Introduction

“Is Culture a Luxury?”

“Is culture a luxury?” This was the question posed in a small op-ed concerning the health of Greek cultural institutions that appeared in one of the main daily newspapers in Greece in early October 2009.¹ The op-ed was easy to miss, buried as it was among headlines shouting the more pressing economic and political news of the day: revised assessments of the soaring national deficit, emergency elections amid sustained civil unrest, and early indications of the sovereign debt crisis that would soon consume the country and the rest of Europe. Indeed, that October would prove to be fateful in the now well-known “Greek crisis”: emergency elections ushered in a new government whose first order of business was to unveil the full extent of the country’s economic troubles and begin negotiations with foreign lenders, starting a crushing cycle of debt and austerity that threw the country into deep depression and has lasted to this day.

Next to such sober matters, the op-ed writer’s concerns about a number of arts institutions might have paled in comparison. The author acknowledges as much when, after calling for immediate solutions to the economic and organizational challenges faced by institutions such as the Thessaloniki International Film Festival and the National Film Archive, he writes: “In the brief pre-election campaign, which justifiably turned to economic issues, even references to culture were considered a luxury. But is culture a luxury? In the context of an economy that is struggling for survival, that might be the case. However, this luxury is supposedly one of our strongest weapons and a tool for the development of education.”²
In pondering the value of these cultural institutions, the author was participating in a larger public debate over the (in)significance of the arts at a time of economic and political exigency. Artists, critics, academics, and arts professionals, together with politicians, bureaucrats, civil servants, and the wider public, all grappled in different ways with the question of how the arts might justify their continued support by the state—or, as another op-ed a few days later put it, determine “some usefulness so that we might be able to understand, finally, what is culture and what is the job of the Ministry of Culture, which is considered to be the ugly stepchild of every government.”

I take up this question by reconsidering the political value of the arts, focusing on cinema as a field of cultural production, at a time when public life is increasingly threatened by the twin pressures of austerity and precarity on a global scale. In a rehearsal of perennial debates over the significance of cultural production, public funding for the arts is once again under fire, cast as superfluous or unnecessary against the backdrop of shrinking state budgets and crumbling social welfare structures. In the United States, the Trump administration’s early and sustained attacks on the National Endowment for the Arts, among other agencies, are only the most recent in a long history of battles over state support for the arts. And the debates over public culture that took place in Greece at the
onset of the economic crisis were just the beginning, as a massive wave of cuts to arts funding across Europe would soon follow.

In this book, I take a close look at the Greek case, focusing specifically on the world of independent film production and exhibition, starting with the Thessaloniki International Film Festival, one of the country’s most important cultural institutions. In 2009, the state-sponsored festival was entangled in larger debates over public arts funding triggered by the country’s economic troubles, at the same time that it became the target of a filmmakers’ protest movement aimed at overhauling national film policy. The politicization of the Greek film world in those early years of the economic crisis is in keeping with the social history of cinema in Greece, where the independent film world has been variably aligned with the state, European Union (EU) cultural policy, and oppositional movements since the end of World War II. Understanding cinema expansively and diachronically, as a field of cultural production in time, I consider how it served as a site for agonistic encounters between different publics and counterpublics, between divergent political investments and conflicting agendas, and between the state and its citizens. What was often in dispute in these encounters was the “public thingness” of cinema: whether, in what ways, and to what extent cinema is what Bonnie Honig has called a “public thing.” At heart, these disputes are contests over the notions of publicness, hierarchies of value, and functions of the state that structure and organize collective life.

The stakes are particularly high in Greece, an apt site for investigating the relationship between state, citizen, and cultural production, and a bellwether of larger social and political dynamics at work around the world. Since 2009, when revelations of the country’s insolvency marked the onset of the eurozone crisis, Greece has become the site of dramatic social upheaval, a testing ground for the neoliberal policies of the European Union and a key battlefield for those who oppose them. As successive governments implement deeply unpopular austerity measures dictated by foreign lenders, the state is forced to revise the terms of its social contract with its citizens, and the gap between citizen and state grows. Significantly, in a country where the state has traditionally functioned as the steward and patron of cultural heritage, the relationship between the state and cultural production is also being restructured as part of these struggles. Consequently, the arts have become one of the arenas in which people contest the terms of their engagement with the state and, in the process, renegotiate the terms of collective life. Moving away from a film-centric approach to understanding the politics of cinema, I trace the
ways that multiple practices and discourses of publicness, citizenship, and political collectivity are being contested, imagined, and enacted within cinema’s institutional and social spaces. Through such a reconsideration of its “public thingness,” we may locate the political work of cinema and better understand the value of the arts to public life.

CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP

On a sunny October afternoon in 2009, I caught up with a filmmaker friend in a café overlooking the central square in the northern Greek city of Thessaloniki. Nicoletta was a perpetually active, lively figure who always seemed to be bustling from one project to another: leading film workshops at schools and festivals, teaching in the state film school in Thessaloniki, and working for hire as a filmmaker while also trying to get a half dozen of her own film projects off the ground. As she told me about the latest obstacles to getting her new documentary in production—she had applied for funding from both the Greek Film Center and ERT, the national television channel, but had been turned down by both—she lamented the state of public funding for the arts in Greece more generally. On the one hand, she complained about state institutions like the Film Center and ERT, which she characterized as inefficient bureaucracies and exclusive clubs, both impossible to penetrate. On the other hand, she said that the amount of public funding available was meager to begin with, and the economic crisis, the full magnitude of which was only beginning to become apparent in 2009, would only make the situation worse. Half-jokingly, she threw up her hands in mock surrender and quipped that soon she would have to leave Greece and seek work elsewhere as a “cultural immigrant” (politismiki metanastis).

It was a light-hearted remark, shared between friends in a small moment over coffee. We had both laughed at her clever play on the more commonly heard, and more “serious,” categories of economic and political migration, which have figured prominently in different periods of modern Greek history and most recently in the ongoing migrant and refugee crisis. Indeed, part of the comic valence of her statement came from the sense of frivolity in the idea of cultural migration, compared to the often very dire circumstances that lead to economic and political migration.

Despite its levity, Nicoletta’s statement lingered in my mind as I started to think through its deeper significance. By using the term “cultural immigrant,” she was highlighting her relationship as a filmmaker to the Greek
state. Underlying her comment was the assumption that the state was responsible for supporting the country’s cultural producers, and because it was not providing the conditions necessary for her cultural work, she would have to find another state that would. In this sense, the half-serious notion of the “cultural immigrant” points to its flip side, the figure of the “cultural citizen,” and to rather more serious questions of state responsibilities, citizens’ rights, and the place of both within cultural economies.

The concept of cultural citizenship has traditionally been understood in a much broader sense. Across a number of disciplines, including film and media studies, cultural studies, sociology, and anthropology, cultural citizenship has come to denote myriad forms of mutual engagement between states and subjects that fall outside the purview of the strictly civil, legal, political, and economic. In one dominant strain of this scholarship, cultural citizenship encompasses “the right to symbolic presence, dignifying representation, propagation of identity, and maintenance of lifestyles.” Nick Stevenson adds to this formulation the ideas of “cultural inclusion,” “the opportunity to be heard,” “rights of communication and dialogue,” as well as “the right to be different” and access to “the possibility of lifestyle experimentation and new possibilities for selfhood.” Similarly, Renato Rosaldo and the Latino Cultural Studies Working Group understand cultural citizenship in terms of the rights of individuals to cultural difference as protected by the state; here, cultural citizenship means full enfranchisement of cultural minorities, the sense of fully belonging as a member of a polity without fear of cultural oppression.

Another approach understands cultural citizenship in less empowering terms and more as a form of governmentality. In this articulation, cultural citizenship refers to the ways in which individuals learn or are trained to be total subjects of the state, not only legally or politically, but also socially and culturally, and how they take on or resist such training. Writing in this vein, Aihwa Ong argues that the rights-centered understanding of cultural citizenship “attends to only one side of a set of unequal relationships,” and offers another definition of citizenship as “a cultural process of ‘subject-ification,’ in the Foucauldian sense of self-making and being-made by power relations that produce consent through schemes of surveillance, discipline, control, and administration.” Toby Miller writes about cultural policy as one such technology of governance, which aims at “the formation of cultural citizens, docile but efficient participants” in capitalist democracies through, for example, state regulation of television, or the institutionalization of literary studies and critical reading practices in secondary education.
The primary difference between these two formulations of cultural citizenship concerns the power dynamics between the citizen and the governing cultural-political system, and where critical attention is focused within those relations of power. As Lok Siu describes it, the first approach “treats cultural citizenship as a process by which subordinate groups assert cultural rights and political claims in society,” thus attempting to “transform the cultural-political system by expanding notions of national belonging and political participation,” while the second takes cultural citizenship to be a process of subject formation through negotiations between state and subject, in which the balance of power skews heavily toward the former. Despite these differences, what is common to both approaches is a rather broad definition of culture. For example, Ong’s definition includes notions of morality, taste, and economic and consumer practices; Miller’s encompasses “artistry and ethnicity . . . language, heritage, religion, and identity”; and Rosaldo’s is described as “how specific subjects conceive of full enfranchisement,” referring to larger belief or value systems and their attendant notions of respect and dignity.

