

University Seminar #703: The Modern Greek Seminar

November 7, 2013

Speaker: Toby Lee, Lecturer in Modern Greek, Program in Hellenic Studies, Columbia University

Topic: "How to Be Public: Conflict and Collectivity at the Thessaloniki Film Festival"

Presiding Chair: Vangelis Calotychos, Columbia University

Rapporteur: Justin McNamee, Columbia Law School

Attendees: Karen Van Dyck (HS, Columbia), Stefanie Leontiadis (NYU Center for European & Mediterranean Studies), Pawel Wojtasik, Gerasimus Katsan (Queens CUNY), Dimitris Papadopoulos, Erato Basea (Blinken Institute), Chloe Harralambous (CC), Katherine Stefatos (HS, Columbia), Helene Nouyen (GSAPP Alum), Maria Mytilinaki (CUNY Graduate Center), Themis Veleni (Stevens Institute), Catherine Rogers (CU Narrative Medicine)

Vangelis Calotychos welcomes everyone to seminar, this is the 10th year of the Seminar. Read from original minutes of foundational meetings for University Seminars program yesterday. We have tended to invite scholars and artists at the beginnings of their careers, has worked quite well. Toby is a lecturer in Modern Greek

Toby's research focuses on issues of state, citizenship, and public culture. Tonight's seminar is the fruit of her dissertation and the defense of that dissertation about six months ago. Tonight's title is "How to Be Public: Conflict and Collectivity at the Thessaloniki Film Festival."

Toby Lee: My dissertation was on questions between public culture and state and cultural citizenship in Greece in the last 5-6 years. I thought I'd focus on "publics" today.

In October 2009, after emergency elections, Op Ed pieces came out raising question of value of culture – specifically dance, architecture, cinema, sculpture – "is culture a luxury?"

These ideas were very much circulating as severity of economic crisis was becoming apparent; government was deciding which programs to cut/shrink

Thessaloniki Film Festival was one of the largest institutions facing this kind of question, exactly as it was gearing up for 50th anniversary; while technically independent, it was largely funded by tax money and believed to be a "public" institution at this point

Public: a slippery word; Michael Warner outlines a wide range of meanings of this word

- Yet discussion of the word public is still necessary – "publicness" has been central to many developments in Greece over the past few years

After young boy killed in Athens by police in December 2008, steep rise in public collective acts of resistance

- Growing louder civic discourse of rights and responsibilities
- General reconsideration of proper ways of living publicly, continue to remain very much up for debate in Greece today

Background on the Thessaloniki Film Festival is given

- 50th Anniversary was a particularly big deal given the turmoil over that period in Greece

2009 was a year of celebration, but also of intense crisis for the festival

- At the same time of fiscal restraint, festival also preparing for lavish celebrations for 50th anniversary
- Incongruity between severity of economic crisis and festival celebration provoked strong criticism
 - o Accusations more serious because 2/3 of budget was public money

Ways in which notion of public/publicness causing trouble for the festival

- But average festival attendee had little knowledge of this
- Little noticeable disturbance in festivities/programming

In this discursive media outlet, festival was concerned with publicness; it was interested in its audience and its publicity/visibility

- Large cultural institutions put a lot of emphasis on publicity/media visibility/broadening audiences

Not hard to understand why festival staff would be so concerned about appearances like this, particularly when stars or other distinguished guests are present

- Captured during opening ceremony of 50th anniversary edition, very elaborate ceremony
 - o Emcee concluded ceremony with gimmick of live feed video of himself projected on screen, while he was speaking in front of it, then jumped and walked past us but his face stayed on the screen. Followed by shot from the outside, of the facade of the building transformed by a large scale animation/projection, then panning across a small crowd -- a staged audience -- outside looking on
 - o Festival chose to represent itself to its public through another image of its public/publicness – some kind of investment going on in terms of projecting an image of publicness

What kind of public is it that is being imagined? We can look to festival's "Just Talking" program to answer

- Prime example of festival staging a public - In afternoon, before primetime films are shown, groups of filmmakers gather to discuss work
- Program is basically an attempt to create ideal public sphere where people can engage with each other in informed way

Festival was trying to create a public that watches and discusses, but not necessarily one that resists/protests, in many ways one that "just talks"

