

CHAPTER VI

FESTIVAL, CITY, STATE: CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP AT THE THESSALONIKI
INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

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In November 2009, the Thessaloniki International Film Festival (www.filmfestival.gr) celebrated its 50th anniversary, a milestone edition for a festival that is considered to be one of the most important cultural events in Greece. However, this celebratory year also turned out to be one of deep crisis for the festival, which found itself facing the effects of the larger economic crisis in Greece, public criticism for what many considered to be overblown budgets, and an uncertain political environment, with widespread civil unrest, emergency elections in October 2009, and a resulting change in government. Amid these crises, the festival also found itself facing a boycott by a group of over 200 Greek filmmakers, including some of the country's most celebrated directors, who withheld their films from the state-supported festival as a protest against the government. More than any other crisis, the filmmakers' boycott called into question the identity of the festival, its function and its place on the larger cultural map of Greece. In particular, the Greek filmmakers' actions pointed to the tricky relationship between the Thessaloniki festival and notions of Greek national cinema.

Liz Czach addresses this relationship in an article on film festival programming and the

role it plays in the construction of national cinemas (2004). Looking specifically at the Toronto International Film Festival (tiff.net/thefestival) and its Perspective Canada series, Czach describes how film festivals contribute to the shaping of a national film canon—and ultimately, she argues, of ‘the concept of nation itself’ (2004: 85)—through the programming of national cinema series and spotlights. She characterizes programmers as powerful decision-makers, in this case defining not only Canadian cinema, but also what it means to be Canadian. However, she ends her article by suggesting that the relationship between festivals and national cinemas is decreasing in importance:

Its future in an era dominated by so-called postnationalism seems uncertain.

When coproductions and co-ventures as funding models are gaining popularity, the ability to easily define and delineate a national cinema becomes increasingly more difficult (2004: 86-7).

The Greek filmmakers’ boycott of the 2009 Thessaloniki festival serves as an interesting counterpoint to what Czach describes. By abstaining from the festival altogether, the filmmakers effectively made it impossible for the festival to program its annual showcase of Greek films, raising questions about the role of the festival in defining and representing a national cinema. In this case, we see the category of the national coming under question; however, rather than becoming irrelevant, it takes a central position in a larger debate over the relationship between cultural production, institutions and the state in Greece today. In this

chapter, I examine the Greek filmmakers' boycott and the surrounding public discourse, to see how the festival and, by extension, the city of Thessaloniki function as a space of social negotiation. Specifically, I ask how the protesting filmmakers, as well as different social actors reacting to the boycott, use the festival to articulate notions of local, national and European cultural citizenship.¹

Locating the Thessaloniki International Film Festival

The Thessaloniki festival was started in 1960 as a small showcase for new Greek cinema and, over the past 50 years, has grown into one of the largest and most established international film festivals in the Balkans (Figure 1). It now functions year-round as an institution, organizing a number of separate festivals, screening and educational programs, sponsoring industry events, and publishing books and monographs. Among the various festivals and screening series it organizes, the most important is the International Film Festival which, for 10 days every November, brings films, filmmakers, producers, distributors, journalists, and cinema-goers from around the country, and the world, to Thessaloniki.

Like most international film festivals, Thessaloniki is characterized by various spatial or geographical orientations—local, national, regional, international—often functioning on more than one, or on all of these levels, at any given time. Started through the initiative of a local arts association, Techni, the festival has always been closely identified with the city of Thessaloniki; despite the fact that, over the past 50 years, Athens has overwhelmingly

surpassed Thessaloniki as the centre of Greek cultural, economic and political life, the country's largest—and, for many years, its only—film festival has always remained in Thessaloniki. From the beginning, however, the festival was also identified as international, modelled after the large film festivals of Western Europe that blossomed in the post-war period. Indeed, the festival's main founder, film critic Pavlos Zannas, stated that his purpose in starting the festival was two-fold: On the one hand, he wanted to promote Greek cinema and to develop a knowledgeable local public that could engage critically with films. On the other hand, he wanted to attract the attention of the international film industry, and from early on Zannas worked to make the initial 'Week of Greek Cinema' into a festival with international presence (Xanthopoulos 1999: 7-9). The identity of the festival as a local institution is further complicated by the fact that, for the past two decades, its main offices have been located in Athens, where all major programming and organisational decisions are made; a common complaint among festival-goers in Thessaloniki is that the festival has become an Athenian event, organized in Athens by Athenians who are disconnected from the public in Thessaloniki.

