

“The Other Town” - Why do nations clash? Preliminary remarks

(By H. Millas)

*“Many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices.
The greatest revolution of our generation is the discovery that human beings, by changing
the inner attitudes of their minds, can change the outer aspects of their lives.”*
William James

This documentary film is about a group of Greeks and Turks of our time, but not only about them. All contemporary societies have certain characteristics in common, so this film should interest a wide circle of viewers. Love and hate, insecurity and pride, attachment to communal myths and compassion, fear and desire for peace (or for strife), ethnic prejudices and stereotypes are all human features and shared by many communities.

Greeks and Turks have had tense relations during the last several decades. As mentioned in the film, Greeks revolted against the Ottoman State in 1821 and established their modern Greek state in 1830 after a war of independence. Since then the two sides have gone through periods of war as well as of peace. The Balkan Wars (1912-1914) and especially the invasion of Ottoman lands (Anatolia) by the Greek army at the end of the First World War were the worst of the clashes. In the latter conflict, it was the turn of the Turks to fight for independence, achieving victory in 1922. A peace treaty, and an agreement for a “population exchange,” were signed, Greeks who lived in Turkish lands and Turks who lived in Greek lands were exchanged, and friendship between the two was officially established. (the minorities of Istanbul and Western Thrace were exempt from this “exchange”).

Subsequently, Greece and Turkey have not fought for the last ninety years, were in the same camp during the Cold War, and are allies in NATO. However, they have had occasional tense moments because of certain unresolved issues such as sovereignty rights in the Aegean, complaints about Greek and Turkish minorities who still live in the “other” country, and the Cyprus issue. Various polls show that the citizens of both countries are insecure towards the “other,” do not trust the “other,” and have ill feelings for that “other”. An easy explanation of the tension would be to point out the past and the unresolved issues. However, those aspects do not explain the more crucial questions: why is the past still so vital for the citizens of the two countries, and why do these issues remain unresolved after so many decades?

The “Other Town” examines not only how the two sides think and feel about the past and the “other,” but also the environment in which these opinions are formed. The educational practices, the public ceremonies and speeches, the museums and the monuments are all means that shape this environment. The attitudes of the young and old people with whom we talked also showed that nations mostly believe what they have been told to believe. They feel happy when they exalt their side, i.e. their nation,

and when they treat the “other” as a scapegoat. They base their identity on all these constructions. Most importantly, they are far from an awareness of what forms their opinions and perceptions. Therefore, the film can be utilized to study national identity, frozen conflicts, and deadlocks in conflict resolution.

Historical background



I and director Nefin Dinç worked for more than a year to complete the filming in Dimitsana and Birgi, two lovely towns, the first in Greece and the second in Turkey. Dimitsana is a small town in the center of the Peloponnese (southern Greece) and is famous for its contribution to the 1821 Greek revolt against Ottoman rule. The town produced much of the gun powder needed during the revolution. Gun powder is still produced there, but Dimitsana is now a winter resort area that attracts visitors and tourists. It is also known as a historically religious center. Picturesque monasteries as well as the residences of historic religious personalities populate the area. For example, the house of Patriarch Grigorios, who was hanged in Istanbul by the Ottoman authorities when the revolt began, has been turned into a museum. The house of bishop P.P. Germanos, who is believed to have blessed the revolt of 1821 at its inception, has also been recently restored. Dimitsana seems as if it has been offered for national pilgrimage.

Birgi is a historic town in Western Turkey (Anatolia), near Ödemiş and Izmir, with many mosques and other monuments that attract tourists. Once a Byzantine town (Pyrgion, meaning small castle/tower), in the 14th century it became the capital of Aydınoğulları, a Turkic emirate. According to a legend, Umur Bey, who was from Birgi, was the first Turkish sailor to reach the Peloponnese and fight there. In the first quarter of the 20th century the town was inhabited by both Turks and Greeks. Its present proud inhabitants narrate stories about the “efes” and the “zeybeks,” the legendary warriors that fought against the Greek army that invaded and occupied the area during the years 1919-1922.

We talked to many people in both towns, and asked questions about the way they perceive their history and the role and character of the “other.” We observed that the blend of “us-other” operates for both groups with reference to their identity. We watched how the public sphere influences young and old, and how people react to related “difficult” questions. In the following paragraphs I will examine the film’s scenes more closely, interpreting and evaluating them.

Opening scenes

In the initial scenes, we see Turks and Greeks expressing their opinions about the “other.” Both sides believe that they cannot be friends with the “other” because of “historical” reasons, but especially because the “other has not changed” and is still the

“same.” The “other” is seen as the cause of unhappiness – “they burned the place down,” “they invaded our land, we lost our freedom.” The “other” is still a problem: “we fought in Cyprus,” “they may invade again.” There are also proverbs reminding each side of the negative aspects of the “other” (0:50-2:54).

Clearly, stereotypes characterize this discourse: the “other” is negative because he or she is the same throughout history. Insecurity related to sovereignty is the second aspect: they invaded our land, they may do it again! Both the stereotypes and the insecurities are justified by references to old times. Thus, the past is projected into the future. The past is reminded and reproduced by means of everyday discourses. The “other” is being taught stereotypically not only in schools, but also in many other public manifestations, as we will see in the rest of the film.

The voice over – i.e., me

I introduce myself in the film by speaking directly to the viewers. I will add here that I spoke with the Turks and the Greeks in their own languages (and director Nefin Dinç in Turkish with the Turks), and this enabled friendly communication with both groups. People normally are more reserved when they feel they are addressing a foreigner, especially the “other.” In such circumstances they try to be “politically correct” and they won’t say things that they believe will not be appreciated. We also focused on asking our questions in an indirect way. In the film we present only the core of the statement made; in reality we had long discussions with our subjects. In fact, approximately eighty hours of film were utilized to create a forty-five minute documentary.

I appear in Dimitsana in an early scene (4:55-5:30) in which a woman explains to an older one that I am not actually a Turk (as, without me being aware of this, some people in the town apparently referred to me) and that I am called that only because I come from Istanbul/Turkey. The older lady expresses her relief and says that she had been astonished to hear that a Turk had appeared in the town! My answer, which was not included in order to keep the film short, was jokingly the following: “It is ironic not to have had Turks in Dimitsana during the Ottoman rule and to have one now!” In fact, Dimitsana had special privileges in the 15th-18th centuries, and as a consequence it was populated almost solely by Orthodox Christians, probably because it was a religious center.

