs to denounce the film and, with the encouragement of some right-wing groups that used him, to portray the film as one that glorified a criminal and was essentially anti-Greek. This led to some trouble at movie theaters and even a bomb hoax at one. All this refutes any suggestion that any publicity is good publicity. It's not.

Question: Do you think the riots currently unfolding in France this week might happen soon in Greece?

Giannaris: Greece does not have France's colonial past. Also, despite the recent troubled events in Greece, the experience of immigration in Greece has a very short history; all this has transpired since 1989. Consequently, such problems are not as deep-rooted. What is troubling in Greece is that much of the ill feeling toward the Albanians at present is coming from the younger generation, those under thirty. The assaults against immigrants during the celebrations that followed Greece's Euro 2004 soccer triumph was disturbing; clearly the younger generation feels that some of its potential is being curbed by co-existence with these immigrants from the Balkans (mostly) and other non-European regions. What is also disturbing is the weakness of the Left in fully embracing a certain responsibility on this issue in a true spirit of liberal humanism. This would bolster the discourse around human rights and civil rights as these impinge on well-being of these immigrants. But this observation does not apply only to immigrants in Greece: to a lesser degree it also applies to women's issues, gay rights. I'm not clear why there is this deficiency on the part of the Left: maybe because Greece, unlike Spain, has not lived through the kind of social repression wrought by Franco, the Catholic Church, vicious dictatorship for a sustained period. Of course, this touches on some of the themes I consider in *Hostage* where I try to show that it is not just the Albanian hijacker who is a hostage to his circumstances. All the passengers are shown to be hostages to their own

demons, circumstances, which through the film the audience is made to negotiate and confront. Indeed, my next film, which will be in English, will consider how we understand such situations; it will be a film about the limits of this understanding and toleration in the context of the new Europe.