In this book, I trace a different notion of cultural citizenship. Rather than working from a very broad definition of culture as “morality,” beliefs, or value systems, I start from Pierre Bourdieu’s more narrowly defined “fields of cultural production,” or the social conditions for the production, circulation, and use of symbolic goods, with literature, visual arts, and theater being of primary concern. Each field constitutes a complex system of interests, motivations, forces, conflicts, currencies, values, and goods, as well as the “the structural relations . . . between social positions that are both occupied and manipulated by social agents which may be isolated individuals, groups, or institutions.” Taking the world of Greek independent cinema as such a field of cultural production, I examine how it served as a site for multiple forms of engagement—alternately empowered, resistant, complicit, overdetermined, dissenting—between citizens and the state, at a time of intense political turmoil. It is in this sense that I understand the term cultural citizenship, as the forms of citizenship—that is, how subjects engage with and position themselves in relation to the state and to political collectivity—that arise where fields of cultural production meet the practices and discourses of the state.

In this delimited sense, cultural citizenship could be seen as resembling “artistic citizenship,” a term used in the field of art and public policy to refer to the ways in which artists and their work operate within larger social and political worlds. Some treatments of the concept risk slipping
into universalizing humanist terms, conceiving of artistic citizenship as art-making that aligns with vague notions of “civic responsibility” and “virtuous action,” contributing to even vaguer notions of “shared humanity,” “positive change,” and “personal and collective flourishing.” A more nuanced and useful elaboration of the concept is offered by Randy Martin, who uses the term “artistic citizenship” to refer to “art’s worldly effects” and “the artist’s civic capacities,” attending not only to their potentialities but also to their inherent frictions. For Martin, the social and political dimension of art’s work in the world lies in the dynamic relationship between art and publicness, which is made especially apparent in the case of civic monuments and memorials, public installations and happenings, and other forms of public art that function as “a means to realize and recognize the commons, a medium for people to gather together to reflect on the very idea of being together.” Such work brings into high relief the fact that “public making, calling the people together, is one of the operations of art.”

Martin goes further, however, by complicating the idea of “public” itself, imagining it as agonistic, representing disparate and even conflicting social and political positions, investments, attachments, and identifications that, when gathered together, “challenge the consensus conception.” In this cacophonous public life, the work of artistic citizenship is not to resolve these dissonances but rather “to make these fissures legible as matters available to common rumination.” What is more, Martin contends that art has the potential to destabilize our very understanding of publicness. Here again, a useful case is public art. The controversies that tend to surround public art works are often a symptom of their ambiguous status as both “serious,” in their associations with the state or in their civic functions, and “frivolous,” a “luxury incompatible with republican values.” Thus, what is often being contested is not simply the content or themes of the work in question, but more importantly, the notion of what is properly public in the first place, that is, what rightly deserves public funding and state support, and what should or should not be in public or be considered part of a shared, public life. In this sense, disputes concerning contentious public art works “have much to teach us not simply about how artists are perceived by the public but also about the very nature of what we take public to mean.”

Martin’s formulation of artistic citizenship—as the friction that occurs where art “rubs up against the state” and participates in the creation or contestation of publicness and collectivity—provides a helpful framework for understanding the debates circulating in and around the world.
of Greek cinema at the onset of the economic crisis. However, I insist on the term “cultural citizenship” rather than artistic to broaden the scope of Martin’s underlying terms, which are ultimately limited to the individual artist and the work of art. Decentering the artist-filmmaker and the film as object, art work, or text, I attend instead to the wider sphere of social actors, institutions, and political and economic processes that constitute the cinematic field of cultural production, circulation, and engagement. This book aims to understand how independent Greek cinema, conceived more expansively, served as an occasion for agonistic public-making and for wrangling over the very definition of publicness in relation to the state, citizenship, and collectivity.

My use of the word “cultural” rather than “artistic” also reflects the complexity of the Greek word politismos, and the related politis and politeia, roughly translated as “culture,” “citizen,” and “polity,” respectively. All three derive from the archaic Greek term polis, which, often translated as “city-state,” in its original usage evoked more the sense of a political entity ruled by its members or citizens, and even the body of citizens itself, rather than the city proper, in the sense of the urban built environment. In Modern Greek, politis is defined as “a citizen of a state with all the rights and obligations thereof,” but layered onto that definition are the alternate meanings of “inhabitant of a city,” “private citizen, as opposed to figures of state/authority,” and “nonmilitary civilian.” Politeia also has multiple, overlapping meanings of “state,” “body politic,” and “government,” with the connotation of “city” or “place.” All of these semantic shadings inform the numerous, overlapping definitions of politismos. It can be used to mean “civilization,” both in the sense of a society or culture in a particular area—for example, the ancient Greek or Egyptian civilizations—and in the more value-laden sense of development, sophistication, refinement, or modernity. It is also commonly used to mean “culture” in the more narrowly defined sense of Bourdieu’s fields of cultural production, evident in its common usage as the title for the “Arts and Culture” section of most Greek newspapers; in this sense, it contains the notion of art, techne, or the fine arts, kales technes. As it is used in the designation “Ministry of Culture” (Ypourgeio Politismou), the term expands to include matters such as archaeological heritage; traditional folk music, dance, crafts, and dress; and even sports. Sometimes it is used interchangeably with the word koultoura, a Latin borrowing, but politismos, unlike koultoura, is colored by its etymological association with polis, politeia, and politis and thus carries the sense of the
political, as Hannah Arendt would understand it, as something public, experienced in common and collectively held.24

