

University Seminar 703: Modern Greek

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Speaker: Erato Basea, Stavros S. Niarchos Postdoctoral Fellow, Columbia University

**“Poverty Porn: Performing the National and Mapping the Cosmopolitical in Contemporary New Wave Films”**

Presiding Chair: Vangelis Calotychos, Columbia University

Rapporteur: Alexis Radisoglou, Columbia University

Attendees: Stefani Priskos (Columbia), Orania Yancopoulos (Columbia), Elena Nicolaou (Columbia), Karen Van Dyck (Columbia), Chloe Haralambous (Columbia), Michelle Lee (Barnard), Kostis Karpozilos (Columbia), Toby Lee (Columbia), Kostis Kornetis (NYU), Margarita Markoviti (LSE), Dimitris Kousouris (Konstanz University), Despina Lalaki (NYU), Khris Lewin, Vassilis Colonas (University of Thessaly), Stephanie Sarbanes (Columbia), Georgia Barbayannis (Barnard), Kostis Smyrlis (NYU), Mona Momescu (Columbia)

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*Summary of Presentation:*

Basea begins her presentation by invoking the film *Slumdog Millionaire* in order to introduce the concept of “poverty porn.” To what extent, she asks, could this category – “originally intended as derogatory” – prove helpful to “describe the international interest generated by contemporary new waves that come from ‘poor’ countries” such as Greece, Romania and Argentina? Basea is particularly interested in exploring “the diverse channels, networks, processes, relationships, and interactions involved in” the making of these films: “a complex, transnational or, rather, cosmopolitan network of production relations and processes of reception and distribution” at a moment when “their domestic film industries are being dismantled.” While the national, she argues, has become a dominant discourse “to frame, group together, interpret and construct” these films, there is at the same time “a profound ambiguity as to where these films’ national credentials lie.” Basea wants to demonstrate, then, “how these films navigate the intersections of the domestic and global fields of cultural production, and are situated in both a local and global context.”

In the following section of her talk, Basea delineates the concepts of the national, the transnational, and the cosmopolitan, and argues for a discussion of contemporary new waves in terms of cosmopolitanism. The “point I am trying to make,” she argues, is that in the current cosmopolitan and greatly globalized times, the local and global each “needs and produces the other without requiring the mediation of the national or the nation-state’s institutional mechanisms of regulating the political, legal, economic, and cultural aspects of everyday life.” This is why I find this theory particularly apt for my research on the cultural practices of filmmakers who work not only on the periphery of the economic centers of filmmaking but also in countries ridden by economic and, subsequently, political and social crisis.”

Arguing that if “we move on to contemporary new waves, it becomes obvious that what these cinemas have in common is that they tend to originate in countries facing economic problems,” Bacea goes on to present a wide range of material about contemporary Argentinian, Romanian, and Greek cinema, encompassing aspects of production, distribution, reception, and film aesthetics. The guiding question for Bacea is “whether and to what extent the choice or, rather, necessity of the filmmakers to build transnational links or deepen existing collaboration with colleagues and foreign producers, defines the aesthetic decisions they make.”

Drawing attention to the interplay between “transnational networks” and “cosmopolitan aspirations,” in the next section of her paper Bacea illustrates the role of co-productions and festivals. Taking the case of Romania and Argentina, for instance, Bacea argues that often a particular image of these countries is projected to audiences of films that enter the festival circuit: “the depiction of post-communist, Euro-consumerist life in the present,” for instance, in Romanian films, or “themes of disillusionment, unemployment and economic crisis” in those from Argentina. Bacea demonstrates how festivals and film funds “can directly influence film production, not only through various financial awards but also through co-production and production development prizes, and work-in-progress workshops.” In fact, she argues, one could even speak of “a kind of postcolonial power over film production in terms of” what Azadeh Farahmand calls “the visual look and narrative tendencies of films.” Festivals, Farahmand argues, “exert a direct or indirect influence on film production because of the role they play in helping a film transition from local economies to the global market.”

