7   Being there, taking place

Ethnography at the film festival

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In a 1994 essay on the emergence of new Iranian cinema on the international film festival circuit, Bill Nichols observes that, as festival-goers, we learn to digest new, foreign cinema by reading it in terms of the norms and conventions of the international film festival. By discerning in it the patterns and formal elements that we have grown accustomed to seeing in the context of international festivals, we make the foreign familiar by—paradoxically—plucking it from its local context and inducting it into our global network. However, Nichols ends his essay by pointing to the inadequacy of such familiarization or knowledge, warning that:

> [b]eyond it lie those complex forms of local knowledge that we have willingly exchanged for the opportunity to elect Iranian cinema to the ranks of the international art film circuit. Hovering, like a specter, at the boundaries of the festival experience, are those deep structures and thick descriptions that might restore a sense of the particular and local to what we have now recruited to the realm of the global.
>
> (Nichols 1994: 27)

While Nichols was writing about the process of watching and understanding a film, his observations could easily be applied to the process of researching and understanding a film festival. Since the emergence of film festival studies, a dominant concern within this field of research has been to examine the festival in terms of "the realm of the global," i.e., to focus on the participation of festivals in larger networks of media, people, ideas, and capital (Stringer 2001; Elsaesser 2005; De Valck 2007; Iordanova and Rhyne 2009), and methodologically this has meant an emphasis on systemic approaches to the global festival circuit. As a counterpoint to this tendency, this chapter explores how we might access the "deep structures and thick descriptions" that surround and give meaning to a festival, in order to get "a sense of the particular and the local," and to understand how the festival is actually experienced, on the ground and in real time. In particular, I use my own ethnographic research on the Thessaloniki International Film Festival as an example, to see how the methodological tools of anthropology—ethnographic fieldwork, participant

observation, and sustained engagement on a smaller scale—might allow for a better understanding not only of film festivals as culturally, politically, and economically embedded social experiences, but also of the larger transnational networks in which they participate.[1]

Ethnography: definitions and practices

Nichols' use of the term "thick description" is a direct reference to anthropologist Clifford Geertz, whose original articulation of this concept is helpful in clarifying the contours of ethnography as a methodology, which admittedly can be hard to pin down. As any anthropologist would readily attest, ethnographic fieldwork often resembles an ad hoc process, with the researcher improvising on-the-spot responses to unexpected circumstances and tricky interactions—playing different social roles as needed, listening to whoever is willing to talk, following one lead to the next, and trying to piece together a coherent picture out of what seem to be loose threads and dead ends. In trying to formulate a working definition of ethnographic fieldwork out of this hodgepodge of practices, I turn to Geertz' seminal discussion of ethnography and its epistemic parameters:

> From one point of view, that of the textbook, doing ethnography is establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary, and so on. But it is not these things, techniques and received procedures, that define the enterprise. What defines it is the kind of intellectual effort it is: an elaborate venture in […] thick description.
>
> (Geertz 1973: 6)

By "thick description," Geertz means the act of illuminating the countless "webs of significance" (ibid.: 5) that connect social actors to each other and that allow any social object or action to take on shared meaning among them. Whatever the object of research—be it a particular practice, a ritual, or an entire film festival—Geertz states that the job of the ethnographer is to try and understand the various contextual "webs" that shape how that object is perceived and experienced. Some examples of such "webs" might be shared cultural heritage, social conventions, political histories, economic structures, transnational networks, hierarchies of value, or ideologies. Ethnography as an endeavor aims to shed light on these contexts or frames that structure social and cultural significance.

For Geertz, this is only possible through a process that he describes as "microscopic" (ibid.: 21). In his understanding, the ethnographer does not take on these larger "webs of significance" from the top down, but rather by approaching such broader structures "from the direction of exceedingly extended acquaintances with extremely small matters" (ibid.). In other words, ethnography is humble work: spending significant amounts of time in a place,

