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The Hindered Drive towards Internationalization: Thessaloniki (International) Film Festival

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Abstract

Originally a site for the promotion of the Greek film production, the Thessaloniki Film Festival, founded in 1960, gradually evolved to showcase international cinema, with a special emphasis on Balkan film. By focusing on the festival's international aspirations, this account highlights certain under-researched parts of its history during which the festival offered parallel, competitive or not, programs of non-Greek films. In exploring this history, this article foregrounds tensions among key stakeholders, and maps these over the country's broader socio-political dynamics, as well as in relation to broader developments in the European and international film festival scene.

Keywords: Film festival; Thessaloniki; Greek cinema; national; international; film history

Introduction

In 1992, the Thessaloniki Film Festival, Greece's main state-sponsored film festival, launched a new international competition. Its prior national focus was replaced by an unambiguously extrovert reorientation. By becoming international and getting FIAPF (International Federation of Film Producers Associations) specialist accreditation for new directors' films, the festival sought to redefine its identity both within and outside the country. This article traces the tensions in the festival's history between the drive towards internationalization, and the desire to keep the festival as an institution in the service of Greek national cinema. Such tensions represented the interests of different stakeholders (Rhyne 2009) and were expressed in power struggles that often disrupted the operation of the festival. Indirectly, they also related to national political developments, as well as to broader tendencies in terms of the country's changing identity in relation to Europe, but also to transformations in the international film festival scene. In the 55 years of its history from 1960 to 2014, the festival has experienced a great deal of hegemonic conflicts, many of them expressed as open opposition from key stakeholders, especially filmmakers and the public. The drive towards internationalization has often been caught within them.

The account of the Thessaloniki Film Festival's origin and trajectory here showcases moments, periods and manifestations that illustrate its international character and aspirations, as well as the fact that, and the different ways in which, national and international dimensions have co-existed for most of the festival's history. Existing accounts of the festival indicate a clear break in 1992 from a predominantly inward-looking event to one that sought, and arguably achieved, a substantive presence on the international circuit. And while there is no doubt that the festival's rebranding in the 1990s placed its identity on sounder foundations, and raised its profile as a major festival in the region, this essay highlights an earlier, less

known, fragmented, but also formative and influential trajectory that set the path for its international success.

As sites and institutions for the promotion and exhibition of films, festivals have often sought to reconcile international aspirations and national interests. According to de Valck (2007, 24), the first Venice festival ‘combined the “international” with the “national” by inviting nations to participate in an international showcase where they could present a selection of their own finest films of the year.’ However, national and geopolitical interests influenced proceedings and policies, as throughout the 1930s the Venice film festival helped promote the fascist state ideology. As de Valck has noted, geopolitics were key to the formation of the major European festivals – Venice, Cannes, Berlin – while, according to her periodization, national considerations and agendas remained prominent in European festivals until 1968 (53).

Furthermore, as Chan (2011, 253) has indicated, while a great number of film festivals define themselves as ‘international’, there is ‘no real consensus on what an “international film festival” is.’ Instead, Peranson’s (2009) concept of ‘an alternative distribution network’, functions, according to Chan, as the closest alternative to an agreed understanding of the (international) role of festivals: a platform where films, often excluded from the commercial circuit, have the opportunity to be shown across national boundaries. This article explores the process of the formation of an international film festival, with reference, specifically, to Thessaloniki. In doing this, it offers an account of the festival’s history that highlights the relationship between the festival’s national and international strands and conveys its changing identity.

Aside from the festival’s own publications, there has been no systematic attempt to account for the festival’s history so far. In his multi-volume *Istoria tou Ellinikou Kinimatografou/ History of Greek Cinema*, Yannis Soldatos refers extensively to the festival

in order to present developments in Greek cinema, but disregards its international dimension (2002a, 2002b, 2002c). In its various editions, his book frequently cites original, often unedited, documents from the press, thus providing hard to access, but useful material. The official online archive of the festival (in Greek) offers brief un-authored semi-anecdotal accounts of each edition until 1992, focusing on the Greek side of the festival (Thessaloniki Film Festival). Aside from the catalogues, the most useful resource among the festival's own publications has been the 50th anniversary commemorative edition *50 Hronia Festival Thessalonikis 1960-2009/50 Years of Thessaloniki Festival 1960-2009* (TIFF 2009).

According to Toby Lee (2013, 122) who worked as part of the research team for this project, the volume 'represents the festival's main attempt at writing and monumentalizing its institutional history.' Lee explains that the volume was designed to function as a 'scrapbook' or 'album' of clippings, aiming to be as 'objective' (124) as possible, and attempting to 'erase authorship completely' (125). While being critical of the possibility of such erasure, Lee indicates that the sources for the volume consisted of catalogues and other festival publications (that I also had direct access to), as well as 'archives of old newspapers in the Thessaloniki public library' (127). Despite the 'fragmentary and sometimes chaotic condition of the archives', the 'unresponsiveness of some of the individuals contacted for input and commentary' (127) and the difficulty to verify some of the anecdotal information reproduced (129), this volume remains the central resource for material about the festival, and thus provides a key reference point in what follows. Supplemented by a plethora of other sources, including personal interviews with, among others, two of the festival's directors, the volume's bullet-point presentation of multi-sourced facts, offers a good starting point for disentangling some of the dynamics that underscored the festival's changing identity and its relation to broader debates about Greece and the Europeanization/internationalization of the country and its cultural production.

