

703: Modern Greek Seminar

Columbia University; The University Seminars

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Chairs: Stathis Gourgouris and Maria Hadjipolykarpou

Rapporteur: David Schneller

Speaker: **Vassilis Loules**

Topic: **Screening of «Φιλιά εις τα παιδιά»/“Kisses to the Children”**

After a short introduction of Mr. Loules, the meeting proceeds with a screening of Mr. Loules's 2012 film *Kisses to the Children*. The film tells the stories of five Greek Jews who hid during the Holocaust in different parts of Greece from Ioannina to Thessaloniki to Athens. A question and answer session with the director followed.

Question and Answer

Stathis Gourgouris: It is obviously extremely difficult to have a discussion about after watching this film. As you're thinking about things to ask and say, I was thinking that, Mr. Loules, it would be good for you to tell us how you began this project. What got you interested?

Vassilis Loules: The film started eighteen years ago when I first saw an exhibition at the Jewish Museum in Athens, Greece with objects from hidden Jewish children. I was shocked by what I was shown there. I started looking for new documents, visiting people, talking with them, and so I got into the story. In addition to this process, at that time I for the first time became a father, and I was thinking about how it was for a child to grow up in silence, with a fake name. For me, it was a film mostly about childhood, not just another film on the Holocaust.

Stathis Gourgouris: That is exactly what's innovative about it.

Noushin Ehsan: I'm so sad, so disturbed, after seeing this. What do we learn from the repetition of these emotional stories? Of course the film was fantastic, but you said you did not want to bring the Holocaust, but I'm seeing the Holocaust. This story is repeated right now, right this moment, Iranian children are having this same story.

Vassilis Loules: Art cannot change the world.

Noushin Ehsan: Art is the best thing to change the world. But the label of Holocaust becomes “well, another story about the Holocaust.”

Stathis Gourgouris: But the point Mr. Loules made about the film being about childhood, life, survival, living and experiencing life after this destruction, is the point of the film. Elders who are thinking back are performing the history of living, not just in surviving. The end of the film, which sends us into a post period, sends us into that.

Paul Wolf: How easy or difficult was it to approach these individuals? To gain their trust? For them to speak to you? I'd imagine they're living history.

Vassilis Loules: I had met about forty-five people before I selected them. I listened to their stories, took notes, read, and thought a lot about these things. I decided to make the film about these five people because I wanted to have different, interesting, personal stories. I wanted them to come from different cities and parts of Greece along with their own story of their own community (so that this comes to light), and, last but not least, it was something different, a psychological tool. I wanted these people to be able to go back to their memories, to have the strength and power to face them again, to tell untold stories, to feel again very difficult feelings. I was almost more a psychoanalyst than a director in this film. I tried to help them to go back, taking them by the hand, asking them details. I never asked them "Why did it happen?" All I was asking was "How did it happen?" and "What happened?" Not "Why?" "Why?" makes people give comments. I needed them to share their experiences, not comment. For example, "Tell me what happened when you were in the ghetto with your sister." "How did you feel at this, at that time?" "How was the sun?" "Was it a bright shining day?" "Did you meet people on the streets?" Different questions, but every time they were to the point, trying to shed light onto moments so that they were able to bring their memories back.

Q: How long did it take for people to become comfortable sharing their stories?

Vassilis Loules: I had met each of them about five times before the shoot. I spent about six to ten days with each one during the interviews. So, for five days these people lived in a studio. Their house became the studio; the lights were there day and night, they slept with them. This condition made them feel that something different was going on.

Christina Zarcadoolas: A clarification. The gentleman with the blue shirt, when you're interviewing him, is that across the five days? Or is it a continuous shoot? When we see him in that room in a blue shirt talking to you, is that the product of one day or five days filming?

Vassilis Loules: Five days

Christina Zarcadoolas: So for five days you're filming him?

Vassilis Loules: Sometimes it's not so easy to process. Sometimes they didn't know how to answer or didn't like to answer or didn't feel comfortable speaking about hidden emotions. So they tried to escape. Sometimes I was angry at them, sometimes I showed it to them. "I don't like you because you don't trust me." Sometimes they would answer the question after one or two days.

Stathis Gourgouris: This is the work of the director. In a documentary film with interviews, this is what directing is, in order to produce something.