I have often been embarrassed by how unfamiliar the Turks and the Greeks are with the “other”; many of them know little about “their neighbors”, in many cases have never met a “real other,” and still have strong opinions about the “other.” As far as I am concerned, these opinions are simple prejudices and stereotypes related to an imagined “other.” As a result, the voice over in the film mentions our main objective in making this documentary (6:12-6:33):

“Why is the past interpreted so differently in the two countries? When and how did these mutual prejudices arise? Is our hatred and distrust of one another the result of what happened in the past or a reflection of what we’ve been told at school, at home, or on television?”

National celebrations and militarism

Various dictionaries define militarism as the belief or desire that a country should maintain a strong military capability and be prepared to use it aggressively to defend or promote national interests, in a world where wars are inevitable. Negative images of the “other” are associated with xenophobic beliefs. The national celebrations in Greece and Turkey are characterized by this militarist tone, and children of all ages march like soldiers. They celebrate Independence Day, for example, not perceiving it as symbolizing a social and political achievement but as a military one. The heroes and “our” victims, often appearing as martyrs stained with blood, remind of the “other” who has caused all the suffering. It is as if the whole manifestation is staged to remind of the “negative other” (7:20-12:20).

Militarism is directly or indirectly associated with discipline, enforced blind obedience, violence, fighting and hostility. In the respective countries, children are asked to read and memorize poems which demonize the Greek or the Turk. Love for the homeland is expressed together with hostility for the “other.” Love for the national flag is expressed with metaphors of violence: “*I’ll dig the grave of anyone / who lacks respect for you / I’ll destroy the nest of any bird / which doesn’t salute you in flight*” (7:47-8:22).

The “other,” the enemy who is reminded repeatedly on similar occasions as the unforgettable, eternal foe, is mentioned by name in these poems: “*They reached Tripolitsa / and surrounded the Turks. / They embarked on a fierce battle. / See now the Greek guns and swords*” (8:22-8:40). Or: “*You sing the song of freedom / against the treacherous Greeks in the West*” (9:06-9:12).

Irrelevant references which exalt expansionist wars are considered proper for these occasions. “*Oh, beloved Turkish Republic! / It seems like only yesterday... / ...that [Sultan] Mehmet conquered Istanbul / and [Sultan] Süleyman was at the gates of Vienna. / We’re now fighting for our independence. / We’re trapped by the invading forces / of the British, French, and Greeks*” (9:42-10:01).

The militarist spirit is internalized and, when asked, the children suggest “playing war.” Still, one child – was it a coincidence that she was a girl? – reminded us that their celebration included excessive violence and little peace (12:24-12:45). We will see similar scenes of conflicts at the end of the film, this time in Greece, where children “play war” as part of a normal performance in similar public celebrations (42:50-43:25).

We witnessed in a high school classroom that students had conflicting opinions with respect to the student military parades. Some were opposed, saying that other countries do not celebrate similar occasions with parades of pupils. These students faced, however, the contempt of those who were in favor of this kind of parades (13:12-13:40). The discussion of this issue shows that, in the minds of many students, respect for the sacrifices of the forefathers, freedom, and independence are associated with militarism, militaristic parades, and whatever feeds an atmosphere of fighting and war.

Actors: unaware of their roles

As we carried on with the filming, we were surprised to see how those who used various means to recreate a special interpretation of the past, the present, and the “other” were completely unaware of their role. The mayor of Dimitsana, for example, said that *“things are getting better, more normal, as the years go by. We don’t say the Turks killed us or hanged us as we once used to,”* while ironically, on the wall just behind him, hung a picture showing the Turks hanging Patriarch Grigorios (13:53-14:20).

I asked the same question to the mayor of Birgi: “Don’t all these parades and performances promote a view of the “other” as still being the enemy?” He was confident. The Greeks do that, but not “us” he said: *“That isn’t what our schools tell students. Nor is it how our people talk among themselves”* (14:20-14:31). Sadly enough, the schools and the laymen contradict the mayor, as we see many times in our documentary.

Images of the “other” in the classrooms

The messages of the celebrations are repeated in the classrooms, too. In Birgi the students learn that the Greeks are followers of the *Megali Idea* (Great Ideal), which is meant to be a plan to capture Turkish lands and form a great empire; that the Turks, even though they were outnumbered by the Greeks, fought bravely against the invading Greeks, that the local Greeks sided with the invading enemy, and that just before the war was about to end, the Greeks burned down Birgi and killed the inhabitants (15:14-15:31, 16:04-16:18, 16:31-16:54).

On the other side of the Aegean, the students learn in class that the Turks invaded and held Dimitsana for four hundred years, that the Greeks, even though outnumbered by the Turks, fooled them and scared them, and that the Turks burned the Greek heroes alive. We see a Greek student angered that some want good relations with this kind of people – *“They burned [us] alive! Unbelievable! And now some Greeks want the Turks!”* (15:32-16:03), (16:18-16:32).

Right after a history lesson Nefin Dinç, the director of the documentary, asks the students of Birgi if they would like the local Greeks who once used to live there to come back so that they can all live together. The answer is a clear no. The reason is more revealing. The Greeks are *“bad,”* *“we remember what [terrible things] they have done,”* they will force us to *“believe in their gods”* (16:54-17:22). Shouldn’t the answers be expected considering what these students have heard about the “other” all along their whole lives?

It is also interesting to see how little about the “other” is known. When the Ottoman period and the fact that at one time various religious groups used to live next to each other are discussed, the students in Birgi are confused. One of them asks: *“But weren’t our holy places the same then? Didn’t we pray in the same way? Didn’t they pray like us?”* (17:25-17:47). When asked about local history, students seem confused to the point of mixing up incidents of the 14th century (Aydınogulları) with the 20th century and Byzantines of Middle Age with the Modern Greeks of 1922! (18:45-19:19). The

Byzantine period and the people that lived in their town until recently are unknown to them.