As will be shown, the vision for the festival's internationalization was present from its inception, and it was delayed, halted or transformed by a number of factors examined here. In order to explore this dynamic between an internal and an external pull, this essay focuses on four different periods in the festival's international identity. First, the early years, 1960-66, which began with a Greek-focused event and culminated in the first feature-length international competition; second, the years of the dictatorship (1967-74), that led to its cancellation and replacement, in 1972, with a short film international competition until 1981; third, the nation-focused 1980s; and finally, the post-1992 period, during which the international competition was firmly established, and gradually overshadowed the national one. As will be shown below, these periods are underscored by broader political and socio-economic changes within Greece and beyond, as well as by changing perceptions about what a film festival's organization and function should be.

The founding of Greek Cinema Week and the first rebranding

For its first six editions (1960-65), the Thessaloniki Film Festival was called the Greek Cinema Week. Its first edition took place September 20-26, 1960. The well-known story of the festival's origins goes like this: A few months earlier, the Thessaloniki International Trade Fair, a state-supported annual trade exhibition every September, had asked for proposals for celebratory cultural events on the occasion of its 25th anniversary to run in parallel to its core business.¹ In response, Pavlos Zannas, a Thessaloniki-based intellectual and founder of the cine-club *Tehni (Art)* in the same city, put forward on March 7, 1960 a proposal for the creation of a 'cinema exhibition' that was instantly accepted. In his proposal, Zannas stressed that the festival would be 'original' as there had been no precedents in Greece. He envisaged it as an international event with multinational participation, stressing that this would provide excellent promotion of Greek cinema beyond national borders. Aware

of organizational and other limitations, he then specified that it should initially have a ‘Greek character’ with the occasional participation of foreign films, but that it should steadily build on its international profile and aim for FIAPF accreditation as soon as possible (Xanthopoulos 1999, 54).

The vision for the festival, therefore, was extrovert and ambitious from the start. A cosmopolitan intellectual educated in Geneva and a cinephile, Zannas was committed to raising cultural standards in Thessaloniki and more broadly in Greece. Through his involvement with the cultural organization and cine-club *Tehni* (founded in 1955), Zannas had brought to the public of Thessaloniki the chance to see and debate key films from the then burgeoning international art cinema (Italian neo-realism, French New Wave, Bergman, Kurosawa) as well as silent films and pre-war classics from the Soviet Union, Europe and the US (Xanthopoulos 1999, 5-13; Makedoniki 2002). Zannas’ vision for the event that would become the festival was, in many ways, an extension of the cine-club’s cultural aims. As a more wide-reaching annual celebratory event, the festival would provide a nurturing environment for Greek quality cinema through institutionally sanctioned exposure and it would also bring it into closer contact with international developments in the art of cinema, especially as it could also show foreign films that did not have commercial distribution in Greece (Papadimitriou 2014b).

Organized as a parallel event under the aegis of the Thessaloniki International Trade Fair, a fully state-owned organization funded by the Ministry of Industry at the time, part of the Week’s original aim was to attract publicity for the Trade Fair (Papadimitriou 2015a). For other stakeholders, more invested in cinema itself, the primary aim was the promotion and support of Greek cinema (Papadimitriou 2014b). The opening speech for the first Week by the president of the Trade Fair signaled the possibilities of strengthening Greek industry through cinema, while the Minister of Industry expressed his hopes for the creation of an

American studio in Greece. Only the president of the 19-member jury defined the aim of the event as ‘educational, artistic and national’ (TIFF 2009, 107).

While Pavlos Zannas introduced the idea and the original vision for the festival, its realization involved a number of different agents whose motivations and priorities only partly overlapped. Underlying some of the tensions were different understandings of the role of cinema – as a commercial and industrial product, or a cultural and artistic one.² The issue of its internationalization, however, was not prominent in the first edition, as the focus of the event remained national, and the name adopted was ‘Greek Cinema Week’, following the Minister of Industry’s recommendation.³ The first ‘Week’ was organized in haste and without Zannas’ direct involvement. Modest, it premiered four feature-length Greek films, alongside ten shorts and a retrospective program of Greek films since 1955 – all of which were in competition in separate categories for a significant number of monetary awards (Soldatos 2002, 262-3; ET1 2009).

Beginning with the second edition, an international program of parallel screenings was introduced. Projected in the afternoon, before the main Greek competitive program that took place in the evenings, the films shown originated from countries that participated in the Trade Fair. This international program, in other words, was a direct extension of the fair, in so far as it allowed its clients to showcase as yet another product – films. Therefore, the international program was not curated, but consisted of films selected by national bodies of the countries represented at the Trade Fair (Papadimitriou 2015a). Despite being non-competitive, three ‘honorary’, in other words, non-financial, awards for foreign feature-length films were given.

