Greece in Crisis: Culture and the Politics of Austerity

23 May 2015
ERI building G51

This workshop is part of a two-year research network funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). For further details and for abstracts of papers please visit the project’s website: http://culpolgreekcrisis.com/

Programme

9.00-9.15 Introduction and Welcome
Professor Dimitris Tziovas (University of Birmingham)

9.15-10.45 Session 1: Economy, Culture and Institutions
Professor Roderick Beaton (King’s College London)
Foreshadowing the crisis: Lord Byron and the cultural and economic politics of Greece in 1824

Professor Dimitris Plantzos (University of Athens)
Amphipolitics: archaeological performance and governmentality in Greece under the crisis

Dr Lina Molokotos-Liederman (Uppsala University & Paris GSRL)
The Orthodox Church of Greece and the Economic Crisis: A Moment of Challenge and Opportunity

10.45-11.00 Tea and coffee

11.00-13.00 Session 2: Literature and Street Art
Professor Patricia Felisa Barbeito (Rhode Island School of Design)
‘Nothing feels right about this case’: Gender malaise and economic disorder in Petros Markaris’s Crisis Trilogy.

Ms Lambrini Kouzeli (Athens)

Creative writing workshops: A growing trend during the Greek crisis

Ms Julia Tulke (Berlin)

Visual Encounters with Crisis and Austerity: Reflections on the Cultural Politics of Contemporary Street Art in Athens

Professor Maria Boletsi (Leiden University)

From the Subject of the Crisis to the Subject in Crisis: Middle Voice on Greek Walls

13.00-14.00 Lunch

14.00-15.30  Session 3: Cinema and Music

Dr Lydia Papadimitriou (Liverpool John Moores University)

The economy and ecology of post-crisis Greek cinema: Between production, circulation and reception

Professor Vangelis Calotychos (Brown University)

On Being Good, Very Good, and Breaking Bad in Killer Times: The Film Economies of Yannis Economides

Dr Katerina Levidou (University of Athens and King’s College London)

Feasts in Time of ‘Plague’: Festivals of Western Art Music in Greece during the Crisis

15.30-16.00 Tea and coffee

16.00-17.30  Session 4: Festivals and Performance

Dr Eleftheria Ioannidou (University of Birmingham) & Dr. Natascha Siouzouli (Freie Universität Berlin)

Imperceptible Performances: A Recent History of the Hellenic Festival

Dr Philip Hager (University of Birmingham)

Performances of Democracy and Dramaturgies of the Crisis: The Return of History

Dr Alexandros Efklidis (Greek National Opera)

ABSTRACTS

Professor Roderick Beaton (King’s College London)

*Foreshadowing the crisis: Lord Byron and the cultural and economic politics of Greece in 1824*

Greece became a free, nominally sovereign state in 1830 thanks to the outcome of a bitterly fought internal struggle that took place during the Revolution, and reached its apogee during 1824. This was the year when Byron arrived at Missolonghi (in January), only to die of fever four months later. Byron’s role was pivotal in securing a massive loan for the Greek provisional from speculators in London; his death ensured that the value of the stock plunged before it was even delivered, and that most of the rest would be squandered. But Byron and his close ally Alexandros Mavrokordatos had been instrumental in internationalising the Greek conflict, in the face of fierce opposition from warlords such as Kolokotronis who saw in the acceptance of foreign loans a diminution of self-determination. This faultline in Greek society has not gone away, ever since. Even today, beneath the surface of the crisis and responses to it, can be discerned the same unresolved conflict between the autarky of the warlords of 1821 and the *klefíka tragoudia*, on the one hand, and the integrationist model of which the earliest proponents included Mavrokordatos and Lord Byron.

Professor Dimitris Plantzos (University of Athens)

*Amphipolitics: archaeological performance and governmentality in Greece under the crisis*

The discovery of a monumental “Macedonian” tomb at Amphipolis in northern Greece in the summer of 2014 prompted a wave of enthusiasm among archaeologists, politicians and the public at large; at the same time, however, Greek nationalism was given the chance to revisit some of its favourite themes of national exception, racial distinction, and historical determinism. Moreover, several government officials, as well as members of the clergy, speculated on the identity of the tomb’s occupant, or the monument’s date and national significance, thus performing as archaeologists for the sake of an ever eager public.