The teaching of history in these classes is one sided and produces nationalist understanding -- and stereotypes -- about the 'self' and the "other". The basic facts about local history are either completely silenced or distorted. In the Greek case, the students of Dimitsana do not know about the 1821 massacre of Tripolitsa, only a few kilometers from their school, in which thousands of Muslims died when Greek revolutionaries captured the city. In a picture that shows the event, they see the "other" killing babies and do not suspect that the Greeks may have done such a thing¹ (17:46-18:28). The only thing that the students know for sure is that the "other" killed "us", burned

down our houses as he left, and the like.

The image of the "other"

This "education" apparently starts quite early, probably before children even start school, at home through family conversations, television programs, etc. When we asked kindergarten kids in Birgi to identify who "our" enemy is among the Americans, Chinese, Russians, and Greeks, the last name struck them as negative (19:53-20:08). The Greek students, too, know whom one has to fight! The word "Turk" is associated with fighting (20:09-20:23).

The children (but the adults, too) came to know an *imagined* "other," not the actual one. When asked if they have ever met a Greek or a Turk, or if they have ever visited the neighboring country, not a single child responded positively (20:23-20:26, 21:05-21:28). They only have an image of the "other". Therefore, when asked, children of different ages agreed that the "other" is different from "us" (20:27-21:05, 21:28-22:24).

Monuments and museums in support of "education"

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The post-Tripolitsa portrait of freedom fighter Panagiotis Kefalas was made by German painter Peter von Hess, and hangs in a vast number of elementary school around the country. Peter Heinrich Lambert von Hess (29 July 1792, Düsseldorf - 4 April 1871, München) was a German painter known for historic paintings, especially of the Napoleonic Wars and the Greek War of Independence.

In Greece and Turkey education is primarily the responsibility of the state, as are the building and maintenance of monuments and museums. These activities gathered speed after the establishment of the nation-states and in tune with the ideas required by nation-building. They all operate complementarily. The mayor in Birgi told us how a statue which “we see everyday” becomes part of our historical heritage. I comment: “*So if we teach things that aren’t true, people will still believe they are history. In that sense, history is a very dangerous weapon*” (22:42-22:53). My comment, however, passed unnoticed and the mayor continued to praise the monuments which are supposed to be visual evidence of what is being taught in each country.

“*This woman symbolizes Greece when it was under slavery and in misery*” says the old Greek man who shows us around, pointing to a statue (23:09-23:22). Thus, the past is solidified, it becomes a visual object, much more real than a simple narration. The citizens not only think of the heroes, the martyrs, and the suffering caused by the “other”, but can also visualize them. In the museum the students can “see” what happened in the past. Especially in the museums assigned to “national” themes, I usually felt an atmosphere of awe; it is as if people are visiting a sanctuary, a holy place. People experience a sacred affection for the past.

The religious discourse

In the case of Greece religion plays an important role in building the national narrative. A dignitary in a church and a monk in a monastery describe how the Turks hanged and humiliated the Patriarch in 1821² (27:21-28:15). Religion also plays a role in strengthening the difference between “us” and the “other” as an old Turk explains: “*Our faith is strong; we are Turks*” (28:40-28:54). Religion is an instrument in the service of nation building and strengthening national identity.

In the Turkish case, a religious term is used to refer to the “other”: infidel (gâvur). Actually this historical term has a modern meaning too: Christian, westerner, foreigner. Still the Greeks are often referred to through this term and some laugh in embarrassment when they become conscious of what they have uttered; in some instances, as in the case of a 105 year old woman, the Greeks are “the only infidels she knows” (28:55-29:29).

We also see how a father (a weaver) teaches his son the “basic truths” (30:00-30:20): A) There is no good to come from the infidels, and B) the infidels burned down our houses. This education at home may explain why the children in the kindergarten already know who “our” enemy is.

The Patriarch Grigorious, whose patriarchate was then and is still in Istanbul, was considered responsible for not being able to control his flock and hold back the revolution of the Greeks and was hanged in 1821 as ordered by the Ottoman Sultan, Mahmut II. The Greeks call the Ottomans “Turks” even though this is an anachronism: the term Turk was used to denote ethnicity starting only from the very end of the 19th century.

Myths as part of national reality

According to Benedict Anderson, the national paradigm is associated with “imagined” situations. Can nationalism then be identified as a mythical case? What is the relationship between an imagined national myth and a national narrative? Leaving aside these academic questions, we asked the residents of Dimitsana about the “secret school”. According to a myth widely known in Greece, during the period of Ottoman rule the monks used to educate young children in secret schools because the “Turks” (as the Ottomans are usually called in Greece) had prohibited the teaching of Greek. Professional Greek historians have demonstrated that this is a myth: there was no documented prohibition of this kind. On the contrary, it is known that during the period of Ottoman rule the Christians had many schools.

The myth of the “secret school” started in the first quarter of the 19th century with reference to an anonymous poem – *my tiny moon / light the way / to go to school*, etc. This myth was established with a painting by N. Gyzis (1886), depicting an old monk teaching a number of children and a “kleft” (Greek fighter) looking out for a possible Turkish threat. In 1900 I. Polemis was inspired by the painting and wrote a poem titled

Secret School.



*Despair stood outside dressed in black
The evident darkness of bitter slavery
And inside, under the vault of the
church
The church that every night
Turns to a school
The scared candlelight
Trembling calls for dreams
Gathering the young slaves.*

What is important is not that almost all of the Greeks we asked seemed to believe in this myth as a historical reality, but rather that some of them were not even aware that a different opinion in this matter exists, and that this story might be a fabrication. Others did not even want to know the truth behind the myth! (31:05-31:18). Also the mayor could not explain how Dimitsana could have had a secret school when the town is also famous for the schools it had during the Ottoman rule (31:18-31:55).

The visitor to the gunpowder museum, too, expresses his absolute denial: he clearly states that he does not want to search for and find the truth about the secret school because “*If we ever disputed the truth of secret schools wouldn't we also be denying the existence of Ancient Greece?*” (32:15-32:36). This surprising comment shows how national myths are part of national identity. Ancient Greece and the myths, in short whatever is seen as “our history”, are crucial to preserving what we have been taught as “our identity”. Therefore, the facts about the past are not a simple matter of investigation and discovery; they are a belief, the denial of which would result in a serious transformation of our identity. Seen from this point of view, history becomes sacred, and its denial or challenge is perceived as blasphemy.

