

On the need to DEFAULT

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The hovering image of a never-to-be-realised future

A faded sign hangs from scaffolding beside a weathered redbrick building. As the camera pans across its surface, we see a proposed development: images of open piazzas, covered walkways and resplendent, tree-lined boulevards – all nested behind a row of majestic cranes which front the harbour. To the left of the architectural rendering, written in both Greek and English and facing the real-life counterpart of that same harbour are the words: *Piraeus Cultural Coast: the port welcomes the citizens*. In almost any other context, such a sign would hardly warrant a second glance; simply another large urban development project loudly and glossily proclaiming the societal benevolence of its offering to all that pass by. Much like the animated billboards that crowd the skyline of an imagined futuristic Los Angeles in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, the sign and its message promise a future of prosperity and conviviality, all thanks to the prescient vision of those charged with shaping the urban and economic landscapes of contemporary cities.

But contemporary Athens is not simply any other city. It lies at the very epicentre of the two major crises which threaten to undermine the very notion of a European Union. The first of these – that of finance and sovereign debt – is manifest in the aforementioned depiction of an idealised future port city that now seems an impossible fantasy. This is reinforced by the sweeping panned shots of the cityscape that immediately precede this scene, showing a city that could be frozen in time: a cavalcade of silent high-rises, watched from above by the silhouetted Acropolis.

In contrast to the financial crisis that has brought about this freeze, Athens has at the same time to contend with a crisis of movement – namely, the vast numbers of refugees who are arriving on its doorstep, many struggling to make it further than the very same port which continues to signal its faded welcome – only it is a hollow one, it seems. Driven from their homes by wars for which NATO nations are themselves at least indirectly culpable, they arrive at the port to find that the resolutions and values that by rights should form the basis for asylum in this new land are no longer as universal as many had believed. Instead, these recent arrivals are greeted with the same state of stasis that the city's residents find themselves in.

A similar contradiction between movement and stasis is encapsulated in the very next shot: an endless row of tents running parallel to the very edge of the harbour – a kind of liminal space in-between the sea out of which many have arrived and the city they wish to enter. A sense of uneasiness pervades this scene, with the threat (spoken or unspoken) perceived by many Europeans about the refugee arrivals inadvertently embodied by another banner that hangs directly above this impromptu tent city. The banner commemorates the 2,500th anniversary of the battle of Salamis – a battle in which an alliance of Greek city states successfully defeated the invading Achaemenid Empire from Persia. A new meaning creeps into the sign's declared "welcome" to "the citizens": the refugees are *not* (yet) Europe's citizens. They are by extension *not* welcome here.

A crisis without end

However, rather than merely replicate the binaries which are established within these first few frames, those of stasis/movement, citizen/foreigner etc., the subsequent narratives and networks examined in Lukas Rehm and Tilmann Rödiger's multi-channel installation *DEFAULT* (2016/17) serve instead to undermine the sureties and soundbites so often served up by media coverage of recent events in Greece. Understanding that the particularity of this current crisis lies in its apparently *irresolvable* nature, the work deliberately foregoes dialectical analysis in favour of

probing the manner in which contemporary events have compelled the inhabitants of Athens to think beyond and through habitual approaches to the management and resolution of the crises they face. That this mode of inquiry takes place in Greece feels particularly pertinent, considering that the semantic history of the term “crisis” has its roots in the Greek language. Derived from the word κρίσις, “krisis” originally meant to differentiate, to judge, to select, to decide, or to separate – in other words, it was commonly understood to infer that a situation had reached a crucial *turning-point*; that the time was now rife for a critical diagnosis, a judgement and, inevitably, a new course of action.¹ However this change was to occur, it was inevitable that it would do so – crisis was therefore always linked to movement and flux; it was never stationary. Even in the eighteenth century, when the term acquired its contemporary meaning, the only unknown quantity to a crisis was the “when and how” it would be resolved, and by what means.²

In contrast, the current, *immobile* crisis challenges its spatio-temporal limits and the inherent faith in resolution that has historically accompanied moments of *krisis*. The term itself has, it seems, been thrown into a crisis powerful enough to affect its ordering function, alongside its concept of historical and organising space. The current crisis is defined by a political stalemate – a time when even the smallest advances in legislation are painstaking and complicit parliamentary systems are dominated by often indistinguishable parties that align to mouth the vacuous abstractions of an outmoded political vocabulary – alongside the demand for the unfettered acceleration of global capitalism.³ It is a crisis that has produced many new words and ideas, but little material change. Instead, a crisis mode, crouched and paralysing, affects nearly every field and nearly every aspect of daily life in Greece.