Bacea then concludes her presentation with a detailed discussion of Giorgos Lanthimos’s film *Dogtooth* in light of the issues she raised in the course of her paper. *Dogtooth*, she contends, “is, above all, a well-made film that performs the national, since it effects a simultaneous logic of territorialization and de-/re-territorialization;” “Global” versus “local;” “the spectator in the world,” “universality.” Such statements,” Bacea concludes, “show that filmmakers struggling with their nation’s rancid economic depression seem to be aware of how they can interrogate the geopolitical ethics of working under conditions of global crisis.”

#### *Summary of Discussion:*

Q.

I saw *Attenberg*. This director saw his first film be very successful, this weird experimental film, and then he gets even more abstract. And then, *Attenberg* is not really popular, right? They don’t really know what she is talking about.

A.

It’s the case with most if not all of the films. They are not popular in their countries of origin. An amazing talk could be given about the poor reception of these films in Greece, in Romania, in Argentina. Definitely, *Attenberg* was seen together with Lanthimos because Lanthimos plays in the film, he is the protagonist. And also, Tsangari, the filmmaker, has produced Lanthimos’s latest film. These films were seen by a few people in Greece and certainly by more people outside Greece in art-house cinemas, at festivals, at Columbia. It’s also on Netflix, and this is another thing about the distribution of these

films. This is actually really amazing: I asked my students to see these films, and look at this: you can find *Dogtooth* on YouTube. The film is in Greek; you have two subtitles, in Italian, and I can't remember [shows clip of film dubbed in Russian].

Q.

There *has* been a reception of *Dogtooth* and other films that tried to reconsider them in the crisis and through Greece, no matter what the directors say outside Greece, in Greece etc. For instance, *Dogtooth* has been discussed very much in terms of politics, the family thing that keeps returning in Greek films, it has been discussed in various ways, including history and the crisis etc. That was there, I just want to make it clear. I very much like the argument and appreciate this thing that there is a poverty chic at the moment or whatever chic, and those directors try to create those films that will make it in the international fora. This is true, and it has happened in the past, in various ways, and in many countries, and in many types of art. The whole Generation of the '30s that us in Modern Greek studies are familiar with in a sense is also an outcome of what was very productive in the way it was passing outside Greece in a particular moment, especially the 50s and 60s. The problem I have with this argument is that it presupposes and idealism about how representation should be, as if representation of a country, the stories people tell in a country, the way that film circulates or novel or narratives or whatever within a cultural domain is outside negotiation, is outside expectation, is outside models of circulation, or as if it should be. So that's why I wanted to make clear that there have been genealogies of criticism for these films that try to do their own thing. Just to show that these are still open texts. The way they are taken in film festivals is also a critique, and as representation is always within a system of negotiation. Let us not say, obviously these people do not want to say it's too Greek – some others do say it now. They will do this or that, we're here to discuss it. Let's not fall into this – as if they should do one particular thing.

A.

No, definitely not. This is not what I am saying, I am really against idealism. As a matter of fact, if you look up the bibliography – articles, monographs – then you would see that there are different ways. Film scholars disagree with each other. They say, for instance, that some transnational films can be Euro puddings in a sense, that in order to be transnational they should have international actors etc. that may go out of the context of their own country. Others say the opposite, and definitely with these films that have been discussed to a great extent. With *Dogtooth*, as you probably know, it was the discussion to what extent *Dogtooth* is like another film, *El Castillo de la pureza*. Why, I don't know. Because they wanted to attack the creativity of the filmmaker? Because they wanted to put emphasis on how the film is not Greek? I don't know. Basically, I am doing just one thing right now. It's not as if I am promoting some kind of idealistic way of – in order to have crossover appeal, every single Greek film should be like *Dogtooth*.

Q.

I was interested in the argument you made about the interface between the representation of the national and the local and at some point I had the impression that you said the national and the local went together, as if they were equivalent. So from your point of view, or from the point of view of the theorists against whose ideas you developed your

own ideas, can we say as of this moment that in those kinds of films, in this desire driven toward an international audience, can we equate national with local? When we speak of the cosmopolis, we obviously have to discard or abandon the national and speak of local and the polity.