In the film the issue of national identity is further discussed with several Greek

intellectuals. During the conversation, I dispute the Greek argument that the Greeks remember the Ancient Greeks and are connected to Socrates and Aristotle, and that the Turkish civilization is different from “ours”: *“We don’t ‘remember’ 1821. Memory is what we are told. It isn’t the same as remembering our childhood. We need to be careful about what we mean by national memory.”* Because self-criticism is rare, it is interesting that in this case the Greek man grasps the point and laughs wholeheartedly about his previous incorrect assumptions (32:40-33:10).

One of the Turkish myths is about the local Greeks (the “local infidels”). According to the elderly lady, the priests in the churches told the Turks in Birgi (meaning they persuaded the Turks) that it is sinful to work. And in this way – within the Ottoman lands – the Greeks exploited the Turks. The Greeks thus owned the fields, the orchards, the flour mills, the shops. *“The Turks were the servants of the Greeks.”* (30:20-30:42). All of these national myths are of the same type: they present the “other” as negative, as an enemy, as a threat. On the contrary, “our” side has only positive characteristics and/or has been ill treated, and is the victim.

Silencing and/or denial

The national paradigm is resistant to criticism. This is understandable since national beliefs are directly tied to peoples’ identity, i.e. to their beliefs relating to their existence. Consequently, any argument that questions the validity of the national paradigm is either refuted as wrong (as a lie or a distortion of the truth) or, if denial is not feasible, by silencing the issue.

According to official Greek historiography, Ottoman rule, which in Greece is called “The Turkish Reign” (Tourkokratia), was the “dark age” of the Greeks, a real hell. The Turks, on the other hand, perceive the various ethnic groups of the Ottoman Empire as having lived a happy life, in a real heaven! Consequently, any historical interpretation that is balanced between these points of view cannot be accommodated by either of the nationalist historiographies; it is either denied or silenced.

The young woman who, at the beginning of the film, described Ottoman rule as a period “without education and freedom, only darkness,” was taken by surprise when I asked her about the special privileges Dimitsana had during that period. Dimitsana was granted a kind of self-governance and light taxation by the Ottomans. However, the “privileges” could not be accommodated with “darkness,” hence the embarrassment and discontent (33:36-33:54). When the Turkish children were asked to comment on the *devshirme* system of the Ottomans (taking Christian boys from their families to turn them to Muslim Janissaries) there was a straight denial: *“I think this did not happen”* (33:54-34:29). The Turk who, as a “historian,” accused the local Greeks of having rejoiced upon the arrival of the Greek troops 1919, was silent as to the fate of the local Greeks upon the Turkish victory: *“They were sent to Izmir on the train. What happened to them doesn’t interest me. Let their historians research it”* (34:32-35:00).

In Greece and Turkey effort is expended to wipe away historical traces that would remind of the “other’s” previous existence. The most common practices are the change of toponyms and the abandonment to decay of architectural structures. When I

asked what happened to the churches of the Christians who once lived in Anatolia (Turkey), the reaction of a cultured gentleman was defensive: “*I don’t think there’s deliberate discrimination. These structures were likely destroyed by natural disasters and the ravages of time.*” However, the elderly man (who was not especially cultured) refutes this argument, simply saying that there were many churches around but that they were destroyed, gone (35:00-35:50).

When the past did not serve the national paradigm, silencing came to the fore quite often during our filming. When we asked some Turkish students if Turks ever invaded and captured Greek lands, they said that they did not know, and that they had not heard of such an event. “We know *they* invaded us!” (35:52-36:04). They presumably did not know because they were not taught about this. When we asked the residents of Birgi if the town had a Greek name in the past, they simply kept silent (36:04-36:18).

For the Greek young women and man the “Turks are fanatics about their religion and their country.” When I asked about their feelings regarding “*their* religion and *their* country,” they were perplexed, embarrassed and silent (36:18-36:39). Silencing is a characteristic similar to double standards, a common tendency that goes together with prejudice and stereotypes.

Unawareness of one’s stereotypes

The priest in a concert performed in Dimitsana who said that the songs do not have a “nationalist tone” and the Greek who said that almost no one speaks against the Turks anymore, are contradicted by the songs played in the concert (36:39-38:12). Similar cases, of which there were numerous examples in the film, demonstrate how the people are not conscious of what happens right in front of their eyes or within themselves. Prejudices and stereotypes cannot operate at a conscious level, anyhow, due to the definition of these terms: they are connected to the unconscious part of the self.

The concert song heard in the film is about forty two young Turks who chase a Greek girl to rape her. What is interesting is that the original version of this folk song, which is well known among Greeks, does not mention “Turks” but “forty two young (Greek) klefts,” kleft meaning warrior or rebel (*saranta thio kleftopoula*). Just before directing the performance, the priest explained that it is not possible for Greeks to do such a shameful thing to a Greek girl, “to their sister,,” and that he has “corrected” the song to make the Turks do the dirty job – “now,” he said, “the words make sense.” In the academic literature related to nationalism this kind of re-evaluation of past discourse is usually characterized and understood as “nation-building,” creating the image of the “self” and the necessary “other,” by “re-writing history.”

The image of the “self” and of the “other” and the level of self-knowledge (or self-consciousness) is not different on the other side of the Aegean. The well-educated Turkish man says “with absolute confidence” that there is no prejudice against the Greeks in this town. In the following scene, the barber talks of cutting their throats if the same Greeks who previously fought the Turks were to reappear in the town (38:30-38:43). Another old Turk blames all the nations who are prejudiced (who “discriminate”), and when I ask “how come every other nation is prejudiced and not

the Turks?” his answer is very simple: “the Turks are well brought up” (38:43-38:55). The film eventually provides clear examples about how the two sides perceive the “self” versus the “other.”