On another level, the festival functions as a national institution. The country's most important film festival, it is the one most identified with Greece internationally; since its inception, it has served as the most visible showcase of new Greek cinema. Funded in large part by the Ministry of Culture, the festival is closely associated with the state, and for over ten years, the festival housed the State Film Awards. On yet another level, the festival is an active presence in the Balkans, promoting and funding film production and distribution in the

region. Finally, it is an inherently transnational institution, caught up in the networks of global circulation constituted by international film festivals. These networks of festivals and film industries sustain the festival's activities; the festival not only participates in these networks, but in fact relies on them for its continued existence. In that it traffics in the latest products, forms, and rhetoric of the international film festival network, the Thessaloniki festival demarcates a translocal cultural space characterized by mobility and ideas of cosmopolitanism, in this sense resembling Marc Augé's 'non-places of supermodernity' (1995: 77-79).

In moving between the local, the national, the regional and the global, the festival reflects the city of Thessaloniki itself, a city that has shifted between the poles of provinciality and cosmopolitanism, between place and non-place. As Mark Mazower illustrates in his book on Thessaloniki's cosmopolitan history (2005), it is a city whose very locality, or sense of place, was built on the waves of movement—of people, goods, capital, armies, ideas—that have passed through it. Historically one of the most important commercial centres in the Balkans, Thessaloniki served for many centuries as a crossroads of diverse social currents, resulting in a complex cultural layering still evident today, in the dense patchwork of archaeological sites from various historical periods dug out from the cityscape—a materialization of the cultural stratification that characterized life in Thessaloniki for many centuries. However, despite this cosmopolitan history, Thessaloniki has suffered the narratives of ethnic, linguistic, and religious homogeneity that have dominated Greek national identity in the twentieth century; neither has it been able to fend

off a growing provincialisation in the shadow of Athens. And in the twenty-first century, cosmopolitanism returns, now in the form of an ever-growing number of immigrants from around the world, as well as cultural and economic initiatives aimed at refashioning Thessaloniki as a worldly, European, and international city.

The Thessaloniki International Film Festival reflects the city's shifting dynamic between the local and the transnational, between place and non-place—a process that we can see unfolding in the filmmakers' boycott of the festival and the ensuing public debates.

Oi Kinimatografistes stin Omichli—Filmmakers of Greece

In March of 2009, a small group of directors, producers and screenwriters came together to protest the annual State Film Awards. The Awards are administered by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in conjunction with the Greek Film Center; decided by a committee comprising state officials and members of professional film guilds; and, since 1998, given out at a special ceremony at the Thessaloniki festival. Objecting to what they saw as corruption, nepotism, and a lack of transparency in the distribution of the awards and prize money, the filmmakers vowed not to participate in the 2009 State Awards unless new regulations were put in place. They called on the government to do away with the State Film Awards system and to allow for the creation of a national Film Academy based in Athens, modelled on the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, that would administer its own awards.

