

University Seminar #703: Modern Greek Studies

December 8, 2008

Speaker: Maria Boletsi

Topic: "When the Sound of the Other Sounds Strangely Familiar: The Balkan Neighbor, the Guest, the Barbarian"

Presiding Chair: Vangelis Calotychos, Columbia University

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Attendees: Nikos Laaris (Manhattan School of Music), George Fragopoulos (CUNY),
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Summary of Presentation:

Boletsi's presentation used the documentary film "Whose is this Song?" (2003) by Bulgarian filmmaker Adela Peeva in order to explore the process of the barbarization of the neighbor within the context of nationalism. As she outlined at the opening of her presentation, the barbarization of the other is usually motivated by the threat of radical difference, which the self cannot domesticate and thus tries to neutralize by degrading it to the realm of the "barbaric" (inferior, but also incomprehensible and thus not worth engaging with). However, this process of barbarization can also be set in motion on the basis of *similarity* of the other to the self, which can be just as threatening for the self as radical difference. The barbarian can therefore also be identified in the face of a neighbor with whom we might have a lot in common; in fact, precisely because of those similarities, we wish to solidify the borders between us in the most resolute way possible.

Peeva's film offers a prime example of this kind of behavior. The film begins with a warm and hospitable scene: an international group of friends sitting together at a table in a restaurant. However, the group soon dissolves into disagreement, as each of these friends claims a song the Turkish band is playing as his or her own, from his or her country. This sparks Peeva's attempt to locate the song's origins, on a journey that takes her through Turkey, Greece, Albania, Macedonia, Bosnia, Serbia, and finally Bulgaria, her own country of origin. The film's journey across Balkan nations becomes an occasion for exploring the complex national and ideological boundaries in the Balkans, as well as the violence and hostility that migratory objects can give rise to, when they trespass foreign territories and unsettle national narratives.

Boletsi showed clips from the film, including the opening scene as well as scenes of Peeva's encounters with people who claimed this song as their own in Turkey, Greece, Serbia, and Bulgaria. She then discussed these clips at length, interpreting them within a theoretical framework that treated the song as a migratory object, and also drew on Jacques Derrida's distinction between "absolute" and "conditional" hospitality. She noted that the song was not openly acknowledged as a migratory object by the individuals in the film: indeed, it is precisely their desire to cover up its migratory nature, to claim the song as authentically, autochthonously theirs that makes their encounter with the song's existence in neighboring countries and cultures so problematic. Meanwhile, the issue of

hospitality was significant on multiple levels: the song is, in a sense, a guest in these various host nations; the filmmaker becomes a guest as well; and the filmmaker also acts as host to her object, the song.

Boletsi noted that while the Balkans are often thought of as an indivisible semantic space or homogenous cultural entity, defined by shared Byzantine, Ottoman, or communist legacies, Peeva's film challenges this totalizing view: as Peeva delves into the Balkans in search of the song, she is confronted with a multiplicity of viewpoints and conflicting interpretative networks, which make a unified metanarrative of the region's history untenable. As people interviewed in the film declare their nation's exclusive ownership over the song (with very few exceptions), the discussion about the song often leads to monologues about their nation. In their statements, the nation often emerges as a superior entity, based on exclusionary mechanisms and on the "othering" and vilification of other Balkan nations or ethnic groups within their nation. In this sense, Peeva's documentary also partly contributes to the negative stereotyping of the Balkans as a crude or uncivilized place, caught up in the past.

In treating the film through the lens of Derrida's analysis of hospitality, Boletsi noted that the hospitality shown to the song in the various Balkan nations was very much a conditional one: when the song in question appears on the threshold of each country as a foreign guest, its reception by the host nation depends on its identity being erased and reappropriated by the host. This violent assimilation suggests the host's fear of the guest's potential transformative and subversive force. In other words, the host nation strives to turn this migratory object into a sedentary construction as a means of solidifying its own national identity.