Thus, at the end of all this “information” and “education” with which the residents of these two towns were brought up, it becomes understandable why the Greek lady has “negative feelings” when she thinks of the Turks, and why the elderly Turkish lady, who has heard from her elders how Turks and Greeks once happily lived together in the very town, does not want Greeks around. *“It’s better like that”* (37:41- 38:00, 38:55-39:43).

To allow for optimism

In spite of our disheartening experience “the night is not all dark” as a well known poet said. There were people – even though a minority within the mainstream – who did not follow the general trend. In the case of the massacre of Tripolitsa, for example, a Greek man, in front of the Kolokotronis museum, was very clear when I asked him: *“What are we going to say to the little children about this massacre?”* He said *“If I answer you as a Greek, I’d say it was a great triumph. But if I speak as someone impartial, I’d describe it as a massacre. The word ‘massacre’ says it all actually. Crime”* (24:14-24:41).

We have seen the students on both sides, some confessing regretfully that their performance during the national celebrations did not include “peace” but only much war, and some others opposing the military-like parades of students (12:34-12:45, 13:20-13:26). A Greek adult was ironic vis-à-vis the myth of the secret school: *“I don’t believe in those things ... How would it be possible to hide a secret school from the Turks? We shouldn’t fool ourselves!”* (31:55- 32:14).

The Turk who fought against the Greeks in Cyprus, in all likelihood because he had firsthand knowledge of what war involves, was outspoken and radical. *“All I want is peace. I know what war means (41:20-41:24)... For years now, our history books (in Greece and Turkey) have taught us hatred and hostility. Both sides do the same... We see the outcome... I wish the books hadn’t been written like that. As long as history books are written like that our children will always see the Turks and Greeks as enemies. That has to be stopped”* (41:46-42:13).

The Greek man in front of the Kolokotronis museum was clear and frank, too. *“Unfortunately, history is molded to serve certain aims on both sides. They praise our side and deplore the other. I suspect they do the same on the other side, too”* (41:24-41:45).

Overall, the younger generation seems to be better than the older ones. Three scenes were chosen to conclude our documentary. The young Greek who said *“I think the young generations look much further ahead whether they’re Greeks or Turks”*; the small Turkish girl who said *“We’re friends with the Greeks now. [Hatred] was years ago. We can be friends now. What’s the use of being enemies anyway?”*; and the very small Greek boy at the end – obviously without being aware of his coincidental wisdom - who gave a wise message. To the question *“who was the winner of the war-*

game between the Greeks and the Turks?” he said “Nobody!” (42:25-44:00).

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“The Other Town” as a Case Study:

Answers to Some Questions

The text above was prepared before we had presented our film to the public. Upon questions put to us during our first public presentations we now feel the need to clarify some points a little further and answer some recurring questions.

How did the idea of the documentary come about?



whom appear in our film, too.

The director, Nefin Dinç, and I did not know each other before this film. Nefin Dinç had read my publications (see bibliography below) which are mostly on Greeks and Turks and their relations and she reckoned that I would be the proper person to work with for a film she had in mind. She was interested in Greek culture and music, and had previously produced a related documentary titled “Rebetiko: The Song of Two Cities” (2005). Eventually it proved to be a fruitful cooperation. The film was financed solely through our own means. “The Other Town” should not be perceived as a Greek-Turkish production per se, even though Greek and Turkish are our respective mother tongues. Our approach is distant from national identity as it is understood by a large portion of Greeks and Turks -- some of

Is this the true picture of the two societies?

We have been asked what the situation would be if we had filmed in big cities and urban areas, or in towns with a different historical background. I sensed in these questions a criticism and a doubt, even an opposition to what we projected. I suspect that some Greeks and Turks were, to various degrees, embarrassed and annoyed with some scenes and harsh statements of “their side”. Probably we have presented the Greeks and the Turks as more prejudiced and with many more stereotypes than our viewers expected. Naturally this was not our intention. However, the outcome did not surprise us. Some opinion polls of the last decades have shown that the perceptions of the Greeks and Turks vis-à-vis the “other” are not at all promising. I quote a passage from a study of mine:³

Scientifically applied opinion polls concerning the mutual perceptions of the Greeks and the Turks are more reliable sources (relative to personal opinions) to approach the identity of the parties and their attitudes towards the “other.” There are few however. Maybe the most extensive survey, carried out in 1989 at the same time in both countries is quite old.⁴ It is also very interesting that this poll was never published in its totality, and therefore all its findings never became known. The reason for this ‘secrecy,’ I suspect, is political. The findings are so discouraging that probably the parties decided not to publicize them, thereby which would reveal to both sides that the “other” has such a negative opinion about “us.”

According to the few findings made public, we know that, in 1989, only 3% of the Turks and 7% of the Greeks would choose the other country in case they decided to travel abroad as tourists. Turks and Greeks do not trust the “other” (much/at all) by percentages of 73 and 81. When asked if the food, the structure of the family, the music, and the personality of the parties “look alike” the Turks said “yes” 15-20% for the first three and only 10% for the “personality,” and the Greeks 49-54% for the food and music, and 27-20% for the other two.

When asked which of the following parameters influence Greek-Turkish relations in a negative direction, i.e. if it is the difference in language, in religion, the wars in the past, the low educational level, the bad mass media, etc., the Turks highlighted wars in the past (49%), bad mass media (48%), and religious difference (40%), and the Greeks emphasized wars in the past (68%), bad mass media (62%), low educational levels (57%), and religion (52%).⁵ In these answers one notices the importance given to “history” and to “religion,” the two constituents of the national identity.

As for the image and prejudices about the “other,” there is not much of a doubt. Only 7% of the Turks and 27% of the Greeks said they would accept their daughter’s (if they had one)

3

The Imagined Other as National Identity – Greeks and Turks, Ankara: CSDP-European Commission, 2004. Also: www.stgp.org.

4

The survey in Turkey was conducted by PIAR LTD and in Greece by ICAP (GALLUP) AE during 15/10-5/11 1989. 1400 and 1000 people were questioned respectively, all around the two countries and care was taken so that age, sex, education, size, and geographical area of the sample were representative. Some of the findings were published in *Sabah* newspaper in Turkey and *Tachidromos* magazine in Greece in November 1989.