As time passed, the group grew to a membership of over 200, including the most

established directors in Greece today, such as Theo Angelopoulos and Pantelis Voulgaris, as well as the most promising of a new generation of Greek filmmakers, such as Giorgos Lanthimos, Panos Koutras, Constantine Giannaris, and Filippos Tsitos. By the summer of 2009, they had organized themselves into a loose organisation, calling themselves *Oi Kinimatografistes stin Omichli* (Filmmakers in the Mist) and, in English, Filmmakers of Greece (FOG). As the group grew, so did their demands (Figure 2). No longer limiting their criticisms to the State Film Awards, the FOG filmmakers demanded an overhaul of the existing film legislation and state funding structures, increased government support for domestic film distribution, a re-evaluation and scaling back of the Thessaloniki festival, and improvements in film education. Most importantly, they vowed not only to boycott the State Awards, but to withhold their films entirely from the 2009 Thessaloniki festival until their demands were met and new film legislation passed and implemented. To publicize their protest, they created a website, published a manifesto, held press conferences, and circulated video of their press conferences and other public debates online.

For the festival, such a boycott was potentially disastrous. With over 200 of the most active Greek film professionals boycotting, the festival faced the possibility of a 50th anniversary celebration without Greek films, a prospect especially troubling in a year distinguished by Greek filmmakers' success at major international festivals abroad.² A series of negotiations took place between the festival and the FOG filmmakers; as the festival administration endeavoured to placate the filmmakers and convince them that they were 'on the same side', the filmmakers accused the festival of being too moderate in its concessions,

demanding instead a wholesale re-organisation of the 50th edition so that it resembled more of a protest than a celebration. In the end, the two sides were unable to come to an agreement. With the government in the throes of an economic and political crisis, and with the change of government one month before the November festival, the demands of the FOG filmmakers could not be met in time, and the 2009 Thessaloniki International Film Festival took place with only a handful of Greek films and with most major Greek filmmakers abstaining.

Navigating between the Local, the National and Beyond

Initially, the actions of the protesting filmmakers resulted in heated public debate, involving politicians, cultural commentators, all the major film institutions and organisations in Greece, unions, professional guilds and associations, and filmmakers who themselves were dissenting from the FOG group. All during this time, the protesting filmmakers were careful to point out repeatedly that they had no objections to the Thessaloniki festival itself; rather, they insisted that their protest was against the state and that the festival simply happened to be the best public platform for their protest, because of its high media profile and close connection to the state. The underlying significance of this point of view was made clear to me in a conversation with director Vardis Marinakis, one of the filmmakers who started the protest. Referring to the events of December 2008—when the shooting of an unarmed teenager by the Athens police sparked massive protests around the country—Marinakis described being inspired by the general civil unrest that followed. Galvanized by what he saw

as public expressions of frustration with a corrupt government and ineffective state, he and his fellow filmmakers decided to boycott the State Awards in this spirit of protest. Taking up the rhetoric of rights, responsibility, and government transparency, such descriptions clearly cast the FOG filmmakers as citizens addressing the state; rather than advancing an aesthetic agenda, the protesting filmmakers often described themselves as a movement of citizens (*kinima politon*). No longer just a group of local professionals looking to better their lot, the protesters are thus elevated onto a national stage, and, as a citizens' movement, their protest takes on national significance.

This identification with the national is particularly evident in the form of the protest itself. As the filmmakers insisted, they chose the festival as the site of their protest because it was the one public arena in which their actions would be most visible and effective. What is important to note here is that their protest was effective precisely because of their national identification, as Greek filmmakers. As a small group of professionals working in a subsidized industry, they had neither the political nor economic clout to affect change; however, what they did have was their visibility as Greek filmmakers, an important asset during a year in which the state-sponsored festival was eager to present its 50th anniversary edition as a celebration of Greek cinema, new and old. By refusing to participate in the festival, the filmmakers were activating their national identification, putting it to use in negotiating their relationship to the state. In so doing, they also elevated the festival and, by extension, the city of Thessaloniki, to the status of a national space; by refusing to take their films to Thessaloniki, the filmmakers effectively cast the festival and, for the duration of the

festival, the city itself as a space of the state, in contrast to the usual identification of Thessaloniki as a provincial second-city in relation to the nationally dominant political and economic capital of Athens.