Vassilis Loules: Yes, you must be very careful. You're dealing with feelings and experiences.

Stathis Gourgouris: Of course.

At the end of this, what feedback did you get from these people? Did you hear anything unexpected (when they saw the film, after you finished shooting it)? What did they say to you?

Vassilis Loules: They loved this film. During this process they confronted different feelings. At the end, the film is the proof that they did it. They managed to finish the story. The film was, at the same time, an innovation for me. It became the reason for them to go back in history and, for many, to return to things for the first time in decades. Mario, for his first time, visits Auschwitz. Rosina enters the house in Thessaloniki in which she hid for the first time since the war. Everyone had fears and difficulties doing things, but with the excuse of the film, they did them. For each one of them, it was not only a narration of their own story, but a step forwards.

Maria Kakavoulia: The film was very interesting, thank you very much. There is, however, a solitary end. You cross barriers between religion, you bring very nice combination of oral history and personal narrative. It is very interesting how you add the details of these people and their trauma, in order for you to bring out documentary truth. Two questions: do you plan to go on with his type of filmic writing? Are there any other documentaries from other countries with the same topic, approach, and content? That would be very interesting, if someone had the same idea from France or from other countries.

Vassilis Loules: There are some films on hidden children from France, but there are few. These films are also not exactly the same in terms of how they extract stories; they are more academic. This is the way I make films, my last three or four films, including this one, are like this. This is the way I work with people. Regardless, they are storytellers. My last film was a film on fairytales, on men and women in villages who told fairytales, not Jewish related. My big influence was Claude Lanzmann.

Charalampos Kydonakis: I've seen the film many times. Its amazing how you make these old people go back to their childhood, they somehow relive these moments. I think its part of your interviewing technique that's so remarkable, how you manage to do this. In terms of Lanzmann, there's a big similarity there, about reliving trauma, in *Shoah*, and it can be very controversial. The barber from Treblinka who cries, and Lanzmann says "we have to do this, go all the way," and its very painful. There are objections to this type of filmmaking. How cathartic is this process in the end for these people who relive the trauma?

Vassilis Loules: In order to be cathartic, you have to offer the people the opportunity to take this step forward. You have to be prepared for it, and you must be ready to...ok. When I make a documentary with everyday people, I always have a moral obligation.

These people are going to tell me their lives; what will I give to them? The only thing I can give them is the opportunity to go a step further with their own stories.

Noushin Ehsan: To do what? What is your moral obligation?

Vassilis Loules: To give them the way and the opportunity to do it during the film. For example, Rosina, who returns to the house. She didn't like doing it during 64 years since the war. She would look at it from across the street, but never knocked on the door. She was ready. I said to her: "Now we will go to Thessaloniki and into the house." She told me: "No, I'm an old lady, I can't walk up the stairs." I said: "Okay, but we will do it." "I don't want to." "Do it for me." "Okay, I will do it for you." It wasn't the truth, though, only half of the truth. I knew that she did want to do it, but she wanted an excuse. I used the film as an excuse.

Stathis Gourgouris: The film is a vehicle. It gives them the actual motion to do it.

Eustace Frilingos: I missed the numbers at the end. How many Jews perished and how many survived?

Vassilis Loules: Before the war there were 77,000 total. And 10,000 survived.

Elena Mamoulaki: Thank you. I was wondering about memory. We know that memory is a selective process. The film editing and montages is another selective process. What do you think that these people didn't say or said? We saw some meaningful moments of silence. What was your role in editing? How did you choose the things you would tell us?

Vassilis Loules: This was the most difficult process for me. It took four years of everyday work for eight hours. You know you have five lives, but you must push them into a two hour film. You need to let the majority out. But at the same time you must respect each story, each character. You are obligated to keep them, to bring them as they are. So, you must use the data, lets say, from the fictional stories and films. For example, the construction, you must do what you do with a fictional story. You must use the language of the body, moments of silence. When they don't answer but a very disorientated, you must keep them because it gives you more information about the characters and their stories. The big difficulties you have are always how to use parts and details of their stories and how you can construct a real person from very few elements. There is not a secret recipe. That's why you spend a lot of time.

Stathis Gourgouris: I think that the creative work that you've done is evident in the film and we want to thank you for coming here. I want to congratulate you, actually.