On the other hand, as far as the representation of a situation of micronarratives – and I'm speaking from the point of view of Romanian film... The discussion around which the reception of these films revolves is: Why do we only have to represent the ugly, depraved, the disgusting to an international audience? Is it really that an international audience cannot appreciate anything else but the ugly, the disgusting. Is it because the international audience only scavenges this post-communist endless agony or does the international audience want to see something else but it's not being represented, apart from "We want to show our beautiful country"?

A.

First, in connection to the national and local: I agree. I tended to use the terms interchangeably, also because I have a tradition of working on national film, my thesis was on Greek national cinema. It's true, if we go to *this* theory, then we have to put the national aside, especially when we talk about this level of why the dissemination of money that comes from outside the nation. Last year I went to a conference, and the whole conference had the title "Cosmopolitanism," and most, if not all, of the speakers used these terms interchangeably, which is wrong.

Q.

Does it apply to these films?

A.

It's still contested. In Greece, for instance, there is a law – with many criteria – that defines what is a national Greek film. So they have a list, and for instance, more than 50 percent of the production of a Greek film should be Greek in order to be considered as a Greek film. Also, a percentage of actors should be Greek. In terms of national and local: Yes, I think we should actually start talking about local, locality here. And when it comes to representations of the discussion, I'm not sure about Greece. Have there been discussions? I know there are discussions about poverty, disillusionment, unemployment.

Q.

A couple of years ago I remember the most-discussed critique of the New Wave Greek cinema was a piece in the daily newspaper of the communist party, *Rizospastis*. There was a very crude Marxist interpretation of *Dogtooth* that tried to underline the absence of any social context. Even though I can understand the inner reason for such a critique, I don't want to reproduce it here. I was just wondering about methodology. For instance, *Dogtooth*: there is no poverty here, right? I mean the title of the talk is about poverty porn. So I'm not sure if here there is the concept of poverty at all, or is it middle class, or family operating as a metaphor, a metonym of society?

A.

Yes, obviously. I'm trying to explore films on various different levels. Especially in this film, we have poverty porn when it comes to reception and the wider interest this film generated. The films have an open-ended narrative, it's not about Greece, it was framed in a group together, promoted as a Greek film. It invited us to see it as an allegory – weird stuff happens between the family members. So a kind of metaphor, an allegory of

what is happening in Greece right now. There is incestuous relationships, personifying what is happening in Greece. Hence, poverty is there. Crisis in Greece.

Q.

Yes, but for some reason it seems to work in a different way. It's not like in *Slumdog Millionaire*, where it's quite evident. Here we don't have a focus on the poverty issue. For instance, *Stuff and Dough*, like the Giannaris films of the 1990s – the depiction of the marginalized world, the world outside as social critique. I'm not sure if *Dogtooth* can be contemporized in the same context.

A.

But bear in mind that this is a film that has no socialist feel [?] to it, it's not realist.

Q.

It's more this propensity to expose a scarcity, of what you don't have, as a presupposition that an international audience would click if you show them only this. This is more the definition of pornography.

Q.

To my knowledge it was *Dogtooth* that initiated this debate about the “Weird Greek Cinema.” I was wondering what you think about *Miss Violence*, where we literally have poverty porn, and where, in my understanding, the crisis – both the crisis in Greece and crisis in general: family values, crisis of capitalism, of exploitation – is much more pronounced, both within the family and in the outside world. We see the social context there being passive, not reacting to what is happening. So I was wondering why you didn't mention that.

A.

Only one reason: I just could not find the film. I only had two or three clips on my external drive, thanks to a friend who went to Venice. I asked him to go there and get the press kit and send it. So I have only seen a few scenes.

Q.

There are many scenes. Some of them are subtle, some of them are as explicit as it gets about all these things you were talking about.

Q.

The way it tried to put realism in the discussion was much more allegorical. And the scriptwriter has actually argued about the absence of social context in allegorical films. This also shows that whatever the institutions want to do and want to promote, there are various things happening in the country as well: debates, other films.