The particularities of the contemporary situation in Greece – in which discourse jostles with the passivity of social and political life – thus calls for a response that moves beyond the teleological framework which has typically accompanied the mediatisation of the so-called “Greek crisis”. – either the expression of awe at the immensity of the crisis, or castigation of those hit hardest for their impotence. In contrast, the various narratives scattered throughout *DEFAULT* appear more than willing to take up Adorno’s “almost insoluble task” and “let neither the power of others, nor your own powerlessness, stupefy us”.⁴ In so doing, each of the interviewed inhabitants of the city is shown to have not simply thought of a new solution to the problem, but also to draw upon Foucault’s exhortation to think “the same things differently”.⁵ Thus, George Vichas and his team at the Metropolitan Community Clinic in Elliniko bypass the legal and bureaucratic structures of the state to provide a direct link between those able to offer medical assistance and those otherwise unable to receive it; fostering what he calls “Energetic Solidarity”. Or a foreman at a building site elects to informally adopt the Afghanistan refugee Reza, rather than dismiss him, upon the latter presenting him with a bucket of mud in place of a clean one. The notion of “thinking the same things differently” even ties oceanographer Nikoleta Bellou’s research on the types of organisms that settle onto artificial substrates to a broader way of thinking about the connectivity of borders and patterns of migration; especially in light of the numerous fences and checkpoints which have, in recent years, amplified the concentration of asylum seekers in places such as Athens. As Bellou notes when discussing the impact of the human intervention into marine environments: “Water does not have borders. So water is actually connected [...] It’s not that I do something here in Greece, and it will not have an impact somewhere else”.

¹ Edmonson, George and Mladek, Klaus, “Introduction: Sovereignty Crises”, in Edmonson, George and Mladek, Klaus (eds.), *Sovereignty in Ruins: A Politics of Crisis*, Durham NC and London: Duke University Press, 2017, 2

² Reinhardt Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988, 127

³ Bahtsetzis, Sotirios, “Democrisis: Notes on the Capitalist Imaginary of Europe”, *e-flux*, 57, September, 2014

⁴ Adorno, *Theodor. Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, London: Verso, 2005, 57

⁵ Michel Foucault, “For an Ethic of Discomfort”, in Faubion, James D. (ed.), *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, New York, NY: The New Press, 1994, 444

Working against the doco-drama form

Complementing this approach of working against the grain at the level of received narrative structures, the format employed by Rehm and Rödiger similarly questions the sureties usually inherent in contemporary media and its artistic concomitant, the essay film. This form of documentary cinema's ascension has been, in many ways, tightly tethered to the increased mediatisation of crises and the wide circulation of media narratives. One possible reason for the essay film's prevalence in these times of crisis is that, unlike other forms of contemporary cinema, it is commonly held to possess an indexical link to the real: "offering a mediated encounter with physical reality in which a heightened attunement [sic] to the actuality of our shared world becomes possible".⁶

Of course, there has always been opposition to the essay film's purported relationship to the real.⁷ But rather than probing such essentialist concerns regarding the moving image's ability (or otherwise) to invoke an inherent "truth", *DEFAULT* instead foregrounds the ambiguities and lacunae which open up within the documentary process itself. It proffers a fleeting glance into a societal crisis in all its complexity and frailty, without assuming that the act of filming can be wholly non-interventionist.