The parallel international program from 1961 to 1965 reflects the location of Thessaloniki in Northern Greece, and its geopolitical significance. Since the end of World War II, Greece was politically aligned to the Western sphere of influence, but its

geographical location placed it in the proximity of the Eastern Bloc, directly neighboring a number of communist countries. Reflecting the clientele of the Trade Fair, the films shown in the international parallel screenings originated almost to equal degree from communist countries of Eastern Europe and from the West. In 1961, for example, the feature-length foreign films shown came from France, Italy, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and the USSR; in 1965 from Hungary, Romania, Italy, West Germany, France, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, USSR, the US, East Germany, France and Cyprus (TIFF 2009). This suggests that Thessaloniki developed from the start a distinctive character in terms of transnational commercial and cultural interest – a character that many years later, after the fall of the communist bloc, would be translated into the festival's Balkan orientation.

Returning to the 1960s, after six years as 'Greek Cinema Week', in 1966 the event was renamed the 'Greek Film Festival', while the parallel international screenings became organized into a fully competitive international festival. Placed under the umbrella term 'Thessaloniki Film Festival', the Greek and the international festivals were jointly scheduled to take place on two consecutive weeks in September, at the same time as the Trade Fair. The development of the international festival was largely due to Pavlos Zannas, who, from his position as director general of the Trade Fair, was finally able to materialize his vision. Following a practice typical of Greek state administration, both the Trade Fair and the festival have tended to have politically motivated appointments at the top managerial positions. A left-leaning liberal, Zannas was appointed Director General of the Trade Fair in 1965 by the Centrist party of George Papandreou.

Zannas favored the temporal and organizational separation of the two festivals, arguing that this underscored the overall dual function of supporting and promoting Greek cinema, on one hand, and of acting as a showcase and marketplace for foreign production, on the other (TIFF 2009, 125). While such a dual – national and international – identity is now

commonplace among the largest festivals of different countries (Czach 2004), by the mid 1960s it had not as yet developed as a widespread practice. While implicitly promoting their respective national productions, the festivals of Venice, Cannes and Berlin were designed as international competitions from the start. Like Thessaloniki, festivals of smaller or less geopolitically prominent European nations tended to focus on national production with a more ad hoc presence of foreign films. Seen in this context, Zannas' aspiration for a festival with a dual identity could be seen as pioneering. Further, Thessaloniki was one of the first (international) festivals to emerge in South-Eastern Europe. Aside from the Pula Film Festival in the then communist Yugoslavia (now Croatia), which was established in 1953 and focused mostly on Yugoslav films (<http://www.pulafilmfestival.hr/en/>), the only other festival in the region at the time was the Antalya Golden Orange Film Festival in Turkey, established a few years after Thessaloniki, in 1964, in order to promote Turkish cinema (<http://en.altinportakal.org.tr/default.aspx>).

Despite the originality of its dual – national and international – emphasis, the Greek section of the 1966 festival was more extensively discussed in the press. Positive reports stressed the unusually high number of good films shown, while criticisms were directed towards the deeply-split jury that led to the least deserving film becoming awarded (Soldatos 2004a, 428-435; TIFF 2009, 125-126). Coverage of the international festival was more superficial, focusing predominantly on the stars that attended Thessaloniki. Suzannah York and Jean-Louis Trintignant topped the publicity-attracting celebrities, while the presence of *Cahiers du cinéma* critic Jean-Louis Comolli suggested that the festival also appealed to international intellectuals. Its program was rich and varied, consisting of 23 feature films and eight shorts from Western and Eastern Europe, the US, but also Japan, Chile, Lebanon, Tunisia and India. A five-member international jury, headed by Zannas himself, awarded five films with golden and three silver medals, with the top prize for best feature-length film

going to Alain Resnais' *The War is Over/La Guerre est Finie* (1966). For the first time, the Trade Fair also organized a separate 'Film Market' further reinforcing cultural and commercial exchanges (TIFF 2009, 125; Thessaloniki, 1969).

However, the international program in the above format was very short-lived. The advent of the seven-year junta, following the *coup-d'état* of April 21, 1967, led to the sacking of Zannas from his leading position in the Trade Fair, and the cancellation of the separate international festival. Foreign films again appeared as parallel non-competitive events, as before (TIFF 2009, 129).

The Short Film International Competition (1972-81)

If the first stage of Thessaloniki's internationalization coincided with Zannas' pioneering vision and its abrupt ending, the second period has remained more obscure partly because of its associations with the junta, and partly because of its main focus on short-length foreign films which tended to attract less publicity and/or controversy. During the seven years of the junta (1967-74), the Greek festival attracted most of the attention, as, in defiance of the official culture, the participating Greek filmmakers nurtured an oppositional stance to the regressive, authoritarian and right-wing dictatorship (Papadimitriou 2014a) and turned the festival into the breeding ground for what was to become the politicized cinema of the 1970s later known as 'New Greek Cinema' (Karalis 2012, 143-162). With censorship and repression dominating the political and cultural life of the country, tensions behind the scenes in the festival were inevitable. For example, soon after being removed from his post as director of the Trade Fair, Zannas was invited to return to his position. He refused, and in 1968 he was condemned to 10 and a half years imprisonment for his anti-regime stance and involvement with the resistance. He remained in prison until 1972.