with a people, doing what can often seem to be rather insignificant. Sharing a coffee or a meal, making small talk, observing everyday tasks, participating in menial work, common practices, routines—such "microscopic" practices often constitute the day-to-day work of the ethnographer, what Geertz refers to as "deep hanging out" (Geertz 1998, 2001). For most anthropologists, it is only through such extended engagement on the level of the everyday that we are able to understand the diverse ways in which larger structures or networks are actually taken up, resisted, or otherwise put to use in lived experience.
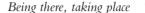
In my ethnographic research on the Thessaloniki International Film Festival, as both an annual event and a cultural institution functioning year-round, I largely took the approach of "deep hanging out." Over 22 months between 2005 and 2010, my primary methodology was sustained participant observation. For this, I occupied a number of different roles: as a volunteer assisting in various departments during the ten days of the festival each November, a volunteer researcher or coordinator for various festival programs and publications, an audience member and festival-goer, a filmmaker and dilettante programmer, and sometimes as simply an anthropologist-observer, gratefully tagging along or sitting in on meetings and trying my best not to appear too out of place. Occupying these various roles gave me the opportunity not only to observe the festival from within, but also to experience firsthand some of the many different publics addressed by the festival, by being a part of them. This pushes against a tendency within film festival studies to focus on the discourse produced by or around the festival, or on larger festival structures, programming, or the festival circuit, which runs the risk of relying too heavily on institutional rhetoric or the declarations of festival directors, programmers, and critics. The methodology of year-round participant observation allowed me a closer look at the complex and meaningful micro-interactions that take place within the wider social space of the festival, and it also helped to create a sense of social familiarity that facilitated more intimate conversations with fieldwork subjects, which I supplemented with formal interviews.

The main portion of my fieldwork (2008–2010) was greatly shaped by a decision I made early on concerning the direction of my research. Having started by spending time in the festival's main offices in Athens, I quickly realized that I was less interested in what would usually be considered the "center" of the institution—the offices, the core staff, the work of the festival director, programming decisions—and more interested in what might be considered its "periphery," where the festival interacts with other institutions, businesses, and individuals, and with its public. At the festival headquarters in Athens, much of the activity resembled that of any other film festival: watching screeners of films, reviewing other festival programs, contacting filmmakers or sales agents, writing press releases. In late 2008, in the context of the economic, social, and political crises that were beginning to unfold in Greece at the time, the goings-on inside the festival offices seemed of less relevance than how the festival was functioning in a broader social and cultural field. Thus a large part of my research focused on the relationship

between the festival and other players in this field, such as the Ministry of Culture, the Greek Film Center, other film festivals in Greece, filmmakers, distribution companies, local businesses, the Thessaloniki Cine Club, the Film Department at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, and cultural initiatives and programs in Thessaloniki, both public and private. I spent a great deal of time away from the festival itself, sitting in on meetings; hanging out and chatting with people in their offices, over coffee, or in their homes; attending screenings, press conferences, protests, and other events.

As I developed close relationships over time with people in the field, learning about their deeply personal ties to the festival, the dynamic between individual and institution also became an important part of my research. People's personal histories of involvement with the festival, their loyalties, and their professional, political, and emotional investments all put flesh on the bones of institutional structures. This is tricky terrain, where the personal and the political are mapped onto each other, and in learning to navigate it, I not only became acutely aware of the intensely political nature of social life in Greece, but also had to become a political being myself, carefully considering my alignments, how they might be perceived, and what doors would open or close accordingly. Although my position as a foreign academic afforded me some neutrality, there were still moments when my inquiries were met with silence or politely declined; in some cases, these silences were telling in and of themselves, and I learned to listen for them and to incorporate them, when possible, in my analyses. As an academic, I also shared a connection with the considerable number of scholars who work in or around the festival, and an important part of my fieldwork comprised long conversations with these fieldwork subjects, colleagues, and friends.

In contrast to research that focuses primarily on organizational structures, programming patterns, or institutional discourse, this more intimate and "microscopic" ethnographic research yields a different kind of knowledge of the festival, as it is actually lived and experienced by individuals. In addition, fieldwork requires the researcher to be deeply embedded in the complex and constantly shifting social and cultural contexts that constitute her "field," in which the festival itself is embedded. For this reason, ethnographic research allows a real-time understanding of how festivals themselves shift in response to changing contexts, and sometimes in unexpected ways, as I quickly learned in the case of the Thessaloniki festival.

