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Archive Trouble

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Hot Spots: Beyond the "Greek Crisis"

In November 2010 the Onassis Cultural Centre opened its doors to visitors in Athens with a big conference entitled *Athens Dialogues*. With world class academics invited as guest speakers and cutting-edge technology allowing for the streaming of the conference across the globe (with concurrent translation in three languages), the conference aimed to showcase the diachronic importance of Greek thought to the world: what the Greeks did and the reason it still matters. Only that, with 'Greeks' in this case, most of the participants and certainly the larger part of the audience understood the 'Ancient Greeks.' Modern Greece, including its handful of powerful private institutions and their well-handled cultural globality, was once again seen as the quintessential archive of a perennial past. Within this logic Athens was presented as the perfect place to have this international dialogue about the undisturbed relationship between the present and its past.

Less than five months later, in the same Onassis Cultural Centre, Athenians were able to see an experimental play by the group Kanigunda. The performance started with one of the actors impersonating 'Myrtis,' a girl who died of the typhoid plague that hit Athens in 426-430 BC, and whose face a team of scientists had claimed they were able to reconstruct from remains some months earlier, to extensive coverage from the

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media. The ancient Greeks, once again! Yet the process now was somehow reversed because this time, in the voice and with the face of 'an ancient inhabitant of the Athenian city state' who died during a plague, the audience was introduced to a postmodern political satire about the current Greek crisis.

Cunningly entitled ***The City State***, this play was the first, or at least the first I know of, that took the current crisis as its subject matter in such a self-conscious way. The very discursive tapestry of the current crisis as one experiences it in the Greek everyday – words, phrases, images, videos, names, well-known and rehearsed arguments – was shredded to pieces and reassembled in a performance extravaganza, which also included Greek 20th century popular revue songs, archive material on the building of Ancient and Modern Athens, on the German Occupation, the Greek Civil War and other moments of modern Greek political history, all spliced together and interspersed with a long tissue of literary quotations about rootedness and uprooting, about the state of fear and its pervasive effects, about waiting for the end of the world. A performance that had started with the reassurance that the ancient Greeks are still with us (the Myrtis impersonator in a low voice whispering: 'Good evening, I am alive! I am very happy to be meeting you'), ended with another actor impersonating George Papandreou and exclaiming: 'I am your prime minister. The perennial doctor. And I've got something to tell you. I want to tell you that we have just ceded part of our national sovereignty.'

It is still early to come to conclusions about how cultural production in Greece will respond to the current economic and socio-political crisis. And it is certainly difficult to find common denominators at this early stage, save for the zeal of international audiences to interpret everything that currently comes out of Greece as an anti-crisis text or to ask artists to define their creative take on

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the crisis. As a prominent Greek writer recently told an eager audience in London, 'we are in the middle of an earthquake; there is no time to pause and think how we scream about it.'

I would nevertheless like to risk a tentative suggestion. It seems to me that there is an interesting trend of cultural expression produced in Greece at the moment, which, even though not always related to the crisis directly, can assume, in the current climate, a radical political position. This is a trend characterized by its effort to critique, undermine and performatively disturb the very logics through which the story of Greece – the narrative of its national, political, sociocultural cohesion in synchrony and diachrony – has until now been told.

If I were to give a title to this tendency, I would call it the 'poetics of disturbed archival logics' or the 'disturbed archive.' To illustrate what I mean, let me return to the *City State* performance: in its collage of images, archival footage, historical and political texts and current opinion-making pronouncements, the play first rehearsed well-known arguments about the past's burden on the present and the historical responsibilities of the ruling classes, of generations of politicians and of corrupt entrepreneurs for the current failures. But exactly in its mixing and performative extravaganza, in its disturbing of the linearity and generational logics of the question of blame, *in its excess*, this troubled and performed archive ended up reframing the question of responsibility altogether. This was not just a story about ancient democracy, the *ancient polis*, gone awry in its modern resurfacing. It was instead a radical questioning that started from the current state of precariousness, in order to critique the reading of the past and ask: Who has been doing this reading on our behalf, in what ways and to what effect? As the cultural logics of continuity and traditional modes of thinking about political agency and

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blame were being undermined, responsibility was now becoming a genealogical question, or rather a genealogical imperative. Suddenly, for instance, the MC in this revue performance started calling herself 'the sponsor of the event', before 'confessing', at the end of her act that, actually, s/he was the former head of Siemens Hellas, the company accused for serially bribing Greek politicians the last 20 years. Point made forcefully: what the audience was watching was a performance that could not dissociate itself from a (narrative *and* material) economy that included corrupt neo-colonial financing in its very core structures.

Therefore, instead of 'who will take the blame for having pushed us to this point', the question became *how* one can tell the story of the now in relation to the past, what it means to act while also positioning oneself within a genealogy that has reached a critical point. Listening to catchy old popular revue songs, while watching archive footage of archaeological sites being excavated, modern Athens being built, popular images from political events of the past, photographs of political families posing in generations – father, son, grandson, politics as a patriarchal family arrangement – people dying in battle, and people demonstrating in groups, snippets of history and fragments of lives arranged as an anarchic visual surface in the background, the audience was called to reflect on its own position as a part of this archive. Making sense of it all would perhaps open up a new space for critique. An incitement to act, therefore, just like in epic theatre. Yet, unlike epic theatre, an incitement to act *from within*, not from a vantage point (with)out.