With the excavation under way, the promotion of its significance begun to acquire a demonstrably biopolitical character, as Amphipolis was strategically deployed in order to organize the Greek population in the ways best suited to fulfil government policies. In this paper, government rhetoric and actions related to Amphipolis will be examined against the by now standard practice of investing plainly biopolitical experiments – such the indefinite detention of undocumented immigrants by the police – with the splendour of classical Greece: thus, the casual arrests of illegal aliens are organized in the framework of an operation officially termed “Hospitable Zeus” and the violent rounding-up of drug users in the streets of Athens is similarly known as “Thetis” (in Greek mythology, a sea-nymph). As Greece finds itself engulfed in a cruel economic as well as political and social crisis, this paper will address the biopolitical uses of the classical past in order to examine ways in which the state deploys archaeology as a means to establish the ostensibly temporary state of exception of the crisis as the new, paradigmatic, style of government.
Dr Lina Molokotos-Liederman (Uppsala University & Paris GSRL)

*The Orthodox Church of Greece and the Economic Crisis: A Moment of Challenge and Opportunity*

The severity of the economic crisis that has ravaged Greece since 2009 has affected several layers of Greek society, already disadvantaged people but also the middle class. In response, the Orthodox Church of Greece has stepped up its charitable work by increasing its material, spiritual and emotional support to disadvantaged people. The Church’s social welfare services fill the gap left by the state welfare system and complement the social assistance of secular voluntary organizations, both of which do not have adequate resources to effectively address the social needs of the Greek population that are most in need. As such, the Church has a de facto important place in the Greek welfare system becoming an important social welfare provider and partner. This raises a more general and existential question: in addition to traditional forms of spiritual support and pastoral care, is or should the Church be a social welfare actor and partner, complementing the State in the area of social welfare? More generally, this is a moment of challenge and opportunity for the Church to demonstrate its social relevance in contemporary Greek society, to bring people closer to the Church, to begin a process of a greatly needed reform and modernization, and to redefine its financial and political relationship with the State. Most importantly, the crisis is a catalyst for the Church to re-examine its social and theological identity and future course and an opportunity to engage in a much needed soul-searching reflection and action on these issues.

Professor Patricia Felisa Barbeito (Rhode Island School of Design)

*‘Nothing feels right about this case’: Gender malaise and economic disorder in Petros Markaris’s Crisis Trilogy.***

The noir novel’s current resurgence as a popular global phenomenon is attributable to the fact that writers at the margins of Anglo-U.S. cultural hegemony recycle the sense of disillusionment and anti-institutional worldview found in canonical American noir, while parodying many of its conventions, in order to “explor[e] the social effects of globalization” and “examine the revolutionary possibilities of literature and popular culture” (Nichols, 15). Given the devastating effects of the financial crisis on Greek society, which has practically demolished the social safety net and left the majority of the country’s youth with virtually no prospects, it is not at all surprising that a critique of the global economy and financial crime is pursued at this time by a Greek author like Petros Markaris in his Inspector Haritos “Crisis Trilogy” novels. They do so primarily, I argue, by tapping into the way noir crime writers before him use culturally resonant gendered anxieties to “unleash demons bottled up in the national psyche” (Christopher, 37). All three of these crisis novels target a particular aspect of the crisis – corrupt bankers in the first; tax-evaders in the second; the political betrayals of what is known as the “generation of the Polytechnic” in the third. Yet the dark and bleak narratives that drive the main action in these novels are juxtaposed with another, developing story, Haritos’s evolving family relations, particularly to the tough, sharp-tongued daughter that resembles him, Katerina. Indeed, in the “Crisis Trilogy” novels, Katerina’s trials and tribulations as she struggles to find a meaningful, socially engaged place for herself in a society reduced to tatters take an increasingly prominent and constitutive role, so much so that she is positioned, ultimately, as a successor to or partner in her father’s
brand of policing. This paper will thus read Markaris’s use of gendered malaise and dismantling of the traditional hardboiled noir novel as a means of counteracting social chaos with the pioneering community-building represented by a younger generation whose “feminization” is a sign of promise and potential.

Ms Lambrini Kouzeli (Athens)

Creative writing workshops: A growing trend during the Greek crisis

For the last six years Greek society has been undergoing rapid changes because of the economic crisis. Fiction, genre fiction in particular and more precisely crime fiction, has been quick to represent the most dramatic or sensational aspects of these changes. But the crisis has not affected literature on the obvious level of the representation of reality alone. Book sales have dropped significantly and book circulation, twelve years after the onset of an unprecedented publishing boom in the late 90s, has started to shrink. Booksellers, authors and publishers alike have experienced loss of income and sought alternative sources of revenue. Creative writing courses, a long and well established institution in the UK and USA, have started to flourish in urban Greece, especially in Athens, mostly in the larger publishing houses and bookshops. Established authors, but some new authors too, along with editors and critics offer a wide range of creative writing courses in all genres, for all aspirations and budgets. This paper aims to map these new literary niche markets, explain their connection to the crisis and show how they are affecting and changing Greek literature in the longer term.

