

## **Opening Remarks at the Launch of the 1st LAGFF-doc and the LMU-LAGFF 10-Year Educational Partnership**

*By Katerina Zacharia, Professor of Classics, Loyola Marymount University, and Director of Education, Los Angeles Greek Film Festival*

It is my profound honor to welcome you to Loyola Marymount University as we launch the 1st Los Angeles Greek documentary film festival (LAGFF-doc) and celebrate a decade of extraordinary educational partnership between LAGFF and LMU's Department of Classics & Archaeology.

For 25 years, I have been teaching Greek cinema as a living, evolving art form—one that bridges the ancient and the modern, the personal and the political, the local and the global. But it was in 2014, when we launched our formal internship program with LAGFF, that this academic pursuit truly came alive. What began as an innovative experiment in experiential learning has blossomed into a transformative educational model that has touched the lives of over 220 student interns, engaged more than 135 students in Greek cinema courses, and involved 15 faculty members from our School of Film and Television as festival jurors.

This partnership is grounded in a shared commitment to something greater than film appreciation—it is about cultivating the next generation of cultural critics, scholars, and citizens equipped to engage with the world's complexity. At LMU, we believe in the education of the whole person. We invite students diverse in talents, interests, and cultural backgrounds to join us in rigorous inquiry that connects learning with lives of meaning and purpose. Our collaboration with LAGFF embodies this mission in its fullest expression.

In my course, "Representations of Greece: Ancient and Modern," students don't simply watch films—they interrogate them. They explore how stereotypes emerge through negotiations of identity and power. They examine who gets to tell stories, whose voices are silenced, and how representations shape our understanding of culture, history, and humanity itself. Drawing on the cultural theories of Stuart Hall, Edward Said, and Michel Foucault, students analyze features attributed to "the other" in encounters between cultures of asymmetrical power. Students publish a blog on research topics focusing on social justice issues selected from the LAGFF film submissions.

This is where our partnership with LAGFF becomes truly transformative. Through their embedded 20-hour internships, students move from theory to practice. They work alongside the Festival Manager and production teams on programming, filmmaker interviews, digital content creation, and event production. They write research-driven blogs that combine film analysis with reflections on their own growth and development. They engage directly with filmmakers—often virtually—participating in Q&A sessions that bring the creative process to life.

But most importantly, they learn what it means to be "people for others"—a cornerstone of our Jesuit, Marymount, and Sisters of St. Joseph heritage. They learn to identify with those on the margins of society, to give voice to the vulnerable and underrepresented, and to promote meaningful social action through their scholarship.

This year, as we celebrate LAGFF's 20th anniversary, we are especially proud to co-host LAGFF-doc, the festival's inaugural Documentary Festival, right here on our campus during LMU Greek Cinema Week. This initiative celebrates documentary films from Greece and Cyprus, as well as filmmakers of Greek or Cypriot descent, whose stories give voice to

lived experience and truth. It transforms festival screenings into spaces for scholarly inquiry and dialogue, with our Bellarmine College of Liberal Arts faculty contributing expertise on themes such as disability, environmental justice, LGBTQ+ experiences, Greek Jewish history, and other pressing social issues.

And in keeping with LMU's mission of service and the promotion of justice, we are inaugurating the LMU Prize for Social Justice, to be awarded to the best feature documentary here today, and to the best feature fiction film and best short film at the main festival in June. My students will select the short film winner—a responsibility they take seriously as they practice discernment and critical thinking.

The impact of this partnership extends far beyond our campus. Our digital booklet featuring over 80 alumni testimonials stands as testament to lives changed, perspectives broadened, and vocations discovered. I think of the countless interns who have selected research topics ranging from the refugee crisis to toxic masculinity, from environmental disaster preparedness to the impact of economic austerity on Greek families—students who chose to focus their intellectual energy on questions of justice, dignity, and human flourishing. I think of Zachariah Michelena who worked tirelessly on the LAGFF-doc website during winter break with me, and of Julia Pinto Ribeiro Sereno who promoted the festival across campus, and of all the other students who attend the screenings and participate in the post-screening discussions. I think of BCLA Dean Richard Fox who supported my long-term dream to bring LAGFF to campus and the Dean's office staff for all their good work to bring this dream to fruition. I think of Zoe Young and Xam Martin for their expert and very smooth operation of SFTV Broccoli Theater throughout the whole event.

This is what happens when rigorous academic inquiry meets real-world application. This is what happens when we create cooperative learning environments where students examine how their own positionality influences their judgment of others. This is what happens when we encourage team-building and respect for the diversity of thought and people—values that define both our university and this festival.