Interestingly, public reaction in Thessaloniki to the protesting filmmakers and the boycott focused on the local rather than the national. A dominant opinion in local press and in conversations with festival-goers was that the FOG filmmakers were undermining Thessaloniki and its institutions, and all of their actions were seen in this light: the boycott was seen as an attempt to sabotage one of the city's most important cultural institutions on the occasion of its jubilee, and the plans for a Film Academy in Athens were seen as an attempt to take from Thessaloniki its traditional (and mostly symbolic) status as the film capital of Greece. In particular, critics of FOG pointed to the filmmakers' insistence that the Thessaloniki festival and its Greek program no longer serve as the clearinghouse for new Greek films and that the State Film Awards be dismantled entirely and replaced with national Film Academy awards given out in a ceremony in Athens. While some of the Thessaloniki public did sympathize with the FOG filmmakers, as citizens negotiating with the state, the predominant view of the boycott was that it was the work of a group of Athenian filmmakers who were uninterested in Thessaloniki, its public, and its filmmaking community and whose actions were a threat to the city of Thessaloniki; in private, the FOG filmmakers expressed frustration with the Thessaloniki filmmakers and public, whom they considered to be provincial and narrow-minded. These tensions came to a head during FOG screenings in Thessaloniki when, on the fourth day, an open discussion entitled 'Thessaloniki and Greek

Cinema' culminated in a shouting match between representatives of FOG and members of the Thessaloniki branch of the Greek Directors' Guild.

In presenting their case to the public, the FOG filmmakers identified themselves as citizens and cast the stakes of their protest as national, while the Thessaloniki public responded by insisting on the local: on their own local identity as a public, on the specific identity of the protesting filmmakers as Athenians, and on the festival itself as a local institution. However, upon closer inspection, we see that these categories of local and national are mutually implicated. For example, filmmakers and the cinema public in Thessaloniki saw the FOG filmmakers and their boycott as a threat to their locality precisely because they felt that something very important was being taken away from them—namely, national status. When faced with the possibility of the State Film Awards and the official Greek program being taken away from Thessaloniki, they responded furiously; not content with the prestige and glamour of the international festival, they made it clear that there was a certain investment in being identified as a nationally significant place. As the site of the Greek film festival and the Greek State Awards, the city of Thessaloniki was a place with national dimensions, with national presence, for at least ten days of the year—it was a place that was defined, understood, and experienced as a national one (Figure 3). The possibility of that being taken away was seen as a definitive threat.

Similarly, the FOG filmmakers' insistence on the national was itself not unproblematic. Because the group started unofficially, growing primarily through word of mouth between friends, the vast majority of its membership does indeed consist of filmmakers based in

Athens, and little effort was made to reach out to filmmakers outside of this group or in other parts of the country. Thus, FOG cannot truly be said to be representative of the national filmmaking community. In addition, their goal to bring the national film awards to the capital city of Athens, a seemingly logical move, hides a less obvious but equally powerful insistence on the local: another kind of ‘provincialism’ which lies at the heart of Greece’s perpetual problem of centralisation. In this case, it is the particular locality of Athens, always defined as national and central, that we see at play. Finally, all of the filmmakers’ actions unfolded within the larger framework of international film production and the film festival network. The group’s claims had more traction because of some of its members’ successes abroad. Most interestingly, in making their claims, the protesting filmmakers—many of whom had studied and/or worked abroad—justified their demands by pointing to the vast disparity between the conditions of film production in Greece and the resources and state support available to filmmakers in other European countries. In this sense, the protesters attempted to engage the state as European citizens, demanding rights and privileges comparable to those enjoyed by filmmakers elsewhere in Europe.

In this analysis of the FOG filmmakers’ boycott, it is clear that the Thessaloniki festival functions as a social space in which the protesting filmmakers could articulate what it means to be citizens in their own terms, leveraging their national identity, but also activating local and transnational identities, to renegotiate their relationship to the state. In turn, different social actors respond with their own articulations of local and national identity, and the city of Thessaloniki itself takes on different identifications.