Unexpected encounters, significant webs

During my time in the field, I also spent a great deal of time with people and in places that initially seemed to have no direct relationship to the film festival at all but that, in retrospect, I can see as having helped build a foundation for making sense of the specific contexts in which the festival takes on "particular" and "local" meaning. These contexts—social, political, economic— constitute the "webs of significance" that Geertz understands as shaping or

framing our perceptions and experiences of an object, an event, or a practice. These "webs" can seem countless, often entangled, and it is not always clear to the ethnographer which are most relevant to her research. We begin with a certain set of assumptions about how best to frame or contextualize our object of study, but often we end up in a very different place. In an essay on the ethnographic process, Ruth Behar discusses this aspect of ethnographic fieldwork, characterizing it as an exercise in the unexpected. Recounting how she first came to ethnography, she writes:

> I was seduced by the notion of fieldwork, the idea of going some place to find a story I wasn't looking for. Of course, ethnographic journeys are always taken with the knowledge that the "field" has already been theorized by precursors of various sorts. But the beauty and mystery of the ethnographer's quest is to find the unexpected stories, the stories that challenge our theories [...]. We go to find the stories we didn't know we were looking for in the first place.
>
> (Behar 2003: 16)

Behar's description of the ethnographic journey, as encounters with the unexpected in a theorized terrain, is an apt description for my own experience in the field. When I started my research on the Thessaloniki festival, I assumed that the most important "webs" for me to explore were the global circuit of international film festivals, transnational media economies, and practices of cosmopolitanism, since these seemed to provide the main contexts in which film festivals were being understood at the time. However, not long after I began the main portion of my fieldwork, the unexpected erupted, drastically changing the context of my research.

On the evening of December 6, 2008, a few months after I had arrived in Greece, a 15-year-old boy was shot and killed by police gunfire in a central neighborhood of Athens. What ensued was an unprecedented explosion of public protest and collective rage. For weeks following the shooting, the streets of Athens and cities across the country were filled with thousands of protesters marching against the shooting. While some of the protests were peaceful, many ended in rioting and violence, with vandalism of both public and private property, hundreds of arrests, and bloody clashes between protesters and riot police. State buildings and police stations were firebombed, cars and dumpsters burned in the streets, and the government struggled to keep the situation in check, eventually being ousted in emergency elections.

While the police shooting of an innocent teenage boy is tragic and unjust, clearly it was not in and of itself the sole reason behind such civil unrest and destruction. As the protests continued and grew in intensity, it soon became clear that the shooting had a larger social significance, beyond the problem of police brutality. The incident also unleashed underlying social frustrations that had been building up over years as a response to government financial scandals, rampant clientelism, and what was generally acknowledged to be a much

larger culture of corruption and lack of transparency that characterized the Greek state. There was also a simmering dissatisfaction, particularly among younger generations, with a lack of earning power and the growing sense of limited professional horizons—early indications of the economic crisis that would soon overwhelm the country. This financial and professional uncertainty, together with the entrenched corruption in the public sector, had led to an underlying sense of frustration with and distrust of the state, which was seen as having abused the country's finances for the benefit of the elite few, and in the process having failed to provide for its citizens' economic and social welfare. The shooting of the teenage boy was a lit match in this larger tinderbox of social discontent, which exploded in public expressions of collective fury.

Of course, Greece is no stranger to protest. In a country where political graffiti is ubiquitous, and where national holidays mark historical dates of uprising and resistance, public protest can be so common as to sometimes seem commonplace. But the sustained unrest of 2008 and 2009 was different. It felt unusual in its ferocity, but more importantly, in the kinds of public discourse that grew around and from it. The marches, occupations, and riots were accompanied by an ever-growing discourse that aimed at collective action and fundamental change in the political and social status quo. In the months following the shooting, as this discourse of civic rights and responsibilities was emerging in the press and online, I noticed that the same themes were dominating my everyday conversations with friends, fieldwork subjects, and even passing acquaintances. Nearly everyone I knew or spoke to was affected in one way or another by the political, social, and economic instability. Conversations and interviews would inevitably turn to a discussion of the "uprising," the ongoing strikes and protests, and the shortcomings of the state. Some would talk about the lack of transparency and accountability in government and the public sector; others spoke about the need for renewed civic participation and a sense of responsibility for collective welfare. As the months passed, protests over the shooting morphed into protests over the state's handling of the economic crisis, the bailout by international lenders, and relentless austerity measures.

As part of my fieldwork, I spent a great deal of time absorbing the tumultuous social climate, trying to understand the complicated politics and histories of the present situation, which was itself continuously changing. Large portions of my day were dedicated to reading newspapers and blogs; watching the news; talking politics with informants, friends, neighbors, strangers; attending marches, protests, sit-ins, and occupations. More and more, this ethnographic work led me to think about the proper role, function, and reach of the state, both in relation to its citizens and in a larger transnational sphere, as well as the right of citizens to make claims on or demands of the state and its assets. In many ways, this felt far from my main research topic, the film festival, and I often wondered if all the time I was spending away from the festival, researching ongoing political and economic developments and the

resulting social unrest, was leading me too far astray. At the same time, however, it felt important, and even unavoidable, to try to get a handle on this shifting social, political, and economic terrain in which I found myself embedded.