- Out of step with the loud, unruly protests that were taking form at this time

Protest of state film awards discussed

- Protesting filmmakers were objecting to distribution of awards, group grew to over 200
- 2009: Called themselves "Filmmakers in the Mist," also Filmmakers of Greece (FOG)

- Two sides were unable to come to an agreement – 2009 Festival happened with most Greek filmmakers abstaining
- Agenda: right of a citizen to have certain considerations of work and production in the field of arts/culture
 - o Responsibility of good government to ensure health of Greek film industry

Boycott also turned spotlight onto connection between State and Film Festival

- Cast the Festival as a space of the State
- Highlighted a kind of publicness the Festival was trying to avoid (relationship with broken state), but also transformed it into an unruly publicness

Discussion of a book presentation that took place during the 50th festival edition, for a commemorative volume celebrating the festival's history. A panel of historians, film historians/critics and other important figures from the history of film (industry, institutions) in Greece assembled for the book presentation. Common thread of panelists' comments: focus on conflict as important part of Festival history, perhaps even the most important part

- Conflict important for study of social history of conflict, not just history of Festival
- Zaharias referred to fall of military dictatorship, but also the FOG protests

One saw debates, objections as signs of vitality

- Liakos: Another focus on conflict, resistance
 - o Festival intertwined with larger social history of Greece; tied festival to rise of the public in the 1960s, after the fall of the dictatorship
 - o Second mezzanine – vocal and sometimes violent expression of opinions; practice first arose during junta; famous because in 1970s many of their negative reactions were politically motivated, loud disapproval of films thought to be supported by the state/too commercial
 - Reached a fever pitch in the 1980s, died down by 90s

Publicness associated with criticality, not necessarily with agreement

I'd like to wrap up with question I began with – the question of the value of culture and the arts today, why do we need support for public culture when State is bankrupt

- Traditionally two answers given in Greece: (1) Cultural essentialist – based on problematic notions of collective cultural identity and historical continuity – “we will lose this cultural heritage” – mixed up with notions of identity; (2) Economic answer – culture is important because it can be economically expedient – EU cultural policy/cultural capitalist program
- But with the Festival, maybe there is another answer: has served as a particular kind of public interaction, a way of being public; classic public sphere doesn't have room for unruliness, but Festival makes room for unruliness/disagreement

Relationship between citizen and State drastically changing, nearly all aspects of social life being boiled down to economic terms, what the State can and cannot afford to provide

- Gap between citizen and State is growing

- Public culture allows us to imagine, perform and enact other ways of being: citizens, collective, with each other, in relation to the State

Public culture, in providing space where it is OK to engage each other in ways not predicated on consensus, gives us the opportunity to participate in the making of our own worlds

Q&A:

Q: Discusses riot police entering scene of ERT broadcast building on this very day

- Among the various groups demonstrating today, different claims of ‘public’ or democratic’ right to act.
- Reminded me of concerts this past summer in the courtyard of the ERT building, where TV footage focused on the crowd’s emotional response to the concerts by sacked ERT employees. Empathetic bond in camerawork.
- Today, parliamentarians from the progressive Left claiming that the building belongs to the people and, therefore, they as representatives have the right to enter the(ir) building.
- By contrast, a rightist parliamentarian watching the scene from a TV studio argued that a government bill to shut down the ERT building gave the police the ‘right’ to take over the building.
- Also found interesting that public prosecutor was in the building – listing and accounting for all the equipment in the building – bureaucratic logic at work here, similar to the funding for the Thessaloniki Festival, in that a line-by-line form of accounting justifies the proper use of ‘public’ funds. To show that ERT employees have flouted such rules would prove that they do not merit public trust.

A: There absolutely is a parallel and everyone engages in this ‘use ‘ of the audience or the image of an audience; different performances between “Academy Awards” discussed, pan across audience, image was being live fed onto screen – having that public and being able to demonstrate media reach is considered very much a positive thing when justifying where money went

Q: I’d like for us to think more about why showing audience back to itself is so critical. Because it strikes me as very cliché, what’s the big deal?

A: It’s not that it is unusual or unique; what is interesting for me is the juxtaposition in that interest of publicness vs. other ways of being a public. It’s not always being projected to another audience.