5

It is not clear to whose “bad mass media,” “religion” and “low educational level” the parties referred; but one can assume that at a very high percentage the parties meant the “other” when they mentioned these problematic areas.

marriage to a man from the other side. Among nine countries (USA, France, Great Britain, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Germany, Albania, Soviet Union) for the Turks, Bulgaria and Greece are the countries they trust the least, and for the Greeks this title goes to Turkey... All these opinions about the "other" are expressed in spite of the declared ignorance of first hand information about the "other." When asked, 90% of the Turks and 67% of the Greeks said that they have never met a single person of the "other" side (a Greek and a Turk respectively). The Turks and the Greeks who answered the questions saying "I do not know," on the other hand, are of the order of only 15-30% for the Turks and 10-20% for the Greeks. In other words, they did not have personal knowledge about the "other" but this did not prevent them of having a generally negative opinion about the "other."

The identity which determines observation and opinions (contrary of the popularly-held belief that individuals formulate beliefs through observation) becomes manifest when questions about "responsibilities" were asked. U.S. government policy was seen from both as a policy "in favor of the other country"; and according to the Turks this favoritism harms Greek-Turkish relations (56% yes, 14% no); the Greeks share the same opinion (62% yes, 15% no). As for the governments, the Turks believe that "their" government makes all possible efforts to improve the bilateral relations (61%, only 1% for the Greek government), and the Greeks believe it is "their" government that does its best (73%, and the Turkish one 5%).

These results were presented in 1989 by the manager of Piar, Bülent Tanla in Istanbul's Greek-Turkish Friendship Association, where he was a member too. I was present in that meeting, and I remember that the numbers that he presented, especially the ones related to the Turks, had caused a kind of a shock. Many raised questions and said that "the Turks cannot be like that since..." and they tried to raise counter arguments. They said they know so many Turkish people that are not at all prejudiced against the Greeks, that the negative image of the Greeks cannot be reconciled with the "common aspects of the two communities," the "past happy coexistence" and the like. The Turkish members were confronted with a reality that they could not accept.

Bülent Tanla tried to explain that the poll had to do with statistical reality, and that personal opinions do not mean much in this case. I will add that 1% of the Turks means 650,000 Turks and 1% of the Greeks means 100,000 Greeks! We may have an environment of hundreds of thousands of people, but this may conceal from us the other 99%. The general situation of Greeks and Turks may be quite different from what we know based on our personal experience.

Also the act of "knowing" itself is problematic to begin with. "Our" understanding of prejudice may be very different from what is actually taking place. Prejudiced people usually define prejudice in such a way that they keep themselves at a safe distance from this category. The "knowledge" of one side may be seen as "prejudice" by the "other." Prejudice itself is never seen as such by its bearer; if it is perceived as such, it automatically ceases to exist anyhow. Therefore, if prejudice exists, it can exist only unnoticed by "us."

Statistics, therefore, can be a reliable source that gives a "general" picture of the feelings of the people. According to a recent poll carried out in 2000 by EKKE (National Center of Social Studies of Greece) we see that the feelings of the Greeks have not changed substantially. According to this survey, the Greeks expressed their liking for different nations and the Turks come last in this list.⁶ The Swedish come first (they are liked by 51%, disliked by 18%), the Serbs follow (by 46% liked, by 27% disliked), in between we see the Germans, the Dutch, the Americans (by 40% are liked, by 36% disliked), and at the end of the row appear the Bulgarians, the Croatians, Albanians (liked by 7%, by 74% disliked), the Macedonians (FYROM), and at the very end the Turks (by 3% liked, by 89% disliked) ...

These polls, however, are not extensive enough to reach reliable conclusions, but rather, they are an indication. Another poll, carried out between 4-17 December 2003 in various

Balkan countries that wished to join the European Union (Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, (Fyro) Macedonia, and Turkey), showed that among these it is Turkey that trusts Greece the least, in spite of the declared policy of Greece to assist Turkey in this effort.⁷ To the question “how much do you think Greece tries to aid your accession to the EU?,” Turkey had the lowest percentage (18%) of trust to Greece. (Fyro) Macedonia and Albania believe that Greece tries in this direction for them at the order of 24% and 39%.

In other words, I am convinced that, had we filmed in some other town or city, the findings might have been somehow different, depending on the special conditions of the area and the coincidental appearance of our interlocutors, but that still, the general picture would not be much different. Besides, the national celebrations, the poems heard during these days, the museums, the textbooks and history classes, the monuments that refer to our past, in short, the “education” system, all show a consistency throughout each country, Greece and Turkey. The skeptic may claim that in some other towns the situation may be even worse!

Why don't we see the results of the rapprochement that began in 1999 between the two countries?

But we do see them! In the documentary we see the best of the bilateral relations! Ten or twenty years ago the mayors would not have said, “we do not say the Turks hanged us, killed us any more” or “in our town we do not say anything against the Greeks.” A few years ago, the mayors and the majority of the Greeks and the Turks would be much more outspoken and would have hurried to accuse the “other,” bringing to the fore all of the supposed ill-doings. They would have said only “they killed us, they hanged us” or “they are irredentist.” Whereas today both sides are keen to appear politically correct.

Recently I tried to show that the bilateral relations of these two countries and the corresponding discourses passed three stages: Until the decade of 1970 the trend was to place the blame entirely on the “other”. Later some (especially the Marxists) tried to come into terms with the “other” by accusing some third parties and some agents who supposedly are responsible for the bad relations, e.g., the big powers, imperialism, capitalism, nationalism, etc. That is, someone was responsible for the tension but not “us.” Only recently some, mostly in academic circles, dared to criticize their own society and venture that there may be something wrong with “us”. They looked critically at their own educational system, at their perception of the “self” and the “other,” at their evaluation of history, at their identity, their prejudices and stereotypes. They started thinking if it were the problems in these fields that created many of the fears and consequently the tension.⁸ Our documentary, “The Other Town,” should be understood as belonging to this third phase approach.

7

The study was conducted by Kapa Research for ‘Balkan Monitor’ and some results are published in the Greek newspaper *To Vima* on 3 January 2004.