In fact, I was soon to learn that these questions concerning the relationship between the state and its citizens were not that far from my research topic after all. As the crisis worsened and the civil unrest continued, this turbulence began to affect the field of public culture, and more specifically the Greek film world. In a very practical sense, the Thessaloniki festival as an organization was affected by the political and economic upheavals because of its close relationship to the state; although technically it is a legally independent entity, it did receive the majority of its annual funding from the Greek Ministry of Culture, and the position of festival director is largely considered to be a kind of political appointment, with each change of government bringing with it a new director and new key staff.[2] With the unfolding economic catastrophe and the shrinking of state budgets, festival staff began to worry that they would be cut or their contracts not renewed, and those who continued to work for the festival had to wait months for paychecks. However, at the same time that this atmosphere of fiscal restraint was taking over, the festival was also preparing for its fiftieth-anniversary edition in November 2009, with a full slate of lavish celebrations, VIP guests, commemorative publications, and special programs and exhibitions. The incongruity between the severity of the national economic crisis and the extravagance of the festival's celebrations provoked sharp public criticism, all the more serious precisely because of the state funding that made up over two-thirds of the organization's annual income: it was public money that was being used. Against the backdrop of crisis and the newly current discourse of state accountability, these criticisms of the festival took on the much larger set of meanings, tensions, and grievances that were dominating public discourse at the time.

In addition, the preparations for the fiftieth-anniversary edition were also disrupted by a boycott of the festival by Greek filmmakers, who were withholding their films from the festival as a protest against the state. In the months leading up to the November festival, a group of over 200 Greek directors, producers, and screenwriters came together to protest what they considered to be a dysfunctional national film policy and the state's mishandling of public funds set aside for the support of Greek cinema. Their demands included an overhaul of the existing film legislation and state funding structures, and increased government support for domestic film distribution. They vowed to withhold their films from the 2009 Thessaloniki festival unless their demands were met, or unless the festival organizers joined their movement by completely reorganizing the fiftieth edition to resemble more of a protest than a celebration. Neither happened, and the 2009 festival took place with most Greek filmmakers, and Greek films, abstaining. The filmmakers' absence turned a spotlight on the connection between the state and the film festival as an institution of public culture. By choosing the festival as the primary site of

their protest against state policies, the filmmakers cast the festival as a space of the state and attempted to redefine their own relationship to the state through the festival.

In articulating their positions, the filmmakers relied heavily on a rhetoric of state responsibility and citizens' rights, closely resembling the larger protesting public of Greece post–December 2008; according to them, it was the responsibility of good government to ensure the health of independent Greek film production, distribution, and exhibition. This was part of a larger conversation taking place at the time around the proper role of the state in cultural production and the right of citizens to demand state support for public culture. In the press and in conversations with people working in or otherwise connected to cultural fields, a common point of concern were the major problems within the Ministry of Culture and the severe challenges faced by dysfunctional cultural institutions and initiatives: not only the lack of adequate state funding, but also overgrown and convoluted bureaucratic structures, the apathy of cultural administrators, and the static introduced by personal ambition and party politics. Underlying these concerns was the assumption that the state is, or at least should be, responsible for public culture in Greece. Cinema, theater, opera, dance, orchestras, archaeological heritage, visual arts, architecture—all of these cultural fields were assumed to fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture, and the state was held responsible for the health of these various fields, financially, legally, and administratively. The debate over the film festival in the months leading up to its fiftieth-anniversary edition was ultimately political and civic.

To the casual festival–goer, none of this turbulence was particularly visible during the 2009 festival. To an impressive extent, the festival organizers were able to keep these tensions and controversies under control; there was generally little noticeable disturbance in the programs and festivities, and very few references to the crisis or the absent Greek filmmakers in the discursive output of the festival itself—in its publications, its daily newspaper, on its website, in its press releases, on its own dedicated television channel. In fact, on the surface, and especially to the foreign observer, the 2009 festival edition was a great success, with international luminaries such as Werner Herzog in attendance, favorable reviews in foreign press, and increases in ticket sales and in the number of participating industry professionals. However, the picture was quite different for the ethnographer who had spent over a year immersed in the "microscopic" process of trying to understand the festival's immediate social, cultural, and political contexts, or local "webs of significance." From this perspective, the Thessaloniki festival could be seen in terms of its position within the larger debate on the relationship between the state, citizens, and public culture. In this sense, the festivals' fiftieth-anniversary edition was marked by precariousness and contestation, caught up in the instability of the conditions "on the ground."