With Zannas out of the picture, the driving force behind the international program was lost as there was no obvious replacement for his commitment to cosmopolitan film culture. However, the new regime at the Trade Fair still wanted to have an international event, and as early as 1968, it announced in the press the desire 'make [the festival] into an artistic event of international appeal' (TIFF 2009, 132). Further declarations for the festival's restructuring and for the introduction of an international FIAPF-accredited event followed in 1969, but they only materialized three years later, in 1972, with the introduction of the '1st Thessaloniki International Film Festival' – its title erasing any acknowledgement of the 1966 event. The new FIAPF-accredited festival was one week long, and took place in early October, just after the Greek festival. It had two sections: a competitive short-length program and a non-competitive feature-length one. Lacking an intellectual figurehead like Zannas behind it, this festival found it hard to establish a distinctive identity.

The entry procedures for participation at the short film international competition established in 1972 followed the pattern of selection via official national bodies, such as embassies or consulates that, as de Valck (2007) indicates, predominated till the late 1960s. According to the new regulations, the submissions would be considered by the five-member 'organization committee', led by the president of the Trade Fair (*Kanonismos* 1972, np). Press reports for the 1st International Festival praised the intellectual stimulation it generated, the commercial possibilities it opened and the presence of celebrities, but also highlighted its limited audience appeal (TIFF 2009, 146). During the 2nd International Festival, in 1973, a number of parallel events were introduced, as well as a market for Greek and foreign films. In their closing remarks, the organizers claimed a very positive response from the audience (TIFF 2009, 151).

While the organization of the 3rd International festival in October 1974 continued along the same lines, the broader sociopolitical situation in Greece changed dramatically. In

July of 1974 the right-wing dictatorship fell, as a result of the Turkish invasion in Cyprus. A moment of hope was matched by what was considered a national disaster, while all sorts of repressed tensions were brought to the surface. This impacted directly on the running of both the Greek and the International festivals, as various confrontations among the audience, the committees and the filmmakers were reported. For example, intense vocal disapprovals by members of the audience of the second gallery (known as *B Exostis* in Greece) motivated the intervention of the police; this, in turn, ignited public anger, because it was widely seen as an unjustifiably repressive action. Elsewhere, a group of disgruntled filmmakers not selected for the festival organized their own parallel screening, the first 'anti-festival.' In protest against the extensive censorship practices of the dictatorship, a number of films previously banned were screened, while Pavlos Zannas, who now headed the Greek festival's jury, made calls for the need to review the festival's proceedings and remove censorship. A public discussion during the international festival also focused on the need to reorganize the event and expressed disapproval about the role of FIAPF. Last but not least, the international festival jury, headed by director Jules Dassin, resigned in protest for the decision of the organizing committee to withdraw three Greek films for not meeting the FIAPF-agreed regulations (TIFF 2009, 155-157).

Such hegemonic struggles continued and even intensified during the next few years and the Greek festival was a key site for them, reflecting the broader intense politicization of the period of the *metapolitefsi* – the return to democracy (Kornetis 2013). During this time, and for another seven years after the fall of the junta, the international festival that was established in 1972 continued to run parallel to – although effectively separately from – the Greek festival. While both under the auspices of the Trade Fair, the two festivals – the national and the international one – approached each other with suspicion and even outright hostility. The Greek filmmakers who gradually managed to 'own' the Greek festival by

organizing oppositional events, such as the ‘anti-festival’ of 1977, as will be discussed below, saw the international event as antagonistic and considered that it represented different interests, competitive with what they considered to be the festival’s key aim: to support Greek cinema (Papadimitriou 2014b).

In 1976, more tensions between Greek filmmakers and the Ministry of Industry surfaced, leading to their culmination the following year. Displeased with some proposed cuts to the financial nature of the Greek festival’s awards, the filmmakers threatened an outright boycott, but were appeased when some of their claims were met (TIFF 2009, 165-166). In 1977, however, their threats were carried through. The trigger was the Ministry’s revision of the festival’s regulations and the reduction of role of the filmmakers’ Trade Unions in its planning.⁴ As a result, the vast majority of Greek filmmakers refused to participate, and organized their own ‘anti-festival’ in Thessaloniki one week after the official festival, which also took place – albeit with severely reduced audiences – despite the organizers’ struggle to find films to screen. The press almost unanimously praised the ‘anti-festival’, while the public showed its support with very high levels of attendance (Rentzis 1977). Among those involved with the ‘anti-festival’ was Pavlos Zannas, as president of its organizing committee. Perhaps not surprisingly, in the light of the above, the 1977 International festival, which took place a week before the official Greek festival, was almost completely ignored (TIFF 2009, 168-175).