Q: I thought you were going to say that at some level, describing two different definitions of public, quite fascinating how examples have developed; were they trying to replace a public with new public and educate those watching? But then FOG did the same thing. Discussion of embarrassment for not being modern enough – how do you be public?

A: Sort of a pedagogical exercise... you learn how to be public by sitting and watching. The festival is not unusual in its practices; any large-scale festival will do this. One of the main things the Festival will do is produce a lot of language, have to keep churning it out, otherwise they stop being ‘an event’. Very much about creating a particular form of public interaction and engagement with work, with media. Not a coincidence that the phenomenon of the Second Mezzanine in Thessaloniki died down in the early 90s. You track this rhetoric in a very particular

kind of way, then in the 90s, Greece came into much more alignment with EU in so many ways.

Q: Then Despina Mouzaki took over. I would have expected more discussion of this transitional moment as well. That is, you underscore the shift that came with the riots of 2008 and the sovereign debt crisis, but what about the earlier artistic change that decade?

A: Personally, I feel that Mouzaki (director of festival), wasn't a shift away from prior regime, films may be more commercial and safe, but that trend was not entirely new. Impulses were not that different. Big change was the industry center, the attention to filmmaking industry, not necessarily specific to Greece or to her though.

Q: I was thinking if you'd like to address the increasing private funding developing for the Festival especially after Mouzaki took over as director. I remember this being a point of debate.

A: It's something you see across the board, branding becoming more important to all international film festivals and any kind of cultural festival. Shift in thinking about the relationship between public and private funding when it comes to cultural sector. Now even more the case in Greece, which I'd like to look into more – fascinated by private foundation money, also corporate money, I'm curious to see the shift. When there is a vacuum, what comes in to fill it?

Q: Also, if I may, I was thinking that the Second Mezzanine phenomenon was in part wiped out with new construction in theatres, change of space and subsequently a change of audience, even as there was more private funding. What part of this has to do with a different class structure in the audience? Feeling of a change in the makeup of the audience from my point of view. I remember the days of the 80s when people would take 10 days off and see the whole festival.

A: I have a friend who refers to himself as kind of a "bum" – he would never go to the screenings though – definitely a class difference – people go to the festival for different things. But it was generational/political, then that generation got older and outgrew it. Structural and historical reasons why it didn't continue.

Q: Did internationalization of Festival also make Festival less combative and contribute to the attenuation of the Second Mezzanine phenomenon?

A: I think a lot of the controversy was stoked by audience over Greek films; so, yes, the internationalization of the festival may have calmed such reaction. And there was more access to movies, so the movies could be seen somewhere else, it was less of an exclusive experience.

Q: Article with interview with Eipides, current director of Festival, using records to attack the previous director; also very glad you mentioned the Festival's history book, you also said you did research for book – two questions: want to learn more about process/other names of people involved; can you comment on the narrative of the history of the book?

A: It was a very interesting process, I was very lucky to be included in the team. Woman at the time was general coordinator of festival and invited me to help out. Was conceived as an overview of Festival's history. Mostly I did research. All the people who worked on the book were locals. Early conversation about what kind of narrative would be presented, emphasis on avoiding editorializing. Didn't want introductory text because it would be seen as political. Insistence on objectivity with hyper acute awareness of political ramifications of every detail.

Q: I'd like to ask if you consider if something played an important role in making Festival arena for public representation – centralized organization but has been displaced so it's far away from capital of Greece, publicized as regional event, but in essence it is not. Representative of power imbalances in the country, one of the rarest representations of power that those from Thessaloniki can confront with.

A: Relationship between Athens and Thessaloniki is very interesting here. Offices moved down to Athens. Festival is national, despite commitment to Thessaloniki and claim by locals. What you are saying is right – Greeks would talk about entering a different space, going up to Thessaloniki, allows you to eat/think/breathe films, not possible in Athens. Creates a sense of separation for people in the industry/scholars via physical separation. Article called it the “Seattle” of Greece. Still a gathering place for critical thought on films.

Q: Now that things are so bad in Greece, people are realizing they need to confront social issues in different ways: Festival isn't an adequate way to move radical, revolutionary desires.

A: Screening series by Larson and Miller, political filmmakers, shown here in New York city just a few days ago: shot a lot in Greece for their recent film, shooting community centers and anarchist groups in Greece