The song's emergence in all the countries Peeva visits is an unmistakable sign of cultural exchange and commonality in the cultural identity of Balkan peoples. But this commonality that the song reveals poses a problem to national identity construction. As this process is based on difference and cannot tolerate a great degree of similarity with the other, it also cannot easily legitimise the slightly altered repetition of the same song in the neighboring nations. Acknowledging this similarity in terms of mutual influence or common heritage with its neighbors would prevent the national self from constructing the neighbor as an inferior other—a barbarian—and itself as a superior subject. Therefore, the most common ways to deal with the other's threatening similarity are either to "legitimise" it as a case of one-sided imitation of the self by its envious, culturally dependent others, or to label it as shameless theft.

Peeva herself was also treated with conditional hospitality through the course of the film, as a guest, but not an absolute and neutral outsider. She is sometimes welcomed on the condition that she is aligned with her host's discourse, and is at other times seen as a potential spy, a semi-outsider with inside knowledge and an unclear political agenda. In the last sequence of the film, the filmmaker returns "home" to Bulgaria. And yet she still finds herself in the position of the foreigner. More precisely, her position here is that of an insider who, by questioning the national truths, turns into a foreigner and runs the risk of being expelled from the community. In terms of her own treatment of the song,

however, the director comes to accept the “guest” of her film (the song) in its migratory nature, without proof of its origins and without wishing to own it. By focusing on the movement, travel, and transformation of objects and subjects, the song’s operations offer an alternative to thinking in terms of fixed identities, origins, copyrights, and predetermined definitions. Ultimately, the song is not a single object that travels around, but a protean force with no original form—it is itself a metaphor for travel and transformation.

Summary of Discussion:

Q: You don’t engage very much with the title of the movie. How do you relate this to the question of whose song this actually is, which resonates throughout the film? It says a lot about everyone’s preoccupations with history and origins, but is it a totally flawed question? Can you tell us more about this? I kept thinking about the study Alan Dundes did about the songs involving the walled-in wife. There’s a similar quest there, and it actually said whose the ballad is. Everybody in the Balkans says it’s theirs, but the historical study does provide an answer, which is that it’s a gypsy song. It’s an interesting, anti-climactic answer to this old feud. So sometimes this question about origins can be productive.

A: In this case, though it’s not relevant, it’s naïve in the sense that there is no answer to the question. The film isn’t concerned with giving an answer, though in another sense this question is what it’s all about. It’s naïve and irrelevant, but it’s also painfully pertinent, because it’s the question that fires this whole thing. I would say that the question is important in terms of the effects it produces, and the way it functions in each place the filmmaker visits. But the question of origins as a real question is not what the film is interested in.

Q: If we dismiss the question of where it comes from, how can you treat it as a migratory object?

A: Well of course it does come from somewhere, there is an origin, that’s just not the issue in the film. Would it add something to what its effects are in the present?

Q: I’m just wondering methodologically, if you’re treating the song as just a sum of variants that are simultaneously present in the whole region, is it trite to call the shift between one variant to the other migration?

A: I also think about these different versions of the song in terms of translations—though that implies an original. But in line with Benjamin’s ideas about translation, the original is a mythical construction that exists after the translations, not something that precedes them. The idea of the origin is important in terms of the effects it produces in the present, but isn’t an existing entity.

Q: It struck me in the film that the director makes use of specific tensions between nations. When she's talking to Bulgarians, she says, Oh, you know there's a Turkish version, and when she talks to Serbians she uses the Bosnian version. She doesn't mention that there are so many versions of the song, she uses a particular other, and usually a very volatile example. The Turkish version, for instance, is about this civilized clerk, part of a rising new class of bureaucratic officials, which probably has something to do with the context when it was first assimilated, the new bourgeoisie rising class. Maybe wherever it's assimilated, it takes the social or political background of the place. Also, you mentioned how it takes on different genres, and maybe the reason it raises so much conflict is because of the way the lyrics are changed.

A: Yes, and in the Bosnian versus the Serbian it's because of the lyrics that they get so upset, because the Bosnian is an Islamist, jihadist version, as opposed to the Serbian love song.