As we gather to celebrate documentary cinema today, we celebrate more than artistic achievement. We celebrate a model of education that honors the search for truth, that demands we view culture from multiple perspectives, and that insists we bring our insights to bear on the discovery of our common humanity.

Thank you to the Los Angeles Greek Film Festival for this enduring and inspiring partnership. Together, we continue to cultivate scholars, filmmakers, and cultural critics who are committed to lives of meaning, purpose, and justice.

**Katerina Zacharia**

Professor of Classics, Loyola Marymount University  
Director of Education, Los Angeles Greek Film Festival  
Host & Curator, LMU Greek Cinema Week

## **Remarks for the Inaugural LMU Prize for Social Justice**

*By Katerina Zacharia, Professor of Classics, Loyola Marymount University, and Director of Education, Los Angeles Greek Film Festival*

It is my profound privilege to present the inaugural LMU Prize for Social Justice for the 1st LAGFF-doc, as part of LMU Greek Cinema Week and the LA Greek Film Festival's 20th anniversary celebration. This prize reflects the deepest commitments of Loyola Marymount University—our Jesuit mission of service, our dedication to the promotion of justice, and our conviction that education must engage with the most pressing challenges facing our world. Documentary filmmakers bear witness. They travel to the margins, to the places where crises unfold far from headlines and political centers. They give us what we most need and often least want: the truth. Tonight, we honor a filmmaker whose career has been defined by this courageous work.

Yorgos Avgeropoulos is an award-winning Greek documentary filmmaker and former war correspondent who has covered conflicts across seven continents and created films in more than fifty countries. Through his groundbreaking thirteen-year series *Exandas* and the acclaimed *Agora* project documenting Greece's economic crisis, he has earned more than forty international awards. His films tackle the most urgent issues of our time—social inequality, displacement, economic collapse, and environmental destruction. He goes where the story demands, and he stays long enough to understand it.

His latest work brings us to one of the most remote and vulnerable places on Earth: the Arctic, where two communities on opposite sides of the Bering Strait face the same terrifying reality. In Eastern Siberia, Nikita watches the ground beneath his village literally disappear. In Northern Alaska, Martha witnesses the same collapse. The permafrost—frozen for millennia, a terrestrial archive of woolly mammoths and ancient ecosystems—is thawing at unprecedented speed. Homes crack and sink. Roads buckle and vanish. Entire ways of life teeter on the edge of extinction.

But *Mankind's Folly: Climate Crisis and Energy in the Arctic* reveals that this crisis extends far beyond these communities. The thawing permafrost is releasing vast quantities of carbon and methane into the atmosphere, accelerating climate change globally. Scientists warn that the Arctic is warming four times faster than the global average. They speak of tipping points and irreversible feedback loops—warnings that should command our immediate attention but are instead drowned out by political expediency and corporate profit.

Here is where Avgeropoulos's film becomes not just a documentary but an indictment. Even as the ground collapses, fossil fuel companies expand drilling operations across the Arctic. In Siberia, Russian oil and gas development continues despite international sanctions. In Alaska, massive new drilling projects have been approved around Martha's community—on land that is literally sinking. The bitter irony is inescapable: we are drilling for the very fuels that are destroying the ground we drill into.

This is why there can be no social justice without environmental justice. When communities are displaced, when Indigenous peoples lose not just their homes but their ancestral lands and traditional ways of life, when the pursuit of short-term economic gain destroys the possibility of long-term human flourishing—this is injustice at its most fundamental level.

Avgeropoulos has created a film that is honest, objective, and at times genuinely frightening. With powerful visual evidence and rigorous analysis, he shows us that what is happening in the Arctic is not a distant problem but a global emergency. Nikita and Martha's stories are not isolated tragedies. They are warnings. They are what the future looks like if we continue on our current path.

Our students understand that critical thinking requires the courage to look directly at difficult truths. This film demands that courage from all of us—politicians, industry leaders, and citizens alike. It should be required viewing not because it offers easy answers, but because it asks the necessary questions with such clarity and urgency.

The inaugural LMU Prize for Social Justice is awarded to a film that embodies our commitment to service and justice, to bearing witness and speaking truth. It goes to a filmmaker who has spent his career documenting the consequences of our choices and giving voice to those who bear the heaviest burdens of our failures.

Therefore, it is my honor to present the LMU Prize for Social Justice to Mankind's Folly: Climate Crisis and Energy in the Arctic, written and directed by Yorgos Avgeropoulos.

**Katerina Zacharia**

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