The artists' approach sees the narrative track of an interview suddenly shift due to the particular train of thought of the interviewee, or an impromptu question posed by the translator, whose command of the language often results in the artists being relegated to mere observers during the filming process. In a similar vein, several interviews need to be momentarily halted while the translator summarises the contents of the preceding discussion for the artists, while in others, languages occasionally change mid-dialogue. Bellou begins her interview in German, then at one point laughingly apologising "I have to switch to English. I can't speak science in German anymore". This in turn prompts the viewer to question the extent to which other testimonies might be altered or lost over the course of their multiple translations. However, rather than a hindrance, such interventions, interruptions and (mis)translations attest to the complexity and fragility of the documentary format; simultaneously foregrounding the automatism of the camera as a means for encountering the world, while also rejecting any attempt to arrive at the "ecstatic truth" that is so characteristic of the essay film.⁸ This position, it could well be argued, offers us perhaps the best path out of the inherent Platonism of the debate concerning whether mediatised appearances can in fact be understood as anything more than deceptive seductions – incapable of leading to knowledge. In this regard, and given the immensity of the current crisis's impact on the lives of *real* people and societies throughout the world, it is worth recalling Donna Haraway's warning in 1988 that the contemporary critique of objectivity then (as now) risked giving way to a social constructivism that would ultimately compromise our need for a real, shared existence.⁹ There is a visible world out there, and the crises of the present moment compel us to seek solace in the traces of the real which persist in and through the codes of representation and translation.

6 Balsom, Erika, "The Reality-Based Community", *e-flux*, 83, June 2017

7 As early as 1990 Trinh Minh-ha was declaring that "there is no such thing as documentary" (see Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Documentary Is/Not a Name", *October*, 52, Spring 1990, 76)

8 In his 1999 Minnesota Declaration for example, Werner Herzog calls the truth of cinema "a merely superficial truth, the truth of accountants," and opposes to it the "deeper strata [of] poetic, ecstatic truth 'that can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization.'" See Werner Herzog, "Minnesota Declaration: Truth and Fact in Documentary Cinema," <http://www.walkerart.org/magazine/1999/minnesota-declaration-truth-and-fact-in-documentary-cinema> (accessed 18 July 2017)

9 Donna Haraway, "Situating Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", *Feminist Studies*, 14, no. 3, Autumn, 1988, 575-99

The need to restore DEFAULT settings

Perhaps the most pertinent example of the real to emerge amidst the various imperfect codes of representation occurs, once again, on the pier at Piraeus port. As his interview draws to a close, the retired harbour worker motions to a group of children playing in the spot where he normally fishes. The camera slowly pans to show us three small boys precariously attempting to retrieve a basketball that has fallen in the water. The music builds and the tension mounts – it's surely not possible for them to retrieve it without falling in – only for the camera to suddenly move away and focus on another scene: an enormous German cruise ship slowly departing from the harbour, with a full contingent of tourists on board. Moments ago we have heard the interviewed retiree describe having to sell his fishing boat on account of the governor of Athens imposing new taxes on all Greek boat-owners (the result, one assumes, of yet another round of EU-imposed austerity measures). Yet here is a colossal ship, its passengers no doubt heading back to prosperous Germany. As it slowly pulls away, the camera reveals another group: three asylum seekers sitting on the edge of the harbour. They are waving goodbye to those on board. Long seconds tick by as all three wave their arms at staggered, but enthusiastic, intervals. We recognise a timeless, perhaps a universal, gesture of simple, strangerly goodwill. No one waves back.

Observing this scene – and the concomitant narratives of citizenship, risk-taking, responsibilities, and social niceties that it summons – the impetus to “default” is brought into sharp relief. Whether interpreted as a default on a loan, or as an operational resetting of a device to its default settings, the need to short-circuit the present moment and begin afresh cuts across all of the narratives in the work. Yet its need is perhaps most pertinently expressed in the motionless, passive gaze of the cruise ship occupants. Faced with a raft of contradictions (the “tug of war” that inevitably leads to conflicts, as the actor, consultant and prominent blogger Yorgos Vouzoulidis mentions during one interview) and an almost Kafkaesque state of fluctuating stasis that sees precarious, ephemeral solutions taking the place of permanent institutions, surely the only option left available is to hit “reset” and to begin again. Only this time, to do the same things differently.