

FILM REVIEW

When Tomatoes met Wagner (2019)

by Marianna Economou

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On its surface, Marianna Economou's documentary *When Tomatoes met Wagner* (2019) is about a deserted village in central Greece and the efforts of its 33 inhabitants to grow organic tomatoes and export their tomato-based products around the world, all the while negotiating the harsh realities of crisis-ridden Greece. As viewers delve deeper into the film's universe and wide-arching story, they will discover that this subtle documentary contains a profound political message. *When Tomatoes met Wagner* indeed is a testament to the importance of community and inclusivity in harsh times.

At the centre are two forty-something cousins, Alexandros and Christos, who returned in 2014 to the dying village of Elia in the fertile valley of Thessaly in central Greece with the aim of growing organic tomatoes. This is not an entirely new development in crisis-era Greece. Many young Greeks, after years of studies abroad, have returned and brought with them an entrepreneurial spirit, hoping to invest in the tourist and agricultural sectors. This trend has in fact seen a flourishing carob production in Crete, an endemic and ancient plant, with growing popularity in international markets where alternative foods are sought after. The story of Alexandros and a cohort of local village grannies, who join him in his endeavor, is one such. More so though, it is about the undying bond of community in a country, which has steadily seen a decline in its population and desertification of the rural landscape. Upon viewing *When Tomatoes met Wagner*, I was reminded of Theo Angelopoulos's debut feature film *Anaparastasi/Reconstruction* (1970) which

documents with devastating honesty the gradual desertification of rural mountainous Greece.

Economou chronicles the struggles and small victories of her protagonists but the real focus is on Alexandros, who leads the way with his ingenuity and romantic spirit. He is a whimsical dreamer and seemingly obsolete figure in a period when entrepreneurs are told to be competitive, individualistic and exponentially productive, as though to embody the tenets of neoliberal capitalism. Alexandros insists on cultivating organic tomatoes from an ancient seed which, as he tells in some of his meandering speeches full of childish enthusiasm, was brought by Christopher Columbus from America to Europe. The film in fact receives its namesake from one of Alexandros's whimsical initiatives: he installs two large speakers in the middle of the tomato field and plays Wagner compositions to speed up the ripening of the tomatoes. At other moments, Alexandros and Christos philosophize over coffee, about the afterlife and how grand it is that man actually "becomes feed for worms".

Rather than painting his portrait as a naive eccentric, Economou looks at Alexandros and his cohort as kind genuine human beings with the potential to change the world through their humble and noble achievements as they eventually manage to export their delicious products to Europe, the US and even Hong Kong. This is not, however, a story about the little man confronting a kind of Goliath. Economou avoids the stereotypical casting of Greece as a pariah state (*elladitsa* [tiny Greece] as is often said) while not discounting the permeating feeling of abandonment and loneliness, which two elderly men describe when they say that the village is "forgotten by god and people". The one and only school of the village, in which one of the grannies used to go as a girl, has been closed for thirty years. Once the film is over, one realizes that the few inhabitants of Elia will still have to endure many difficulties and the inevitable loss of their village as it shows little prospect of maintaining a living population. Eventually, they will pass away and there is little knowing whether Elia will become a ghost village. This is what ultimately makes *When Tomatoes met Wagner* bittersweet, despite the overall uplifting story.

Indeed, at several moments viewers realize that this small village is not unaffected by Greece's economic crisis, which leads to greater impoverishment. More so, one discerns this inescapable fact when Alexandros and Christos ruminate over the yoke of the economy, which determines the dreams of ordinary people: "It is a tragedy that our dreams depend so often on the economy" Alexandros says with obvious frustration. The village is also affected by climate change, which is showing growing and frightening signs in the global south and countries like Greece. And this can only worsen progressively. Yet the film shows that Elia manages to do more than stay afloat, but to even bring some change. This is Alexandros's dream. During one of his philosophical debates with Christos, they both agree that somehow the

world has to change but can this happen without a revolution, they wonder. Maybe a small village and its artisanal tomato products can be a good start, the film suggests. This is where it becomes joyous and truly uplifting.