Ms Julia Tulke (Berlin)

Visual Encounters with Crisis and Austerity: Reflections on the Cultural Politics of Contemporary Street Art in Athens

And through all this crisis I think we all actually should feel lucky – in quotation marks – because it makes us more creative. I was talking with another artist yesterday exactly about that: we are creative now because if we were in a period where everything is calm and nothing really happens we wouldn’t have the motivation to express ourselves. It’s not a good situation to be in, I’m not saying that, but I think it makes you creative.

In contemporary Athens the cultural practice of street art has gained new significance as an unsanctioned medium of public expression. This development is deeply entwined with the transformation of the material and social landscapes of the city that has been brought about by the crisis and its austerity regime. The ruptures that disinvestment and austerity inflict upon urban space create surfaces and spaces such as unfinished and abandoned architectures or empty shop windows that are potentially intriguing for appropriation via artistic intervention. Furthermore, the severe un- and underemployment of large shares of the productive population, particularly the young and highly educated, has set free a vast amount of creative potential. These aspects have contributed to a quantitative increase of

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1 Refur (street artist), interviewed by the author, April 2013.
street art in recent years. Being fundamentally entwined with all aspects of everyday life, crisis and austerity also deeply permeate the realm of imagination and cultural expression – a dynamic that is reflected in the qualitative depth of Athenian street art.

Based on materials and observations from ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in Athens in 2013, my presentation will outline how Athenian street artists reflect upon and process the crisis – from the aestheticisation of protest to expressive accounts of everyday life under austerity – and discuss the historical, affective, and political narratives and iconographies that are mobilised therein. Analysing works of street art both as visual artefacts and as performative practices, I will argue that they are not merely representations of the given socio-cultural context they are embedded in but also have the potential to actively transform and politicise urban space.

Professor Maria Boletsi (Leiden University)

*From the Subject of the Crisis to the Subject in Crisis: Middle Voice on Greek Walls*

In his recent novella Κοντά στην Κοιλάτα (Close to the belly, 2014), Sotiris Dimitriou offers a dystopian vision of the Greek crisis-stricken nation. From the first pages, the practice of finger-pointing—assigning blame for the crisis—features as people’s primary obsession. The starting point of Dimitriou’s novella, however, is a well-known Greek wall-writing featuring the verb ‘βασανίζομαι.’ Since 2009, this wall-writing has been popping up everywhere in Greek cities, on the walls of buildings, on monuments, in parks, on benches and garbage containers, on windows of bankrupt businesses and shops. In Dimitriou’s narrative, this wall-writing becomes a temporal marker: history is split into the era before and after ‘βασανίζομαι.’ But how does ‘βασανίζομαι’ relate to practices of (self-)assignment of blame? What kind of response does it form to popular narratives on the Greek crisis?

Unlike in most politically motivated wall-writings, in which the addressee is identifiable and usually different from the addresser, in “βασανίζομαι...” there is no implied ‘you.’ The subject (the ‘I’) is the one affected by the action, but the agent causing the torment remains ambiguous: it could be the subject itself or an external undefined agent. This is typical for middle voice constructions, in which the subject remains inside the designated action and is affected by it.

This talk explores the potential of the middle voice in fostering alternative accounts of the Greek subject against the backdrop of the crisis. In ‘βασανίζομαι,’ the middle voice helps envision resistant modes of subjectivity that cannot be articulated in current hegemonic discourses, because they resist the binary distinctions these discourses rely on—particularly the oppositions active versus passive, innocence versus guilt, and mastery versus victimhood. In the wall-writing at hand, the middle voice enables a notion of agency that de-centers the dominant notion of the liberal ‘willing’ subject but also the notion of the subject as already determined by discourse and ideology. The use of the middle voice does not come without political pitfalls, which stem from the difficulty of constructing strong positions of responsibility through a middle-voice discourse. These risks are addressed next to the conditions under which the middle voice could constitute a productive critical tool, able to accommodate the voices of dispossessed individuals.
Dr Lydia Papadimitriou (Liverpool John Moores University)

*The economy and ecology of post-crisis Greek cinema: Between production, circulation and reception*

The paper will explore the contexts of production, circulation and reception of Greek films since 2009. It will focus, in particular, on the changing dynamics between the national and the transnational in the ways in which the films are developed, funded, produced, distributed, and critically received. To illustrate some of the points made, the paper will focus on two recent films from the ‘Greek Weird/New Wave’ that explicitly thematise the crisis, Alexandros Avranas’ Miss Violence (2013) and Syllas Tzioumerkas’ A Blast (2014), and trace their trajectories in the context of the changing economy and ecology of Greek cinema.