Q: It's strange that the song starts as this migratory object, and it does good things within each culture individually, they sing it and feel good about it. It only becomes a problematic object when the filmmaker brings to their attention the existence of these version elsewhere. I was thinking also about the structure of myths in terms of Claude Lévi-Strauss, looking at the structure of myths to think about commonalities in mankind, and the filmmaker doing the opposite, using these similarities to bring out the differences.

A: Yes, though there is this commonality that existed, it's just not one that people are aware of. In fact this commonality is something they're trying to suppress in order to achieve their own identity construction as superior to their neighbors. As soon as the filmmaker makes them aware of it by showing that their song is also their neighbor's song, then the conflicts and reactions start.

Q: That's a powerful moment in what you're emphasizing, which is the threat of similarity, not the threat of difference. In terms of a point that was raised earlier, I wanted to say that with the emphasis on a kind of nationalist interface in these examples, how the filmmaker brings up certain pointed nationalist moments, it could be that your analysis runs a similar risk. Some of the staged spectacles here are so interesting because you can't help but notice how the gendered aspect comes in. She begins at a multicultural table, but it's also a group of men and women; as the film progresses, most of her contacts are with groups of men. And at the end, in the Bulgarian example, there is also a difference in age, since she's talking to younger men. In the Serbian example it's all about sex and gender: before they ask who she is and where she comes from, there's this staging of the relationship between them in which they need all these excessive sexual stories to establish some kind of relationship with her. These other layers, the gendered issue, this kind of poetics of the situations that compliment the national not only mustn't be overlooked but obviously all go together. I was interested in the example of the Slav Macedonian taxi driver, who says, We're not interested in history, in the past. Well, he's saying this to a Bulgarian, and probably very aware of that, the same way a Turk or a Greek would say to one another, We're all people, we're all the same. So there it's pointedly national, in a way. There were times in your analysis when, I felt that, like her,

you were falling into a kind of balkanism: when you were talking about the self you were talking about the national self, and then troubling that, but not taking into consideration these other layers.

A: You're right, and another thing I haven't talked about are the tensions that surface not only between but within nations, among different groups. At some points I didn't look at the specific dynamics between the filmmaker and the people she's talking to, and I should spend more time on that.

Q: This is not my area of expertise, but perhaps if we're looking for origins we should consider that this music was played by the Turkish military band near the start of the film. We know these bands were going around the Balkans in the 17th century to take boys, the janissary bands, and after they lost their function they still existed until the 19th century and were going around Europe. This is how Mozart and Hayden knew this music. I don't want to say that perhaps Western versions of this song exist, but military bands of the Ottoman government were going around, and perhaps it is very important for the origin of the song to know that the verses in Bosnia are somehow jihadist, military.

Q: The problem with the scene with the military march is that they've started putting on those shows only recently, it's not a tradition from very far back, it's from after the republic. All of those ottoman traditions were disbanded, and only recently with the religious party they have been brought back So there's a disruption of tradition, which means that these songs might originally have been played, or they might not.

Q: There's also the Smyrneiko version of the song, which literally talks about a migratory object, a woman leaving Asia Minor for Greece at the time of the exchange of populations. You would think perhaps that the composer would take an Asia Minor melody to talk about this, I am from this place and I've come to Greece and you don't understand me. That's basically the gist of the song, and to have a melody that sounds foreign on mainland Greece and to incorporate that melody into a song that actually talks about migration is very interesting.

A: This isn't the version Glykeria was singing, is it?

Q: No, but she did use it in the 1980s, and made it the most popularly known version in Greece, but that may say something about that recording in 1980. But the content and form of the song may have a certain past.

A: In the bigger version of this paper I also look at the song as a palimpsest carrying different layers of cultural pasts, both from different regions and within the same region.

Q: I also had the feeling that there's something strange in the strategy of the trip, that these are a series of staged provocations. I can't help wondering who the audience of the film is, and what the purpose of the film is. Is it meant to be watched by all the Balkan people so they finally understand one another better and come to love one another? Or is it intended for export? She positions herself as a Bulgarian through and through at the

beginning, she starts this quest, knows it's her song, and she ends up arriving in Bulgaria as a foreigner, in a sense, because she's gone through the whole journey and realized there's no such thing as a pure Bulgarian object, and now she knows more than the others. Is she selling herself as the true Balkan subject who has a kind of vision that no one else does? Is there a way of talking about these songs that wouldn't have provoked the same responses?