8

See: H. Millas. “Perceptions of conflict: Greeks and Turks in each other’s mirrors” in *In The Long Shadow of Europe, Greeks and Turks in the Era of Postnationalism* (Ed.) O. Anastasakis, K. Nicolaidis & K. Öktem, Leiden & Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 2009.

Is education the basic source of the ill-feelings against the “other” and the tense bilateral relations?

The answer depends mostly on what one means by “education.” Our present-day problem is that the Greeks and the Turks (and many nations who are facing frozen conflicts) are not conscious of the residue of their prejudices, nor of how they reproduce old nationalist hate-discourse. Most Greeks and Turks, throughout the period of nation-building, developed and internalized various national myths. Each ethnic group’s story, which sometimes experts call a national grand narrative, includes the basic information about “our history,” the “self,” the “other,” “our identity,” “our worries about the future’s prospects,” etc. A couple of years ago I tried to outline these two myths of the Greeks and the Turks in a humorous analysis:⁹

The Greek myth goes as follows: we are the Greeks and we compose a nation. We have existed continuously for many thousands of years. We have developed great civilizations (the ancient Greek, the Byzantine, and the modern). In this respect we are unique and superb. Now, if our present might is not so apparent, it is due to the “other.” The Turks, so different from us, are an Asiatic and barbaric nation. Their characteristic is repeated through history: they captured our lands, destroyed our country (Byzantium), they enslaved us for hundreds of years. We suffered a lot. Eventually we shed our blood and we liberated ourselves. However, the same Turks are still nearby and similar problems still exist: the Turks still occupy Greek lands in Asia Minor, Constantinople, and Cyprus, they are threatening our sovereignty in the Aegean and in Thrace, and treat our ethnic kin in Istanbul badly. They hate us since they know they are the invaders; we are the original inhabitants of these lands. The “West” is not helping us, as it never did, because it is in its interest to align with Turkey, since Turkey occupies a strategic area and/or because the Catholic/Protestant West does not like us. That’s why the Westerners pretend to be unaware of our problems and of the aggression we face.

The Turkish myth goes as follows: true, we originated in Asia, but we have lived for centuries in Europe. When we came, we encountered the ruins of an empire. This empire was not Greek, but Roman, to begin with. The claims of modern Greeks to be the heirs of Byzantium are not valid: they are not the same race or nation as the ancient people, i.e. the Ionians and the Byzantines are not “the same” as modern Greeks. Their claim on these lands is not justified. We treated them extremely well during Ottoman rule, and this rule was beneficial to them.¹⁰ Turks proved their good will and unbiased attitude toward all the “others.” We lived together closely, within one benevolent Turkish state, for centuries. They did not want to live with us, so they revolted. And from there on, they continuously attacked and captured our lands: in 1881, 1897, 1912, and 1919. They tried the same in Cyprus in 1974. They discredit us as “barbaric” they hate us, and they always mistreat the Turkish populations, especially in Western Thrace. Actually it is the Greeks who are not civilized and ultra nationalist. We are Europeans too, but the whole “West” is against us because they are prejudiced: they have a negative image of the (Muslim) Turks and they always back up Greece because they form a Christian family.

These two myths act as the base for most of the ethnic Greek and Turkish discourse with respect to the “other.” It is natural that these arguments are presented in different “styles”:

9

Do’s and Don’t’s for Better Greek-Turkish Relations, Athens: Papazissis, 2002.

10

With this argument the ‘Greeknness’ of the Byzantines is naturally recognized; but the contradictions of the national myths are part of the national historiography.

nationalistic and aggressive, academic and ‘scientific,’ sophisticated and disguised, hinted and in a roundabout manner. The fact, however, remains the same in every case: the “other” side almost always gets an annoying message. Both sides react angrily to most of the “other” side’s arguments...

The greatest difference appears in the area of the use of these myths. Both sides address them to the “West,” from which they expect alliance or at least neutrality. The Greek myth however is more “inward” oriented than that of the Turkish one. For the Greeks, the myth and the related Turks are necessary to explain the past and the formation of the national identity.¹¹ The existence of the present Greeks is associated with the historical existence of the Turks. The Turkish national existence, or more precisely the sovereignty of the Turkish state, however, is based on the non-existence of the Greeks, on “forgetting” the Greek heritage. The Greeks cultivate the past, the Turks silence it...

The political, military, historical and cultural disputes emerge out of these myths and find their justification. All the arguments about the past, the relationships with ancient people, the present legal theses, etc., simply support the basic myths. The whole dispute seems to be one of securing some national aim: national integrity, sovereignty, independence, supremacy, and liberty. All these are probably understood by the nations involved as the basic needs for a happier and more secure life.

These myths are a product of “education,” the word meaning something more than schooling: parades, public celebrations, patriotic poems and high-pitched speeches, monuments and museums that highlight “our” grandeur and remind of the “enemy,” textbooks that can be welcomed only within the national frontiers and would cause sarcastic comments in an international milieu. Our documentary tried to show this “education” and its results: the stereotypes and the complete unawareness towards these stereotypes. A large section of the society has internalized the myths and do not see them as such. The myths have turned into history and/or to a story that people do not want to part with or lose.¹²

Which side is worse?

We have been asked this question and we were expected to give an answer. However, we do not accuse or condemn any side. We try to understand how people think and why nations behave the way they do. We do not aspire to change the world or change the Turks and the Greeks. We only hope that if the background in which our ideas, convictions, and beliefs are formed can be shown, we would be freer to control ourselves.

11

See: H. Millas. ‘Tourkokratia: History and the Image of Turks in Greek Literature’ in *South European Society and Politics*, Routledge, Volume 11, Number 1, March 2006. Also in *When Greeks Think About Turks – The view from Anthropology*, (Ed. D. Theodossopoulos), London & New York: Routledge, 2007.

12

There is a very wide bibliography on these issues of nationalism, construction of identities, and historiography. I only mention a few. Their bibliography may lead to interesting and related areas: Hayden White, *Metahistory, The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Johns Hopkins, Baltimore & London, 1973; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities, Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, London, New York, 1991 (1983); Eric J. Hobsbawm & Ranger Terence (edit), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983; Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, Sage Publications, London, 1995.