Post-national?

Thomas Elsaesser has described international film festivals as ‘post-national’ phenomena, i.e. ‘another way of transcending the national for European films’ (2005: 83) as they address foreign publics, circulate in foreign markets and become transnational cultural products. While film festivals may have had their beginnings in the organisational logic of nations, he states, the nation now exists in film festivals only as a ‘second-order concept’ (2005: 82)—a discursive construct, a strategic rhetoric, or a self-conscious category. In her article on film festival programming, Czach suggests that even this is no longer the case, as the relevance of the very category of national cinema is now being called into question (2004).

To a certain extent, the FOG filmmakers’ boycott does demonstrate how the category of the national, along with the local and the international, is being self-consciously put to use in the context of the film festival (Figure 4). However, it is important to remember that the ultimate goal of the protest was to affect real change in national film policy; while the filmmakers were using the rhetoric of citizens’ rights, they were doing so in order to actually engage the state, to address and make demands of their government, and to change the conditions under which they, as citizens of the Greek state, produce and exhibit films. In this sense, the nation is not simply a ‘second-order concept’—to be a Greek filmmaker, working in Greece, means to be subject to a very real complex of conditions, laws, policies and regulations. For the protesters, it is precisely this complex and their relationship to it that is at

stake in their boycott, and it is in this way that we see the nation still very present in the Thessaloniki festival.

The FOG boycott and the resulting public debates are particularly interesting in light of the economic and socio-political crisis that has unfolded in Greece since 2009—a period of somewhat paroxysmal transition for one of Europe’s most dogmatically social-welfare states. In Greece, notions of culture—national and ancient—have long been used in attempts to position Greece in relation to Europe, often at its centre and origins, with the Greek state usually considered to be the steward, guardian and financial sponsor of those cultural claims. As the state is now being forced to revisit the terms of its social contract with its citizens, the relationship between the state and cultural production is also being restructured. Public culture is one of the areas of social life in which people are now struggling with the effects of this restructuring and attempting to redefine what it means to be a citizen of the Greek state—utilizing and revising local, national and transnational identities in the process. In the space of the Thessaloniki International Film Festival, these different identities are flexible and strategic, in a country that is once again struggling to find its footing on the margins of Europe.

Afterword

Recently, there have been a number of important developments in Greek film culture. The FOG filmmakers established a national Film Academy, which held its first annual awards ceremony in May 2010. In October 2010, Greek Minister of Culture and Tourism

Pavlos Geroulanos announced that the long-awaited new film legislation had been proposed in parliament; shortly thereafter, the majority of FOG filmmakers publicly announced their approval of the proposed legislation. In December 2010, Greek films were well represented at the 51st Thessaloniki festival, which showed, among other national productions, the much-celebrated *Attenberg* (Athina Rachel Tsangari, Greece, 2010). In the same month, the proposed film legislation was passed.

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Notes

¹ This essay is part of a larger ethnographic and historical study of the Thessaloniki festival and its relationship to its host city, its public and the state, which looks at how people in Greece today understand and experience place through their engagements with public culture and its institutions. Research for this project was made possible by a grant from the Fulbright Foundation.

² The most notable are *Kynodontas* (*Dogtooth*, Giorgos Lanthimos, Greece, 2009), *Strella*, (*A Woman's Way*, Panos Koutras, Greece, 2009) and *Akadimia Platonos* (*Plato's Academy*, Filippos Tsitos, Germany/Greece, 2009). *Dogtooth* premiered at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival (www.festival-cannes.com/en.html), where it was awarded the Un Certain Regard prize; most recently, it received an Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Language Film. *A Woman's Way* premiered at the 2009 Berlin Film Festival (www.berlinale.de/en/HomePage.html), while *Plato's Academy* had its première at the 2009 Locarno Film Festival (www.pardo.ch/jahia/Jahia/home/lang/en), where it won an award for Best Actor.