A: Of course provoking and creating conflict makes her film more marketable. So even though she says that her original intentions are to see how the song unites us, in the end she plays a big role in provoking conflict. It's a very ambivalent position. And she does end up giving up the claim that the song is her own, is purely Bulgarian, but on the other hand you might be right that this kind of attitude suggests some kind of superior feeling towards the people she interviews. And because you asked about the audience, it was directed toward an international audience primarily, and was shown in film festivals all over the world, so perhaps it was meant for export, though it also had a Balkan audience as well.

Q: It seems to me she also courts the stereotype by seeking the opinion of people who have had a few beers, or are at a national festival or village festival, and there's the idea that you can get the truth out of them in this way, in this setting. Does she go and get another, more sober kind of view? It's clear that the Serbians are aware from the first moment that there is antagonism there. They're suspicious of her because of the cameras and everything else.

Q: So she has a thesis and she goes there to prove her thesis, and she goes to the most advantageous places. I'm interested to hear if you are sympathetic or critical of her approach.

A: Both. The film does contribute to all kinds of stereotypes, the director does provoke these reactions in this sensationalist way. On the other hand the effects that the film can have on the viewer are very disruptive and provocative, especially for the Balkan viewer. Maybe not as much for us as intellectuals or academics, but if this film was shown in high schools in Greece the effects it could have would be very powerful or intense, the sense of the history we have been taught being challenged by the approach that this film brings forward.

Q: In a class I teach I sometimes show a documentary about the village of Pyla in Cyprus, the one where Greek and Turkish Cypriots have lived past the invasion up to the present day. Like this one it also starts out projecting that it's going to be a multicultural film, and then that slowly unravels, with both sides being very suspicious of each other. But the way it differs from this is that the director manages to capture a Turkish Cypriot policeman who is caught between the two communities, and their exchange allows for some kind of reflexivity about the director too. So in some ways that's preferable to the unquestioning multicultural view, because if one can make people sensitive to the subjectivity of the director, that helps.

A: I think the self-reflexivity is an effect that the film does have on the viewer. When I first saw it myself I did have that feeling, though it might be missing from the director. She uses a lot of voiceovers in the film, she always seems to have the last word, and to impose a coherent narrative on her story. She says outright that her intentions changed over the course of the film, from looking for something that unites us to showing something that divides us. But of course every film needs that element of reversal of fortune.

Q: Beyond Derrida, whose specific usage of absolute and conditional hospitality I don't know, isn't all hospitality conditional?

A: Absolute hospitality for Derrida doesn't really exist, there's always some kind of condition behind hospitality. But the tension between theoretical absolute hospitality and the conditional hospitality we get in practice is what produces interesting effects in the film.

Q: The tension between similarity and difference is also something that you see in this film, and Appaduri's argument that it's because of this similarity that people disfigure others during moments of violence, in order to negate the similarities—but precisely because of that similarity, to make it so that no one can doubt this difference. I like how you use the two metaphors together, it's bringing something new to the discussions of similarity and difference, which is already part of the discussion of Balkans. So bringing the notion of hospitality into the conversation is good. I'm also interested in the issue of a host and guest culture, because for me it's central to understanding Greece's relationship with the Balkans, this hosting and guesting of Balkan culture and immigrants; there are many such metaphors in play when we discuss the Balkans.

A: This particular metaphor, of the host country, is actually a dead metaphor, a metaphor that has forgotten it's a metaphor, since it's very much naturalized in everyday discourse. One of the things I'm trying to do in the bigger chapter is show how, by applying the metaphor of hospitality to the song rather than to subjects, to migrants, we might revive the metaphor. It implies a double metaphorical object: first you turn the song into a migrant, and then the migrant into a guest, which reanimates the metaphor of the host and guest as a metaphor.