Publishing the past, remembering in the present

As an example of this ethnographic process and perspective at work in my research on the Thessaloniki festival, we can take as our starting point a book: a special retrospective volume published by the festival to commemorate its fiftieth anniversary—*50 Years of the Thessaloniki Film Festival: 1960/2009* (Thessaloniki International Film Festival 2009). The ethnographic exploration of a text in the context of a film festival is something that anthropologist Daniel Dayan explicitly addresses in an essay on the Sundance Film Festival. Noting the sheer volume of printed materials generated by, around, and about the festival, Dayan writes of his methodology:

> Observation and interviews were obviously helpful, but the festival's most striking and to me most unexpected feature concerned the role of print. […] My principal task as ethnographer was unexpected. I could not just ignore these masses of paper, reject this unwanted information, nurture the dream of a face-to-face Sundance. […] Being in Park City made no difference: I had to read.
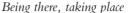>
> (Dayan 2000: 52)

While I agree with Dayan that the discursive output surrounding a festival is an important element in how the festival is constructed, perceived, and experienced, I would argue that, for an ethnographer, the "reading" of a text goes well beyond the paper and the printed word. In the case of the 2009 Thessaloniki festival's commemorative volume, my reading of this particular text began long before a single word was written, and my analysis focuses less on what is written in the book than on how it is being read and put to use by others.

My involvement with the volume began in January 2009, as the festival was moving into full gear in its preparations for its jubilee edition. Since I had arrived in Greece, I had become friends with Athina Kartalou, head of festival publications and a film studies scholar herself, who invited me to be a part of the research team for the book. She told me how she envisioned the book: a large, full-color, coffee-table tome that would chronicle the history of the festival, edition by edition, with detailed information about each year's programming, plenty of accompanying photographs, and special sections for more anecdotal information. Over the following months, as I attended editorial meetings and worked in archives and libraries together with the small group of researchers that Athina had assembled, I observed how the institutional history of the festival was being constructed. Later that year, at the presentation of the book that took place during the November festival, I was able to see how this history was then taken up by the public and used to reflect on the present.

Some of the main issues that emerged in the process of working on the publication were questions of the authorship, as well as the publics, of history:

by whom, and for whom, history is produced. When Athina first described to me the idea for the publication, she referred to the book using the word *lefkoma*, which translates in English to "scrapbook" or "album," and from the first organizational meeting, this was the word used among the group to refer to the publication. The model of a scrapbook complicates the idea of authorship because, unlike a written history or memoir, it functions more as a collection of traces of the past than as an overarching historical narrative, and each of those traces might have its own complicated history of authorship. At the same time that the scrapbook represents a highly subjective, curatorial act, it also allows its creator or compiler to claim a certain objectivity, deferring the responsibility of authorship to the multiple authors, cited or not, of the scrapbook's constituent elements.