The poetics of the disturbed archive I am trying to frame is, of course, by no means a new trend in Greek culture. Greek postmodern thinkers and artists, for instance, have been performatively undermining Greek national narratives in

such a way for a number of years. And the history of Greece's turbulent 20th century has been explored in the last decade through a reinvigorated interest in unofficial and non-normative archives, and a critique of official archival logics. What I am trying to argue though is that this type of undermining now has the potential to become a dominant political and cultural critique, a full-blown genealogical attack that takes the current state not as a symptom of things that went wrong in the past, but as the very point from which the past should be reviewed, revisited, re-collated, reassembled and reassessed, both in political and in identitarian terms. I am also saying that, through this larger logic of archival disturbance, an array of cultural texts are bound to take on a political importance that perhaps would have been unthinkable some years earlier.

Like the performance of *City State*, a number of recent Greek films and art projects use archival material in order to tell a story of disturbance. In ***Country of Origin*** (dir. Syllas Tzoumerkas, 2010), the story of a repressive, incestuous Greek family pushed to its limits, is mashed up with archival footage of past political demonstrations, photographs of major historical moments, the private archive of this family, reconstructions of the December 2008 riots in Athens, and a teacher's lecture on the Greek national anthem. The point of the film is that if there is a connection between all these events and cultural texts, it has to be actively sought by the audience and perhaps rearranged, replotted; it is not a given. Representation, family, desire, official and unofficial archives, are blasted (and blasting) together, and that is pretty much it – end of story, end of film.

Yet I would propose that it is worth searching for the moments of archival disturbance and the call for taking genealogical responsibility in a spate of recent art works, writing, performance and film projects, which are not

primarily about archival representation, and do not use it as a device. In the political paintings of **Stelios Faitakis**, for instance, where politically charged slogans and images related to recent events, are woven through with byzantine iconographic traditions, ancient Greek and folk references, and a play with size and volume that encourages audiences to rethink aesthetic experience in terms of participation. Or in the new queer film ***Strella: A Woman's Way*** (dir. Panos Koutras 2009), the incestuous tale of a transsexual that (ab)uses the Oedipal myth and pokes fun at the official tourist slogan 'Live your myth in Greece', while also simultaneously showing contemporary Athens as both an identity matrix palpitating with personal archives and itineraries, and a crisis space that allows archival logics (including that of the nuclear family) to be radically reframed.

The two Greek films that have gained the greatest international attention and distribution in 2010 point in the same direction and showcase similar moments of archival disturbance and excess. ***Attenberg***, by Athina Rachel Tsangaris, starts with two young women making quaint noises, grimacing, waving, distorting their bodies and running around a deserted modernist village, as they try to come to terms with the queerness of desire and loss. One of the girls' father, an architect full of unfinished (modernist) projects, is dying. Conversely his daughter is empty of any grand projects, yet is instead full of images, mainly drawn from hours of watching documentaries on television (a particular favourite being David Attenborough's, whose distortedly mispronounced name gives the film its title). The excess of the footage of animal life and history, reproduced by the main characters who constantly mimic with their bodies what they watch, recurs almost painfully throughout the whole film, with the most haunting of these **body distortions** being used as the film's title photograph.

In the same manner, in a central scene of Yorgos Lanthimos's *Dogtooth*, the children who have been subjected to a life of internment within the boundaries of the family house, **stage a celebration**. It is painstakingly shot as a very typical modern Greek family 'nameday' gathering. Until, that is, the children start performing their well-rehearsed song and dance routine. A routine they execute eagerly. And then, one of them, even more eagerly. As one girl stops tired, the other goes on dancing, now extending and deforming her dance moves, in an overappropriation of the original parental order that eventually becomes alarming; the all controlling mother rushes to stop her. The intertextual wink in this scene guarantees its symbolic weight (think, for instance, of the last scene of Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, or, in the Greek context, the performance scenes in Pantelis Voulgaris's *Happy Day*). This is a moment when totalitarian control is undermined by overappropriation and excess.

What is new, though, is that this excess comes from the centre of a story of a manically repressive family that can be seen (and has been seen) as a sociopolitical allegory related to the Greek crisis. The Greek family unit is short-circuiting by excess, and from its centre there come jolts; if you see the whole film as an allegory, then this celebration scene says something about tentatively assuming responsibility and disturbing the logics of the social narrative from within its most abusive and critical moments. In other words, if, according to the allegorical trope, this family's story is offered to us as a platform for critical understanding (of a culture in crisis, of power dynamics, of repression, of political control), then from its centre comes a body that, in its excess, decides momentarily to take control, understand the dynamics, and disturb its narrative coherence from within.

These are stories of Greeks who delve

into their cultural, social, political and everyday archive at a time of extreme and prolonged crisis, in an extended effort to reframe; these are also stories of a painful archival meddling in the middle of which, and suddenly, some bodies decide to overdo it.

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