To contextualize further, and explain the disregard of the international festival, it should be noted that for Greek filmmakers, the Thessaloniki festival had grown to become the major annual event where they could meet and exchange ideas about their films – and about politics. Their conflicts with the Ministry of Industry expressed their desire to assert their right as the major stakeholders of the event, and, through their Trade Unions, to continue to be represented in key decision-making processes, a number of which had

financial implications. For the awards at the Thessaloniki festival were not only monetary, but they offered the status of 'protected' and 'supported' films to those that won, thus guaranteeing national distribution.⁵ This was particularly important for Greek films to have a chance to be shown, especially at a time when Greek cinema had started losing its wider appeal to the audience and therefore exhibitors were becoming reluctant to provide screening slots for them.⁶ In the light of such political and financial situation, the international festival was considered, at best, a distraction, at worst, damaging.

Despite the Greek filmmaking community's suspicion and even hostility, the international festival continued until 1981 and, to a certain extent, grew. In 1978 two special tributes were added (one dedicated to Stanley Kubrick and the other to Canadian cinema), as well as an international conference about the promotion of short films. In 1979, press reports supported the international festival, praising the selection of films, and highlighting that a number of them had previously been shown at Cannes and in other major film festivals – thus implicitly developing a discourse that sought to situate Thessaloniki within the broader festival circuit. In a critical tone, however, some reports objected to the fact that foreign embassies and consulates made the films' selection (TIFF 2009, 184). As de Valck (2007, 19-20) has noted, the period 1968-1980 was characterized by an outburst of 'independently organized festivals' across Europe. Thessaloniki's dependence on foreign official national bodies for the choice of film shown was therefore comparatively anachronistic.

Other press reports underlined the prospects of the festival's further internationalization. According to the Thessaloniki-based *Makedonia* newspaper (owned by one of the Trade Fair's most influential executives), 'the organization widens its frame of reference to international horizons' and 'according to most signs the International festival will become the main event inside which the Greek festival will be integrated, as a result of a process imposed because of our integration into the European Economic Community (EEC).'

(TIFF 2009, 184). The EEC (the then European Union) underscored the festival's drive towards internationalization. Greece had initially applied for entry in the EEC in June 1959, and two years later, in June 1961, the first agreement was signed. The advent of the colonels' dictatorship in 1967 halted developments, but these were quickly resumed after the return to democracy in 1974. After a number of delays and setbacks, the agreement for the country's entry was signed in June 1979, and a year and half later, on January 1, 1981, Greece became the EEC's 10th member state (Ministry 2010). The international side of the festival interested the Trade Fair most, as its aim was to facilitate, enhance and profit from trade. The existing international festival, competitive only for shorts, was deemed unsatisfactory and, in 1981, was canceled.

To explain its cancellation, we need to throw some light on the broader political situation, as well as on the role of the filmmakers and the relationship between Ministries and the Trade Fair. For, as a state-sponsored institution, the Thessaloniki festival has been directly affected, on the one hand, by relevant legislation voted in the national parliament, as we will see below, and, on the other, by politically motivated appointments at top positions, as noted above. In this sense, and rather paradoxically, the festival's trajectory has some structural similarities with festivals in communist countries, such as the cases of China and Yugoslavia examined in this issue (Ma 2016; Jelencović 2016). To return to the Greek context, in October 1981 national elections brought to power for the first time in Greece a socialist (or rather social-democratic) government that was much more favored, overall, by Greek filmmakers with ties to the Thessaloniki festival. One of the new government's defining features was its anti-Europeanism and emphasis on national self-determination, evident, however, more in its rhetoric than its actions. When the socialist government came to power, film matters had just migrated from the Ministry of Industry to the Ministry of Culture. The socialist government appointed Melina Merkouri, a film actress of international

repute and partner of French filmmaker Jules Dassin, as Minister of Culture – a post she kept continuously until 1989, and later briefly resumed in the early 1990s. With her close links with the Greek filmmaking community, Merkouri wanted to leave her mark in the cinema, introducing, among others, a new cinema law, as we shall see below.

With the change of government, the continuing tensions between Greek filmmakers and the Ministry of Industry subsided, and a new era in matters of cinema – and not only – began (TIFF 2009, 184-185). The cancellation of the International festival in 1982 was announced as a ‘step towards its reorganization on different basis’ (TIFF 2009, 199); however, the Ministry of Culture would not finance the International festival, which was seen as a diversion from the festival’s main aim, to support Greek cinema, and would alienate the festival’s emerging primary stakeholders, the filmmakers. For the next eleven years and until 1992, the festival remained exclusively national in focus, apart from one year, 1987, when the then director, Thanassis Rentzis, introduced an extensive program of parallel international events.