The discussion that took place during the first editorial meeting pointed to these questions of authorship, objectivity, and subjectivity. During this initial discussion concerning the larger shape and function of the publication, everyone quickly agreed that the *lefkoma* would have to be as thorough and objective as possible. For the film historians in the group, it was a question of scholarship—they wanted the volume to serve as a resource and reference for other scholars who might be interested in the festival and its history—while others felt that anything perceived as subjective or editorializing would have political implications. The concern for objectivity was illustrated most clearly in the debate over the publication's introductory text. The head editor had brought with her examples of retrospective publications from other festivals and cultural organizations; flipping through them, we noticed that they all contained a long opening text, either synthesizing the history of the organization or offering an analysis or interpretation of that history. We tried to think who would be the best person to write such an introductory text for the *lefkoma*; someone suggested Despina Mouzaki, the current director of the festival, as a logical choice, while others suggested Michel Demopoulos, the previous director, since he had led the festival for nearly 15 years and had been responsible for transforming it into the institution as it exists today. But the head editor deemed both inappropriate—they were too polarizing, she argued, because of their political affiliations. One of the researchers suggested that we ask one of the more established critics or film historians, but the editor replied that even they would not be "neutral" enough; she argued that anyone with enough authority and experience to qualify to write such an introductory text would either have a particular point of view or would at least be accused of having one, and she did not want anyone to accuse the festival or the editorial team of pursuing a larger agenda or ulterior motive with the book. In the end, it was decided that there would be no such text at all; apart from the formalities of opening remarks by the director and a short text describing methodology, structure and abbreviations, there would only be photographs and information about each festival edition in the form of data points. In the quest for absolute objectivity, or at least the appearance of it, the group went so far as to erase authorship completely, or at least attempt to.
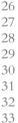
However, despite this concern for "objectivity," it was also clear from our first meetings that the very nature of the group's work was interpretive. Even in simply deciding what information to present, in what form, the group would be determining how the history of the festival would be structured, and how, through that particular version of its history, the institution would be perceived and understood. Meeting periodically over a period of a few weeks, the group discussed for hours: how the different editions of the festival should be presented; if the festival's chronology should be divided into "eras," by decade, by director, or at all; if anecdotes and "unofficial" stories should be included, or only the bare facts about each year's programming, and which facts; if equal attention should be given to the sidebar events, exhibitions, master classes, and Industry Center activities; and which members of the festival programming and organizational staff from each edition should be included. In debating which elements to include in the book, and how, the editorial team was actually debating how to define the festival itself. Thus, even in these early stages of conceptualization, there was a clear tension between the ideal of objectivity and the necessary subjectivity of the editorial process—a tension that centered on the question of authorship, the particular positions from which this history was being authored, and how these positionalities determined the shape of that history.

In October 2009, after all the research and most of the editorial work had been completed, I caught up with Athina on the status of the project. She said that the book was almost ready to print; the only task remaining was a final, detailed examination, particularly of the photographs and the anecdotal information, to make sure that everything was in order politically. When I asked her what exactly they would be looking for in the material, she specified: names that should not be mentioned and some that should, people who should not appear next to each other in photograph arrangements, stories that should be left out. She would be setting aside a few days especially, to work closely with the editors on this. Athina was known for having an acute sense of political dynamics and was highly attuned to both micro-politics, on the one hand, and larger party and cultural politics, on the other. Combing through the *lefkoma* material in this way, she was adjusting it to a very particular public— one familiar with and sensitive to different moments of controversy or conflict in the festival's history—with an eye to how this version of the festival's past would navigate the political dynamics of the present. In this respect, the editorial approaches to authorship and to the public converged; in both cases, the goal was to revisit history while avoiding offense and conflict.

During the official book launch, however, it was precisely a history of conflict that became the focal point of the discussion. On the penultimate day of the 2009 festival, a group of "experts" was gathered in front of an audience to present and discuss the volume. Among the packed audience was the usual army of journalists, photographers, and videographers, and in the front of the room sat a panel of notable historians, critics, writers, and filmmakers. While the event began predictably, with an initial discussion of the historiographical

merits of the *lefkoma*—its objectivity, its thoroughness, its methodological rigor—the conversation soon took a different, less expected direction: namely, a focus on conflict as an important part, perhaps even the most important part, of the festival's history. For example, Ilias Kanellis, a journalist and magazine pub-lisher sitting on the panel, spoke at length about the book's anecdotal sections, stating that what interested him most was not the descriptions of major cine-matic events, but rather "the secondary events, apart from cinema—the heck-ling, the protests, the complaints" (Kanellis 2009). He then went on to read entries from these sections, most of which had to do with moments of conflict: the public's disapproval of and vocal negative reactions to particular films or jury decisions, filmmakers refusing to accept prizes for political reasons, complaints about the festival's lack of organization, rumors of the festival perhaps being moved to Athens, and even the establishment of the first "anti-festival" in 1961, when two directors whose films were not chosen by the pre-selection commit-tee organized screenings of their films in Thessaloniki at the same time as the festival. The speaker was careful to point out that he considered these moments of conflict as "important not just for the study of film history, but for the study of the social history of our country over the last fifty years" (ibid.).