Alexandros and his grannies achieve this by sticking together, working as a community with an ethos that one rarely finds today, based on solidarity, openness, sharing and above all love for the land, for their labour and each other, despite a large generational or educational gap. Their ethos is what helps them overcome the misery of the economic crisis (which is never alluded to directly) and the daunting challenges of globalization and global capitalism, which crush small-scale agriculture and producers. At one instant, it becomes evident that, in order to accommodate foreign customers and markets, Alexandros needs to conform to global food trends, which are alien to the group. It does generate some comedic relief to see how alien Alexandros and the grannies feel toward super food products like quinoa, which they try cooking in their jarred tomato sauce without great results. "It does not add anything," they say with sour expressions. It is though a challenge they need to deal with, especially since they are aiming at international supermarket aisles where consumerist ideals prevail. To catch, for example, the attention of British consumers, Alexandros suggests using beer bottles instead of simple round jars, because a tomato sauce in a beer bottle is a fascinating alternative.

All the while though, Alexandros displays his own romantic version of globalization. As he retells several times like some kind of mantra, Columbus brought an ancient tomato seed from America to Europe and Alexandros and Co bring it back to the US where agriculture giant Monsanto has corrupted the earth with its GMO seeds – an additional competitor in the global market. Alexandros beams every time he tells the story of Columbus and reaches the punch line, which is that this small cohort from a deserted village is bringing this seed back to its original location. In possibly the most joyous sequence of the film, Alexandros and some of his grannies travel (most of them for the first time in their lives) abroad, to Brussels, where they tour some of the shops where their jars with stuffed tomatoes and tomato passata are sold for six Euros. They also visit some wholesale warehouses where they are introduced to the concept of better marketing and take on board the notion that their jars should feature their faces. It is a truly touching moment when Alexandros's aunt, Katina, sees one of their jars in a health food store. This may not be a revolution, but it sure is a step in that direction.

The community reaps the true benefits of globalization and openness when a junior high-school class from France visits the village, which came as part of an exchange program. The pupils are welcomed by an awkward Alexandros, who struggles to properly pronounce "bienvenue", demonstrating further his unpretentiousness. The pupils are invited to make their own jars of tomato passata

and share a meal in the abandoned school, which is now filled with children's voices for the first time in decades. Economou depicts these scenes as celebrations, which break with the narrative of loss and abandonment, highlighting instead openness to the world. There is hope it seems.

Marianna Economou captures the essence of this community in quotidian and seemingly uneventful sequences, either in the workshop or the field. One of the men is shown putting labels on jars one by one and later on debates with Alexandros whether they should play folk music or Wagner for the tomatoes: "They need music that will make them blush", Alexandros comments. "Let's play Wagner", his colleague responds. "Since when do you know Wagner?" "I grew up listening to Wagner!" In the workshop, Alexandros teases the grannies addressing them as "girls" and in other instances they share the weight of the heavy crates. They all taste and test their jarred stuffed tomato dishes and share their thoughts with the grannies showing off their culinary wisdom. The banter between everyone emblemizes a spirit of solidarity and community increasingly obsolete in crisis-ridden Greece in which neoliberal establishments repress and even criminalize such initiatives. Examples include the closing of anarchist squats where refugees are hosted, beside the demonization of solidarity initiatives in the famous Exarcheia district by mainstream media. One may find parallels also in the case of the self-managed steel factory VIO.ME in Thessaloniki, which is the first ever factory in Greece to follow the principles of self-determination for its workers, the abolition of the middle man and solidarity with the local community and refugees. In the year 2020, the Public Power Corporation, with the help of local SWAT police squads, closed off electricity supply to the factory, which is increasingly threatened by the Greek government. In *When Tomatoes met Wagner*, the very concept of work is founded on the principles of sharing and togetherness. Alexandros and his grannies are like a big *parea*, that is a company of friends who share a unique code of communication and feeling of togetherness. One finds in these sequences humor, love, humanity and truly endearing characters, which Economou portrays with tenderness.

By going back in time, so to speak, cultivating an ancient seed, Alexandros and Christos have performed a revolutionary gesture. Rather than applying themselves to the principles of progress and innovation, which serve to a large extent the logic of unsustainable growth, the cousins resist the demands of our times. Alexandros indeed studied abroad for years but instead of pursuing a promising career stemming directly from his education, he became a farmer in a village occupied almost entirely by an elderly population. Asked by a granny why he wasted his education, being a genuine romantic, he insists that, like a good book, his education stays in his head and that is what makes it precious. *When Tomatoes met Wagner* does not close with the blast of a revolution but the feeling that social

change can start from below, through a communitarian spirit and with respect to the land. And that on its own is revolutionary.