1980s: national focus and decline

The vision for the festival’s internationalization had all but expired during the 1980s. During the first five years of the new government, the Ministry of Culture’s energy focused on developing and then passing through Parliament (after substantial delays) a new law for the ‘Protection and development of cinematic art, the support of Greek cinema and other provisions’ (Law 1597/1986). The delays in the approval of the new cinema law led to tensions in 1984, and the near cancellation of the festival, but this was averted last minute.

The new law formalized earlier practices but did not introduce any radical breaks with the past. Despite behind the scenes tensions between the Ministry of Culture and the Trade Fair, the new law recognized them both as co-organizers of the Greek festival, and allowed

for the provision of an International festival as an optional extra (Law 1597/1986, 15). It introduced a management structure that included wide participation from both representatives of the state and the filmmakers' and critics' Trade Unions. While institutionally strengthening the role of the filmmakers, this structure assigned limited powers to the role of the general director (TIFF 2009, 212).

The first festival director appointed under the 1986 law was experimental filmmaker and writer/journal editor, Thanassis Rentzis, who had been one of the key organizers of the 1977 anti-festival. In 1987, Rentzis materialized his expanded vision of the festival, which included a number of educational parallel events showing foreign films, and aimed to attract international interest. However, despite the parallel sections' success with the public, Rentzis was criticized for taking the limelight away from the Greek sections and resigned (Papadimitriou 2014b). Cinematographer Grigoris Danalis took over for the next three years, maintaining the festival within a national focus. But the festival was widely seen as going through a serious crisis as audiences were alienated, and it was understood that the key problem was the quality of the Greek films (TIFF 2009, 227). At this point, newspapers started promoting the idea of the festival's internationalization as a means to overcome the crisis (TIFF 2009, 228).

1992 onwards: full internationalization

The realization that the festival was going through a period of significant decline motivated the Ministry of Culture, of the, now, liberal right government to introduce changes. In April 1991, Michel Demopoulos, a film critic and television programmer, was appointed as festival director, after informally negotiating increased powers for his role. The 1991 festival was to be the last Greek-only festival, as from the following year an international competition took center stage, refocusing the aims of the festival. Demopoulos credits the idea for the festival's

definitive internationalization to Apostolos Doxiadis, then adviser to the Minister of Culture; but it was his own idea to focus the festival on 'New Directors' and getting FIAPF accreditation. The success of the neighboring Istanbul Film Festival (<http://film.iksv.org/en>), which started in 1984 and was recognized by FIAPF as a 'specialized competitive festival' in 1989 was, he acknowledged, an inspiration (Papadimitriou 2014a). In launching the 1992 festival, Demopoulos stated: 'We aim for the festival to have a certain originality so that it becomes identified with the attempt to support new creators from all over the world, and in this new form, to become embraced by people and get international recognition' (TIFF 2009, 239).

With his increased powers (formally recognized a few years later with the new law of 1997 (Law 2557/1997), Demopoulos now functioned as a director/curator in a way unprecedented for the Thessaloniki festival. Aligning his role to that of his counterparts abroad, the new director could now select the films that would be in the international competition, and appoint a seven-member jury (of which five were international). The Greek competition continued in parallel, while new international sections aiming to promote a young, dynamic and radical image of the festival were also introduced, most notably 'New Horizons', curated by experienced programmer, Dimitris Eipides. Already from 1992 there was a sense that the festival was developing a new identity. Aside from the new awards – the Golden and Silver Alexanders – the international critics organization, FIPRESCI, granted its own prizes. There were exhibitions with photographs and posters, and new festival publications. Apart from the catalogue, six publications were produced: three focusing on international directors, matching their special tributes (John Cassavetes, Atom Egoyan and Abbas Kiarostami) and three on Greek personalities (comic actor Thanassis Vengos, cinematographer and previous festival director Grigoris Danalis and director/producer Kostas Karagiannis).

Most importantly, the changes introduced were not short-lived. Demopoulos remained in his post for 13 years, initially under the liberal right government, and then while the socialist party was in power, with, for the first time, a director surviving a governmental change. He was only replaced in 2005 when the liberal right took over again. Aside from his strong leadership, a number of additional factors contributed to this success: the increasing European integration and availability of funds from Europe, as well as the overall economic growth of the period; the festival successes of Theo Angelopoulos who, with his two prizes from Cannes in the mid-1990s (*Grand Prix* in 1995 for *Ulysses' Gaze*; and *Palme d'Or* in 1998 for *Eternity and A Day*) brought Greek cinema to international attention; and, more indirectly, the fall of the Iron Curtain, the opening of the northern borders of Greece and, later, even the war in Yugoslavia, all of which enabled Thessaloniki to play a meaningful role in seeking to develop a distinctive identity as a center for Balkan cinema (as well as compete with the neighboring Istanbul Film Festival).

The impact of the European integration on the revamped Thessaloniki festival was evident mainly because of funding and networking support. The newly established EEC/EU program MEDIA offered additional funding for the festival, as long as a certain quota of European films were shown. Furthermore, industry events were organized aiming to encourage Greek filmmakers to tap into European co-production funds (Eurimages), develop their scripts (European Script Fund) or discover distribution options (TIFF 2009, 234; 240).