Professor Vangelis Calotychos (Brown University)

*On Being Good, Very Good, and Breaking Bad in Killer Times: The Film Economies of Yannis Economides*

The eponymous protagonist of Stratos/Small Fish (2014), Yiannis Economides’ most recent film, puts all his money into paying for a large, black hole. From it, he hopes, will eventually emerge Stratos’ incarcerated onetime patron, a despicable loan shark. Yet one of his collaborators warns that the hole may suck us all up instead. Certainly, it threatens to suck dry the world-weary Stratos, even though Vangelis Mourikis, the actor who plays him, underscores his character’s nobility by noting how, to his considerable credit, Stratos is a figure that knows “how to pay the debt.” Indeed, he not only pays his debt, but also assumes the debts of less heroic souls by supplementing work in an industrial bakery with some occasional moonlighting as a deliberate and effective hired assassin.

This sliver of the plot seems like a promising basis for analyzing Economides’ perspective on the economy in this as well as in his previous three feature-length films (Matchbox; Soul-Kicking; Knifer). Only that the director himself has cautioned us against seeing the Greek crisis writ large in his films, preferring to point to a larger crisis of western civilization that is, admittedly, more pronounced and evident in crisis-torn Greece. Regardless of this plea, this talk will focus on the role of the economy in Yiannis Economides’ films and the ways by which it speaks to ethics, sociology, and politics in troubled times. What does it tell us about being good, very good, in killer times? Does one need to be breaking bad to do good in a rotten state? And is such individual intervention really cathartic, does it lead to any reform of the system or accomplish much of anything? The talk aims to relate these concerns to the director’s by now recognizable aesthetics, his view of language and image, the stylistics of cumulation and repetition, static shots and minimal scores—what is the effect, if not the end, of such a veritable soul-kicking?

Dr Katerina Levidou (University of Athens and King’s College London)

*Feasts in Time of ‘Plague’: Festivals of Western Art Music in Greece during the Crisis*

Situated on the fringes of Southeast Europe, Greece came into the spotlight of the international community during the recent economic and socio-cultural crisis. Although the
circumstances and repercussions of the crisis have come under scrutiny by scholars working in a variety of fields, the cultural, and more specifically the musical, reality of the last few years is only just beginning to attract the attention of the academic community. In the context of the harsh difficulties with which the Greek musical world has been faced due to severe funding cuts, the astonishing blossoming of festivals of Western art (the so-called ‘classical’) music in the country is of particular interest.

This paper will map musical activity relating to festivals that involve classical music in contemporary Greece, while at the same time identifying the economic, social, cultural, and more specifically artistic factors that make up their profiles. It will also offer an interpretation of the economic, cultural and artistic factors that contribute to the survival, and in fact expansion, of this area of cultural activity at a trying point in the country’s history. The way in which festivals have responded to the Greek economic crisis by adjusting established artistic practices to the new financial and artistic and conditions will be highlighted. Particular emphasis will be put on the contribution of indigenous and international forces in the organisation, financial support, participation in and attendance of festivals, as well as in the role of private initiative and public support in the organisation of such events. My research exploits (among others) data collected through fieldwork at four festivals in 2014 (the Nafplio festival, the International Classical Music Festival of Cyclades, Mani-Sonnenlink and Serenata Criti) more specifically through participant observation, audience questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with festival organisers (artistic directors, members of production companies, members of the respective municipalities), musicians and members of the audience. This research is part of NSRF-funded project ‘Western Art Music at the Time of Crisis: An Interdisciplinary Study of Contemporary Greek Culture and European Integration’.

Dr Eleftheria Ioannidou (University of Birmingham) & Dr. Natascha Siouzouli (Freie Universität Berlin)

Imperceptible Performances: A Recent History of the Hellenic Festival

The focus of this paper lies on the recent history of the Hellenic Festival, discussing the so-called new phase after 2006, when Giorgos Loukos took over as artistic director. While the Festival claimed an international profile promoting collaborations with major European festivals and theatre companies, its policies had to go through restructuring due to the raging economic crisis. The years from 2010 to the present marked a rupture with previous discourses and politics, turning the Festival into a topos of transformation and fluidity that seems to elude certain conditions of production and reception pertaining to its past history. The paper presents an inquiry into the official policies as much as the artistic practices which constitute this topos, while also mapping out the emergent trends which produce its particular dynamic.

