

To a certain degree sacredness is in the eye of the beholder

Stefania Strouza and Apostolos Vasilopoulos

Ancient Greece has been the idealized spiritual and intellectual ancestor of Europe. The latter incorporated the narratives of classical antiquity in its sociopolitical constructs as well as its aesthetic manifestations. The rise of the modern European identity could not but exercise a strong influence on Greece itself. However, in sharp contrast to its glorified past, the cultural identity of modern Greece is embedded with the image of a “double-headed Hellenism”¹. This image - evoking the contrast between the “civilized” capitalist Europe and the “barbarian” pre-capitalist Orient - manifests a tension rooted in Greek modernity. It also describes a certain historical terminal that we suggest modern Greece as a cultural narration has currently reached; a conflict of imaginaries.

Two journeys

“The world had been unified, and there remained only the task of convincing a few last recalcitrant people who resisted modernization.”²

On July 1933, a cruise sponsored by the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) left Marseilles, its final destination being the congress site in Athens, Greece. Aboard the ship *Pâtris II* were main representatives of the Modern Movement. Sharing a mutual interest in an emerging modernism, the group drew its inspiration from the “primitive” sources spread across the Greek terrain. CIAM's leading figure, the architect Le Corbusier recounts:

“In the heat of the summer of 1933 we launched ourselves into the ancient waters of the Mediterranean, like Ulysses on his Odyssey.”

36 years later, in 1969, Pier Paolo Pasolini will reenact another journey, this time from the East to the West, that of Euripide's *Medea*, played by Maria Callas. *Medea's* world is one of static objects, invested by faith in magical powers. What Jason brings into this world is the vitality of geometrical form. He represents the free subject of Modernity, whose historical sense is one of linear progression. On their return to Greece, the drama progresses through the conflict and final collapse of the two worlds, mythical and rational, along with the forms of consciousness each one represents.

Viewed from a contemporary perspective, the journey of 1933 and *Medea's* story could illustrate the asymmetry surrounding the process of Greek modernization. In their encounter with the ancient past, the moderns sought for an image that confirmed their identity. Parthenon became the site where the Western imaginary met with the modern description of the world. *Medea's* story, on the other hand, manifests the conflict such an encounter entails. It becomes the story of the constitution of the “Great Divide”; where West and East meet, resides a cultural dissonance between a foreign-installed modernist ethos and a metaphysical pre-modern mentality.

The project

The project takes these two journeys, a historical and a cinematic one, as a basis to propose a reversed perspective upon Greek modernity. One that revisits the latter's tension not as something collateral to the current socioeconomic suspension, but as something central and urgent; a cultural trauma.

“To a certain degree, sacredness is in the eye of the beholder” is conceived as an exhibition project where the historical, the fictional and the subjective merge. Based in Vienna and Athens respectively, an artist and an art theorist, commence a dialogue that moves from the West to the East and vice versa. Through appropriation of textual references and historical images, the pair engages with the Greek example as a case of a narration that reached its limit. The voice of this narration is a double

voice; a dichotomised collective identity between West and East, due to the individual accounts and imaginaries imposed on the body of Greek modernity.

Envisaging the project in various editions, it is each time “staged” in the exhibition space as an environment where the textual and visual elements of the project are informed by a live performance element. More specifically, objects produced by Stefania Strouza through the reproduction of Medea’s lettertype, form an abstract visual code inspired by modernist design. These works will prepare accordingly the scenery where action takes place. Two sound-artists are invited in each occasion to perform an auditory approximation of the story of the “Great Divide”, based on Maria Calla’s operas and Pasolini’s *Medea* soundtrack. Sound becomes the third layer of narrative - along with the textual and visual – that explores cultural conflict as sonic dissonance.

“To a certain degree, sacredness is in the eye of the beholder” is conceived as an on-going project that manifests itself in different locations, while every location is considered vital to the dialogue in process and its visual manifestations.

Footnotes

1 Michael Herzfeld, *Anthropology through the Looking Glass*, Cambridge UP, 1989

2 Bruno Latour, *War of the Worlds: What about Peace*, Chicago:Prickly Paradigm Press, 2002, p.9