European funding also helped the festival establish a permanent site: the Olympion building on Aristotle Square, and soon afterwards, warehouses on a pier nearby. While the first Greek Cinema Week in 1960 took place in Olympion, by 1963 the festival had migrated to the larger building of the Etaireia Makedonikon Spoudon, and to a number of provisional and changing venues, including pavilions of the Trade Fair. European development funding in the context of the 1997 Thessaloniki Capital of Culture enabled the renovation of

Olympion and the creation of two cinema screens. Since 1998 the building has been permanently owned by the festival, a fact which enabled it to develop year-long activities and become more fully engrained in the life of the city (TIFF 2009, 359). Since 1999, the festival has also used four cinemas in the nearby converted warehouses. With its privileged location by the historic square, its access to the sea and stunning views of Mount Olympus, the festival further strengthened its identity and its appeal as a cosmopolitan and tourist destination. According to Demopoulos, even the local public only took real notice of the festival's transformation after the move to the permanent sites – a fact that resulted in a significant increase of audience attendance (Papadimitriou 2014a).

But if European support and financing, and the general economic growth of the era helped develop the festival's infrastructure, enhance its program and support its networking reach, the international festival success of Theo Angelopoulos also benefitted it significantly. Aside from the general fact that the director's growing reputation could be seen to provide indirect publicity to his country's main festival, for seven years, from 1998 until 2005, Angelopoulos served as the president of the festival's Board of Governors. This was a newly-founded position, established with the 1997 law that formalized a reorganization of the festival structure. Combined with the move to the new sites, the cooperation between Angelopoulos and Demopoulos helped strengthen the identity of the festival as a Greece-based event with international appeal. Indeed, Angelopoulos was one of the first Greek directors to expand his filmmaking practice beyond Greece by getting access to European funds, casting international actors in his leading roles, and opening up his topics to issues addressing Greece's position in the Balkans (Papadimitriou 2011, 496-497). Angelopoulos, therefore, was able to represent a new brand of Greek-European-international auteur implicitly seen as crystalizing the festival's international aspirations: a gathering with a local

and national base, but relevant and recognized beyond national borders, and with a strong emphasis on auteur cinema.

The third factor that contributed to the festival's success concerned the broader geopolitical changes of the era and the ways in which Thessaloniki sought to capitalize on them in order to develop a distinctive identity. The fall of the Iron Curtain led to the opening of Greece's northern borders and a significant influx of immigrants from Albania and other ex-communist countries. Furthermore, the declaration of independence of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in 1991, and its unqualified adoption of the name 'Macedonia' (one of Greece's six provinces too) triggered an intense feeling of national threat in Greece, especially in Thessaloniki, when, in 1992 over a million people went to the streets in protest (Calotychos 2013). In the light of the above circumstances, the festival sought to position itself as a leading player in Balkan cinema. To that effect, in 1994 the non-competitive section *Balkan Survey* was introduced; showcasing films from all ex-communist Balkan countries and Turkey (but excluding Greece), the section has helped bring international attention to the cinema of the region. A 'Balkan Forum' also took place that year, a meeting among Balkan filmmakers and producers that later led to the formation of the Balkan Film Board (TIFF 2009, 251). A further discussion about the promotion of Balkan cinema took place the next year with representatives from European and Balkan critics and directors. And, a few years later, in 2003, a 'Balkan Fund' was set up, which focused on script development for Greek and Balkan projects, offering four 10,000 Euro awards.

In the midst of all these developments, the formal relationship of Greek cinema with the festival changed. As of 1998, the Greek competitive festival was replaced with a non-competitive section 'Panorama of Greek Cinema' which screened all Greek films that had been (partly) funded by the state. According to the new law, this made them eligible for the new 'State Quality Awards' that were decided by a large committee consisting of members

from the filmmaker Trade Unions in Athens, but were awarded during the Thessaloniki festival. This, arguably, confusing arrangement gave the Thessaloniki festival obligations with regard to Greek cinema, but no agency with regard to selecting and awarding Greek films.

Under the directorship of Demopoulos, the festival's profile as an international competition was firmly established, while the Trade Fair's involvement was reduced. In 2005, the new festival director, producer Despoina Mouzaki, built on this identity and developed a market section for the festival, seeking to make Thessaloniki into a site for international commercial exchanges. Aside from the film market, Agora, the co-production forum Crossroads was also introduced, echoing similar developments in festivals such as Berlin and Rotterdam. With a significantly increased budget, the years of Mouzaki's directorship were characterized by an attempt to achieve a more mainstream identity for the festival. Extravagant ceremonies, luxurious parties and international celebrities such as Francis Ford Coppola also introduced an unprecedented degree of glamour (TIFF 2009, 319).