Understanding the mechanisms that form our “knowledge” enables us to suspect that some of our “knowledge” may be partly (or totally) wrong. The question “how much has my environment influenced my beliefs?” is the first step towards self-consciousness. A comparative approach is especially efficient in this regard: when one sees that some assumed facts are not at all self-understood on the other side of the fence, one may start really thinking about and questioning her or his convictions. One may start having some doubts: “why do people have different opinions on so many various issues?” One may start thinking that ideas are not classified only as right and wrong but as “ours” and “theirs” in a relativist understanding.

Especially nationalism has reinforced the convictions that “our nation” is almost always right, just, normal, etc., and that the “other” – relative to us – have behaved wrongly, they are not so good, etc. We tried to show that this belief is not coincidental. It is a result of a planned “education.” Nation states chose this policy and understanding in the past because some leaders believed that this kind of a policy and belief was in the best interest of the nation. We believe that, in our times, we need less brain washing and social engineering, and more self-consciousness in order to understand all who are different from “us”. We believe that our film is in this line.

Are people really so negative/bad/unconstructive?

No, they are not! In the documentary we watch an old man (he is actually a barber) who says that if the same enemies appear in the town he would cut their throat; an old lady says it is better her old and lovely neighbors do not come back anew; a young woman says she hated the “other.” But my experience and studies convinced me that the situation is more complex than these utterances. Utterances and actions may differ.

In some of my publications I tried to show that people who share a national identity perceive the “other” on two levels. The abstract (imagined) “other” is a stereotype with permanent negative characteristics, whereas the concrete “other” (the one they actually meet) is mostly a normal person. The two, however, are not perceived as a contradiction; they exist next to each other. Some Greek and Turkish writers, for example, in their novels 'imagine' the “other” almost always as negative (vicious, barbarian, etc.) whereas in their memoirs talk only about nice people when they refer to the “other.” Construction and experience are in direct contradiction: when the authors decide to reproduce the world in a “realistic” manner they do not prioritize their personal experience, but instead choose to represent reality in abstract and essentialist terms, as this fits their ideology appropriately.

See for example the following table which summarizes the “other” as appears in all the novels and memoirs of three well-known Turkish writers. When they appear in the novels (imagined, abstract) they are negative, in the way they are taught in general; when they appear in the memoirs as real personalities they are almost always lovable, positive:¹³

	Novels & Short Stories					
	Persons				Incidents	
	Women		Men			
	Pos.	Neg.	Pos.	Neg.	Pos.	Neg.
Ömer Seyfettin	0	9	0	7	0	12
Halide Edip Adivar	0	18	1	8	0	46
Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu	0	9	2	18	0	47
SUM	0	36	3	33	0	105
	Memoirs					
Ömer Seyfettin	0	0	3	0	4	3
Halide Edip Adivar	2	0	8	3	17	8
Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu	1	0	3	0	0	30
SUM	3	0	14	3	21	41

We read about the same phenomenon in other studies, too. Nazis who participated in the Holocaust had Jewish friends whom they liked and appreciated, but for those Nazis those friends did not represent the bad guys, the “Jews”!¹⁴ I have first hand experience, too. My father used to refer to the abstract category of the “Turks” in negative terms, frequently claiming that the Turks “hated us” and “treated us unfairly.” He reciprocated. On such occasions I would remind him of my Turkish classmates and friends, whom he himself liked too, and I would argue that we had Turkish neighbors whom we, and indeed our whole family, held in good regard. “You contradict yourself,” I used to argue. My father used to “hate the Turks” but liked the Turks he knew!

The importance of images

We should not rush to conclude that negative images and national prejudices are of a limited importance since, when people meet the actual “concrete other,” reality and common sense prevail. Images (perceptions, stereotypes, prejudices, convictions, beliefs) are of great importance for various reasons.

- a) People normally think and take decisions in matters that are associated with the “other” in the absence of the “other.” For example, a war against an enemy may be decided by leaders or people who may have never met a representative from the other side. The cases where we deal directly and face to face with the “other” may be very limited, so the images lead us to decisions.
- b) In general human beings do not operate based on facts and reality, but according to what they *perceive* as facts and reality. In other words, they act according to the images and concepts they have.

‘The Image of Greeks in Turkish Literature: Fiction and Memoirs’, in *Oil on Fire?*, Studien zur Internationalen Schulbuchforschung, Schriftenreihe des Georg-Eckert-Instituts, Hanover: Verlag Hansche Buchhandlung, 1996.

c) The images and our convictions do not allow us to accept facts and reality. We interpret the available evidence as “true” or as “exception” according to our images. Our “reality” will be affected and change to the extent that our images are affected and change.

Images, prejudices, perceptions etc., are not a few secondary shortcomings of ours that can be overcome by goodwill, a little attention, some reminding, and/or a couple of lectures. They are at the core of our ideological armory from where our basic beliefs originate; it is the expression of our national identity. “The Other Town” illustrates how this identity is reproduced and how nations eventually harmonize state “education” and personal discourses. Naturally all these “peculiarities” are not unique to the Greeks and to the Turks; all nations, especially those in conflict with real and/or imaginary enemies show similar tendencies.

To Allow for Optimism

In the documentary we see some Greek children say that Nefin Dinç does not look like a Turk. Very many times during my life I heard this phrase when I introduced Greeks to Turks and vice versa: he/she does not look like a Greek/Turk! That is why nations and people who had an upbringing in a nation-state have images of the “other,” and these stereotypes are never like the real, concrete “other.” When they meet the real “other” they feel perplexed. The first reaction and “explanation” is that they are facing an “exception.”

Adorno’s study concludes by stating that opinions (the prejudices) do not change by showing more and more “exceptions.” What is necessary is to show to the bearers of stereotypes the mechanism that forms the prejudices, and how they came to think the way they think.¹⁵ Plato had said simply “know thyself.” Of course, this simple act is a challenging task to accomplish. In our documentary, we tried to “learn ourselves” as members of nations because we believe that paradigms do change.

That is why we insisted on ending our film with an optimistic message. We hope that if people understand how they have been trapped by older generations, by past ideologies, by their “education,” and especially by their own inner world, they may act and speak differently.

**

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15

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