Dr Philip Hager (University of Birmingham)

Performances of Democracy and Dramaturgies of the Crisis: The Return of History

‘when History reawakens, it is the reawakening that matters’ (Badiou: 99)
In Greece the period that followed the fall of the colonels Junta was discursively determined by the 'restoration' of democracy, national 'reconciliation' and institutional 'change'. Politics seemed to transcend the ideological and political conflicts of the past as part of the integration within the wider context in which a European Union (meaning, apart from the common European market, a European identity and a transnational political sphere) was being constructed. From Konstantinos Karamanlis’ axiomatic mantra ‘we belong to the West’ to the modernising version of the Panhellenic Socialist Party, democracy as an institutional and ideological framework was crystallised somewhere between Fukuyama’s ‘end of history’ and Anthony Giddens’ ‘third way’. Between the neoliberal doctrine of ‘free market’ capitalism (as it emerges in the EU particularly after 1992) and the modernisers of social democracy (by and large extending neoliberalisation rather than reforming late capitalism) a post-political state was established, which ‘refuses to recognise the antagonistic dimension of the political’ (Mouffe: 2). The current crisis demonstrates in the most painful way that the demands for democracy of the anti-colonels movement in Greece (and of similar movements beyond the borders) during the last forty years were limited to the reiteration of a consensus without any possibility of questioning, following the celebrated ‘end of history’: the ‘final victory’ of liberal democracy and capitalism as the singular historical prospect of humanity.

Since the 2008 financial crisis and after what Alain Badiou calls the ‘rebirth of history’, dissenting politics seem to return to the forefront within Europe and beyond. A series of everyday (political) practices perform alternative dramaturgies of the political, reframing demands for democracy and social justice. Posing these demands anew, new political subjectivities reshape social fabrics drastically in Greece and in other places. Using Nova Melancholia’s Walter Benjamin: Theses on the Philosophy of History that was staged in Athens in January 2009 as a point of departure and looking at a range of public quotidian performances, in this paper I will map the nomadic space of a democratic politics of dissent, where movement is ‘being distributed by turbulence’ that ‘holds space and simultaneously affects all its points’ transcending the boundaries set by the State’s ‘parallel, laminar layers’ (Deleuze and Guattari: 400-1). My aim is to dwell into the historical trajectories evoked by post-2008 dramaturgies and performances of the political; practices that not only challenge the discursive and material domination of the neoliberal project by staging the political project of democracy, but also perform the ‘awakening of history’ as the fundamental feature of democratic politics.

Works Cited


2 Nova Melancholia is a Greek performance group that was formed in 2006 and has been active since 2007.
The economic crisis that hit Greece in 2009 produced an unprecedented realm of politically driven works of art on virtually every field. Very few examples of such work appeared in the traditionally conservative music theatre production, however. The starting point for the creation of an opera for the crisis was an invitation from an alternative opera house in Berlin, the Neukoellner Oper, back in 2010. My original idea of a radical adaptation of Verdi’s *Aida* soon turned into a common project of a creative team, comprised by the composer Kharalambos Goyos, the writer Dimitris Dimopoulos, the dramaturge Bernhard Glocksin and myself. I have been entertaining the idea of a chamber version of this grand opera for years. Being a product of the late colonial world, *Aida* is a story of conquerors and conquered. This was, in my view, an ideal platform on which a new story could be told, a story of the relation between Greece and Germany – or, rather, that of the European South and the European North. After more than a year of intense work, a new opera was born, located in the headquarters of the European Central Bank (ECB) in Frankfurt, and with bankers, Troika delegates and ECB trainees as its main protagonists.

In this paper I will try to describe, in retrospect, how the creation of an artwork on the crisis ran simultaneously to an ongoing process that dramatically restructured Europe. I will also juxtapose the different reception the show had in Germany and in Greece. I will finally draw on some aspects of my experience of the Greek-German collaboration and the tensions provoked by the fact that the initial expectations of our German partners to produce a sympathetic narrative of the Greek crisis and its effect on everyday life were shuttered. These expectations, which exemplified a stereotypic view of the actual socio-political situation in Greece, hid much more than naive sympathy. In my view, they were, in fact, indicative of the survival of post-colonial patterns inside the European Union.