However, once again, the festival's fate was connected to broader socio-political and economic developments. The international financial crisis of 2008 started showing its impact on Greece in late 2009, after the elections of the new social-democratic government. A national crisis had already started brewing in Greece with various protests and expressions of discontent. Among them were the Filmmakers of Greece (FOG), a spontaneously-organized group that sought to push for institutional changes in the relationship between Greek filmmakers and the Greek state, and that organized, as part of its arsenal, a boycott of the celebratory 50th festival. Even though the filmmakers were attacking the State Awards (which, as noted above, were awarded during the Thessaloniki festival, but not decided by it) and not the festival itself, their action implicitly undermined TIFF as an institution in the service of Greek cinema (Lee, 2012; Chalkou, 2012; Papadimitriou, 2014c). FOG managed

to effect concrete change, first through the formation of the Hellenic Film Academy that replaced the State Awards in 2010; and second, through successfully negotiating for a new law for Greek cinema (Law 3905/2010).

With the change of government in late 2009, a new festival director, Dimitris Eipides, was appointed. With his extensive previous involvement with the festival, initially as a programmer for the New Horizons section, and, since 1999, director of the Thessaloniki Documentary Festival, Eipides' remit was largely to keep TIFF afloat while introducing substantial but workable financial cuts to a festival that had built a significant deficit during the late 2000s (Papadimitriou 2013). His highly concentrated managerial style, and his insider knowledge of the workings of international festivals (as prior director of the Reykjavík IFF, and programmer for the Toronto IFF) enabled Eipides to reduce the festival's debts and to keep it in good standing, by focusing its vision on smaller-scale independent films (Papadimitriou 2014d). But the crisis has dominated these latest editions, which have nonetheless managed to be kept afloat until 2014 at least, largely as a result of continuing, if dwindling, European funds (Papadimitriou 2014e).

Conclusion

The internationalization of the Thessaloniki festival has therefore been a gradual, but not smooth, process, hampered by multiple factors that involved different stakeholders with particular agendas. The vision for an international festival was present from the start, but its realization into a feature-length competition was delayed. For many years, however, the public of Thessaloniki had the chance to watch foreign films in the festival context, whether in competitive or informational sections. It was the need to renew an institution that had lost audiences through its exclusive national focus that triggered the launch of the international

competition in the early 1990s, and this was assisted by the increasing integration of Greece into Europe.

Drawing from a number of archival and oral sources to foreground continuities and breaks in the history of a state-dependent festival in a country of the European periphery, this analysis has brought to light dynamics specific to the festival in relation to Greek, European and international contexts. Aside from its value as a case study of a specific festival, the article has also expanded our broader understanding of the notion of the 'international' film festival, highlighting its variable cultural, political and financial meanings and functions. While the festival's internationalism has mostly referred to the fact that it has been showing non-Greek films to local, national and regional audiences, its ambition since the 1990s has been to impact international developments, by discovering and promoting new directors' films. Whether it has achieved this or not is a matter of further discussion, elsewhere. This essay, instead, has explored the multifaceted nature of the festival, brought to light a very little known part of its history, and argued for its distinctive trajectory in the context of broader developments in film festivals.

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Notes

¹ The Thessaloniki International Trade Fair (*Diethnis Ekthesi Thessalonikis*) was founded in 1926. With a 10-year hiatus between 1940 and 1949 (because of the war, the occupation and the civil war), in 1960 it celebrated its 25th anniversary (Posrikidis 2013).

² There are multiple accounts of tensions expressed along these lines and at different stages of the festival's history. Producers such as Filopimin Finos and James Paris, for example, have represented 'commerce', while directors have tended to side with 'art' (TIFF 2009).

³ There had been discussions about the establishment of an international film festival on the island of Rhodes, with the involvement of Anthony Quinn, among others. Some have claimed that the Thessaloniki event was created in haste to prevent this from happening (Papadimitriou 2014b; Soldatos 2002, 262); elsewhere it is suggested that the name Greek Cinema Week was chosen in order to allow for the possibility of an international festival in Rhodes too (ET1 2009).

⁴ The seven Trade Unions active at the time that co-organized the 1977 'anti-festival' were: film directors (ESEKT), cinematographers (POTHA), set designers (ETEKT-OT), actors (SEI), music composers (EMSE) and producers (SPKT) (TIFF 2009, 173).

⁵ The law regarding the 'protected' (*prostevomenes*) and 'supported' (*enishyomenes*) films was put into place with the cinema law of 1961, but it was only applied after 1970 thus benefitting a different generation of filmmakers than the one it was designed for. The support provided was significant: one million drachmas and three weeks' screenings for the

protected; and 500,000 and two weeks' screenings for the supported. This system for sustaining Greek films remained in place until 1992 (Papadimitriou 2014b).

⁶ By the early 1970s, the commercial mode of production, often referred to as 'Old Greek cinema' had started collapsing, largely because of the introduction of television in 1966, but also because of the unsustainable way in which it had developed. The 'New Greek cinema' that represented most of the films shown in Thessaloniki in the 1970s and 1980s, consisted of often politically-inflected art films, which struggled to reach a wide audience, and were therefore in need of state support (Karalis 2012; Papadimitriou 2009).