Q.

I remember that Lanthimos promoted his film as a parable, a critique of the institution of family in general. My question has to do with to whom the film is addressed. You talked about. We could try to talk about efforts to meet, I don't know, orientalist, Balkanist, Western viewpoints on one hand. And this has to do with the general question of who and how watches this film. For example, *Dogtooth* had a Greek audience *after* the international recognition, while the next film of Lanthimos did not have any remarkable box office success.

A.

It's a good question. Look here: the top films that are popular in Greece are basically popular comedies. Most of them are basically adaptations of old Greek comedies. I have to admit – this question: who watches these films? – definitely not Greek people. This is something in general. In Romania, for instance, there are only a few cinemas.

I've been trying to find the numbers of tickets sold but I couldn't. I've been in contact with the Greek Film Center since October, and they refused to give a film scholar these numbers of tickets. You can only find them in film reviews written by Maria Katsounaki. Because it is a secret. It is a secret safely kept by distributors. They don't give numbers, and if they do, they distort them, according to filmmakers. The Greek Film Center is not responsible to give access to someone who has not something specific behind him. So what we know is basically through film reviewers. The most popular film by the so-called Greek New Greek was *Plato's Academy* by Philippos Tsitos. *Dogtooth* sold only 31,000 tickets. *Plato's Academy* was distributed in Sweden and Germany, and as a matter of fact was more popular in Germany than in Greece. As for *Dogtooth*, I remember I was a student at Oxford and it was there in an art-house cinema, and it was a big thing. If I'm not mistaken, it sold more tickets in the UK.

Q.

I always feel there is a problem with talking about a cosmopolitan or transnational aesthetic *as such*. The first lesson should be – even from the discussion we had here – to actually look at the specific works of art. As you have shown, there are all these layers – distribution, reception, production etc. There are all kinds of things that make the film one thing to one audience and another thing to another audience. It can be a European film or a Balkan film or a transnational film or a Greek film.

Then we also need to bear in mind the aesthetic genealogies of films themselves. I was thinking, for example, about the Berlin School in Germany, or even Haneke's films: they might be transnational, but they are above all modernist. And then I don't see why we always have to talk about the transnational as something that suspends or overcomes the national, or the local for that matter. These are all still present, and the global breeds itself some local, the local is transformed through the global. It's all there in these films. And one thing I think is really problematic is to keep talking of the *Greek* crisis, as if the Greek crisis itself weren't also part of a global thing. I think we need to think these categories more dialectically.

A.

Definitely. First of all, cosmopolitan style: I agree with you. In this conference in Glasgow last year, that was the first question the keynote speaker received. Film aesthetics are transnational. This aesthetic that especially *Dogtooth* plays with is an aesthetic that is there, it has already been established outside Greece. It follows a trend. Some of these filmmakers discuss it very openly. Philippos Tsitsos says Aki Kaurismäki is my uncle, metaphorically speaking. And the aesthetic genealogy: yes, I agree. What about the aesthetic genealogy in Greece then?

Q.

Again, I think you can read *Dogtooth* very well as a profoundly Greek film, but then of course you have to tie it back to the global. I sometimes wonder how productive it really is. I mean, that these films negotiate some kind of global situation – duh, in a sense! What is the value of the term transnational, I wonder sometimes.

Q.

If I might follow up on this, because I was intrigued by this term “cosmopolitical” that you used in the description, but it also made its appearance at the end of your talk. It is an intriguing term, so I was wondering if – since we’re on this discussion about these terms of the transnational – if you could unpack a little bit how you are using this term and the genealogy of that term as well, how we might differentiate the term cosmopolitical from the cosmopolitan or the transnational. In the way you are using it, what does it mean to you and what is at stake in your use of that term as opposed to something else?

A.