Similarly, another panelist, historian Antonis Liakos, focused his comments on conflict, collectivity, and resistance. He began by talking about the festival as part of a larger "education" that his generation received through cinema: "The film festival, the films, the cinema clubs, the journals—it was all a learn-ing context, which shaped a whole generation" (Liakos 2009). For him, the history of the festival was intertwined with the larger social history of Greece:

> One could say that the festival follows and is a counterpart to the history of Modern Greek society. First of all, starting from the 1960s, it's been a field of communication, of mutual recognition, of socialization, a field which connects the '60s, the sudden opening of that period, with later the period of the dictatorship, the rise of the public, its autonomous role, the role of the "second mezzanine"—all of these elements that bring together the festival-as-institution with the festival-as-public. And it's also a point of resistance; it prepared the way for the climate that would develop later, the climate of resistance. The relationship between the fes-tival and the resistance during the years of the dictatorship is a very important part of the history of this festival. At the same time, the rela-tionship between filmmakers and the festival is also very important. In a way, the festival resembles a kind of Roman democracy, in which the public engages in discussion with the patricians, the plebeians with the patricians, the filmmakers with the Ministry of Industry, the juries with the film critics. And to tell you the truth, I'm glad that this dynamism manifested itself this year as well, with this separate festival of the [boy-cotting] filmmakers in Athens. I'm glad in the sense that these moments of opposition show that the festival is still alive.

> (Ibid.)

Here, the history of the festival is presented as a history of collective action, of public conflict, debate, and resistance. The term "second mezzanine" refers to the practice of festival-goers in the upper balcony of the cinema who vocally, and sometimes violently, let their opinions be known. The practice of the second mezzanine first arose during the Greek military dictatorship (1967–1974), at a time when the ticket prices for festival screenings varied according to the category of the seating; thus the upper balcony was usually full of youth and students, who could only afford the cheapest tickets. The "second mezzanine" was famous for interrupting screenings, and sometimes even stopping them altogether, with their jeers, heckles, or ironic applause. Particularly in the 1970s, during and immediately following the dictatorship, many of the second mezzanine's reactions were politically motivated—thunderous applause and, in later years, audience awards for films that were considered politically, socially, or formally progressive; and loud disapproval for films that were thought to be supported by the state or too commercial, sometimes even leading to physical violence and police intervention.

In the 1980s, the second mezzanine reached a fever pitch—according to some, it devolved into a kind of hooliganism—but the practice had died down by the early 1990s, when the festival was radically restructured to resemble more closely the international film festivals of Western Europe, a move that was part of a larger effort to "modernize" and "Europeanize" the country by bringing it more in line with developing EU cultural policies and the global cultural economy. But still today, for many festival-goers of that generation, and even of younger generations who were too young to have experienced it directly but are familiar with the lore, the second mezzanine is a well-known and fondly remembered part of the festival experience, representing a level of audience engagement and critical interaction that many feel no longer exists among the festival public. By referring to the second mezzanine, the historian was evoking this particular history of the festival, which he then extended and elaborated through references to resistance under the junta, the "Roman democracy," and the actions of the filmmakers protesting the Ministry of Industry in the 1970s. This was a history of the festival centered on conflict, collective action, and a critical public, and he extended it to the present moment, to encompass the actions of the protesting filmmakers, who organized a special week of screenings to show their films in Athens, just a few days before the start of the Thessaloniki festival that they were boycotting. In this view of the festival, conflict was not something to be avoided, but rather a positive sign of "dynamism" and vitality, an indication that the festival was still a space for social and political action.

In the commemorative volume, moments of conflict from the festival's history are not entirely avoided; it does include references to the "second mezzanine," the various anti-festivals, and tensions between filmmakers and the state. But in the book, these moments of conflict—described "objectively" and listed in the volume's uniform bullet-point lists—are neutralized, subsumed in a larger flow of facts and data. In contrast, nearly all of the panelists highlighted

this sense of conflict, presenting it as the defining characteristic of the festival's history. While the volume's editorial team was actively trying to avoid potential conflicts, stressing objectivity and even authorlessness and attempting to weed out anything that might be too contentious, these panelists saw contention as not just necessary, but even desirable. They were not idealizing conflict simply for the sake of conflict itself; rather, they saw that conflict as indicative of a lively, dynamic, and vital public sphere. For them, the debates, fights, oppositions, and controversies were an integral part of the festival's social, political, and cultural significance. Throughout its history, the film festival provided the occasion for this kind of gathering, this critical collectivity, and created a space where the members of a critical and diverse public could engage and interact with each other. The book launch served as a site for remembering that history, reclaiming it and connecting it to the present moment. This emphasis on publicness, and more specifically on a critical publicness or collectivity, can be understood in relation to the larger civic discourse that was growing at the time in Greece. In this sense, the festival's fiftieth-anniversary retrospective publication was being used to reflect on what was happening in the present moment.