Another distinction that exists in the Greek language, but for which there is no clear corollary in English, is between the adjectives politismikos and politistikos. They might both be roughly translated as “cultural,” but in relation to each other, politismikos takes on more of an association with vernacular or popular culture, while politistikos refers more to high culture. Traditionally, the Greek state has privileged the latter over the former, allocating significant resources to support the fine and performing arts, classical music, opera, architecture, and prestige forms of literature, theater, dance, and cinema, with a particular emphasis on proximity to the classics, ancient Greek culture, and Western European traditions. This state investment in the arts and cultural heritage has been economically and politically strategic, especially beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as the country developed its tourism infrastructure and began its bid for entry into the European Community in earnest.25 As cultural producers and institutions came to depend on and even expect this public funding, the role of the state as steward and patron of “high” cultural production in Greece was cemented.

The term “cultural citizenship,” as I use it in this book, thus refers to this complex nexus of the state, publicness, and cultural production, in relation to which my friend’s comment about “cultural immigration” takes on new meaning. Embedded in her story about the obstacles she faced with her latest film is an expectation that the state should fund her cultural work—indeed, that public funding is the only possible way to get her film made—and this expectation is foundational to her understanding, and her practice, of cultural citizenship. Nicoletta’s quip was a response to what was beginning to be felt at that time as an unraveling of this assumed relationship, or social contract, between state and cultural citizen that was most directly associated with the onset of the economic crisis and the shrinking of state budgets, but which, in fact, was part of a larger social and political destabilization, as was the economic crisis itself.

NARRATIVES OF CRISIS

The word “crisis” has come to be so ubiquitous in characterizing life in Greece over the past decade that it has nearly become meaningless, a catch-all term that can refer to everything from sovereign debt, poverty, and austerity to political instability, far-right extremism, and migration.
In *Anti-Crisis*, Janet Roitman takes a critical distance from the term to think through its discursive functions as a “second-order concept.” Referring specifically to the U.S. subprime mortgage crisis, she writes: “When does a credit (asset) become a debt (toxic asset)? How do we distinguish the former from the latter? ... When does the judgement of crisis obtain? We see, by putting these questions to contemporary crisis narratives, how crisis, in itself, cannot be located or observed as an object of first-order knowledge. The observation ‘money’ is a first-order observation based on a distinction (money/not money); the statements ‘I lost money’ or ‘Lost money is a crisis’ are second-order observations.”

Understood not as an “object of first-order knowledge” but rather as a secondary narrative operation, enabled by and enabling particular understandings of history, the notion of “crisis” occupies a double temporality. It is both “a signifier for a critical, decisive moment” in history, and at the same time a term indicating a “protracted historical and experiential condition ... an ongoing state of affairs.” And the same crisis can be narrated as multiple moments, or as variable histories, depending on who is telling the story, and why.

As the discourse on the “Greek crisis” matures, scholarship has taken up Roitman’s terms of analysis, reflecting critically on how the trope of “crisis” and its multiple temporalities condition and shape the production of knowledge concerning the situation in Greece today. In the afterword to *Critical Times in Greece: Anthropological Engagements with the Crisis*, Evthymios Papataxiarchis warns that “when we analytically adopt the term ‘crisis,’ we indirectly acknowledge the dramatic upgrading of the present vis-à-vis the past that the acceleration of economic and political time has produced. Yet we face the danger of ignoring the historicity of the manifestations of the ‘crisis.’” He suggests that we add to our analytical vocabulary Judith Butler’s concept of “trouble,” which he understands to be “a multi-dimensional trope that allows the simultaneous consideration of many different facets—economic, social, political, ideological, mental/psychological—in the production of antagonism.” Rather than indicating a decisive moment, “trouble” stands for a broader “political disorder, materialized in actions destabilizing the normative political arrangements, and producing disarray in the dominant taxonomy of actions, rules, and representations ... a structural unsettlement of all those powers subsuming individuals in the political order.” The important thing about “trouble” is that it “has been around for a long time and that it preceded the ‘crisis’” and thus, as an analytical concept, it helps us escape the pre-