I have to admit that when I was writing my paper last year I was really – as I always am – very enthusiastic and super-critical and I was in favor of – oh my god, something is there, exactly because of the difference, and the power, poverty. So we are not talking about power, whereas all these agencies have power, so it’s uneven power. Hence, postcolonial power, hence poverty porn, in a sense. So in the beginning I was in favor of this term, and then I was, yes, I can see that, cosmopolitan, local, global. So the more I investigated these films, I incorporated this term. But then I was, no, I should not be not at all critical, even if some filmmakers change their films to “please the markets.” They actually produce work, despite the difficult times. This is how I use the term. They sort of try to attack the periphery and the difficult conditions there, and they turn their subjective lives into politicized lives. They want their work and their vision seen and heard by as many as they can.

Q.

I am just trying to take this term “cosmopolitical” in my own head, and I do see that there’s this relationship there, if not within these films themselves on a formal level, at least in terms of how they are circulating in these broader networks now. There is a way in which the political and the cosmopolitan are inextricably linked. And so I’m wondering, in the sense as you’ve mentioned a number of times in your paper, the world’s attention, and this kind of critical claim is almost like a magnet where when you have poverty or economic and political instability on such a scale, then it draws this critical attention. And I’m curious if that’s it. Are these films catapulted into this networks-global attention precisely because they are claiming to have some kind of political stance. Are they claiming to be either advocating or doing something politically in some way? I’m trying to figure out the relationship between the political and the cosmopolitan that seems to be in this term you are using, the cosmopolitical.

A.

This is really something I should think through. Right now I can definitely say that these films, especially – as Dimitris said – *Dogtooth* and *Attenberg*, are really part of a discussion about Greece, despite the fact that – to a lesser extent *Attenberg*, but to a larger extent *Dogtooth* – they are not about the crisis per se, at least I believe. They are part of this discussion about what is going on in Greece. As a matter of fact, Brooks, the film critic in *The Guardian* who also gave the whole movement the turn “weird Greek wave” – the title of this article, if I’m not mistaken, was “Greece is another necropolis [?].” So again, you have discussions, you have even data, about what’s going on in Greece. So perhaps in five or ten years from now or even earlier hopefully, we can say.

Q.

This is more of a comment: We can see that there's all sort of things happening, and unexpected things. On the one side, we have said that the Greek crisis is on many levels international, and yet one would expect some form of internationalist resistance rising, but on the other side we have the rising of nationalism. And if we bring in these movies in this discussion, we can see that they all take a stance precisely against those nationalist discourses. And then, as they enter this terrain of internationalism or transnationalism or cosmopolitanism through different festivals and audiences, they come back repacked as a national school.

Q.

Just a practical question: How can one use a clip in a talk like this, in the sense that there was a moment where you were about to stop before you were running out of time and you showed the clip. And I was wondering whether when Alexis said that some of these issues and these words can be dialectically considered and their negotiation shown – whether we could make more use of the clip in order to look for some kind of mimicry or alterity or irony of conventions that such films are related to elsewhere. Because I kept thinking of Iordanova, who was mentioned at one point, and her work in the '90s, with the things going on in the Balkans. There was this very kind of sociological description of means of production and the sociological context and the political context etc. And a lot of it revolved around Kusturica, and some of this discussion reverberates for me around that topic. And then at a certain point, through this guy Levi and *Disintegration in Frames*, this thing was fought out with quite some subtlety in the techniques of the cinematographer – of course not disassociated from these contexts, which I think are very important. But I feel as if the clip in a talk like this can do other work, and it can do it in a different language and in some ways make very telling some of the nuances. Like Lanthimos's position in the Museum of Modern Art, and we're trying to figure out how is he playing the game, which you might be able to do cinematically and in terms of technique. I would feel happier, personally, with the clips doing some of this work, talking through the frame.

Q.

And in fact the clip you did show does precisely that, especially with the dubbing and the subtitling and the fact that already in the original script language is completely warped and voided of it's meaning and taken as a thing that can then be taken as a kind of thing that can then be transferred to other meanings. That clip, and the fact that it exists on YouTube at all, that already, as you're saying, is illustrating or performing in some way some of these subtler points.