Being there

What is revealed in this example of "ethnographic reading"—a process that involves the "microscopic" work of ethnographic research, as well as an awareness of the larger social and political contexts, both historical and in the present day, in which the festival is situated—is a way of understanding the film festival that is grounded in lived experience over time. The complex negotiations that went into the making of the commemorative volume, and by extension the construction of the festival's institutional history, do not appear in any written form, nor are they preserved in any archives. Only through the ethnographic work of "being there" (Geertz 1988) can the researcher get a sense of the tensions underlying the editorial process, and most importantly a sense of what did not make it into that history, what was left out, and why. Similarly, being immersed in the turbulent social and political life of Greece over an extended period of time yielded an intimate understanding of the larger "webs of significance" that shaped how people were experiencing the festival. In the context of the country's current crises and their historical resonance, the festival became a site of resistance, of engaging critically with the state, and remembering collective political action. Again, the discussion that took place during the book launch and its gestures toward a renewed sense of critical collectivity are not preserved in catalogs, programming notes, newsletters, or trade press reviews. Likewise, the protesting filmmakers and the questions raised by their boycott were largely absent in the discursive output around the festival, especially in the foreign press. Ethnographic research gives us a view onto such ephemeral, invisible, or silent moments; a "thick" understanding of the deep structures that give them meaning; and what they reveal about the festival as social experience.

What I am advocating is not a return to a simplistic "village ethnography," an old-fashioned insistence on an idealized notion of place in which locality, community, and culture are bounded and conflated. As a discipline, anthropology has been thinking critically about ethnography in relation to place, locality, and the "field" for decades (Appadurai 1991; Augé 1995; Clifford 1997; Gupta and Ferguson 1997). The result of such disciplinary reflection has not been to jettison ethnographic fieldwork, but rather to crack open notions of place and to think in terms of how locality is conditioned by global structures, and vice versa. In the context of the Thessaloniki film festival, the informed ethnographer asks how the festival functions as a node in a global network, serving to connect Thessaloniki to a larger transnational circuit of "global cities" and media events, but just as importantly also serving as a point of resistance or breakdown in that transnational flow. For example, as we saw during the book presentation, the transformations that the festival underwent during its internationalization in the early 1990s in many ways represented a move toward Europeanization and cultural integration with the EU; however, on another level, they were experienced by many locals as a loss—a loss of community, of a form of collective engagement. As film festivals continue to proliferate and to resemble each other—in their programming, their rhetoric, their structures—it becomes all the more important to take a close look at the concrete ways in which this global network actually takes place, in particular places and at particular times. If, as many scholars would argue, film festivals are increasingly important social, political, and economic spaces, then ethnography is an invaluable tool for examining, understanding, and representing the festival as rich, lived experience.

Notes

1 This essay is adapted from parts of my PhD thesis, "Public Culture and Cultural Citizenship at the Thessaloniki International Film Festival," which explores the relationship between state, citizen, and public culture during a period of acute social, political, and economic crisis (Lee 2013). Research for this project was made possible by generous support from the Social Science Research Council, the Fulbright Foundation, and the Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies at Harvard University.

2 Since 2012, with the near-bankruptcy of the Greek state, the festival has stopped receiving funding from the Ministry of Culture. Instead, it now survives primarily on EU grants and private sponsorships, and its annual budget is a fraction of what it was in 2009. As of July 2015, festival staff were still trying to prepare for the next edition; however, with the turmoil of the July 5 referendum, capital controls, and the new bailout agreement, it was unclear if the festival would have the resources it needs to continue.

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Further reading

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Hansen, M. (1993) "Unstable Mixtures, Dilated Spheres: Negt and Kluge's *The Public Sphere and Experience*, Twenty Years Later," *Public Culture*, 5(2), pp. 179–212. (A theoretical discussion of the public sphere as a space of conflict or contestation.)

Schwartz, V. (2007) *It's So French! Hollywood, Paris, and the Making of Cosmopolitan Film Culture*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. (Contains an ethnographically inflected history of the Cannes Film Festival, locating that particular history in a larger transnational political and economic context.)

Warner, M. (2002) *Publics and Counterpublics*, New York: Zone Books. (Provides a useful framework for thinking about dynamic and oppositional spaces of public discourse and practice, of which film festivals can be seen as an example.)