

## **SUPERMARKET THEATRES, OVERSUPPLY OF LABOUR AND NEW HOLDERS OF CAPITAL IN GREEK THEATRE DURING THE DEBT CRISIS (2010-2019)**

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*Greek Theatre; Economic Crisis; Supermarket Theatres; Pierre Bourdieu; Field Theory; Onassis Stegi; Drama School Graduates*

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**Summary**

*Using Pierre Bourdieu's field methodology, the article tries to chart the rearrangements within the theatrical field in Greece during the decade of the economic crisis (2010-2019). The article identifies the distortions of the Greek theatrical market, such as the oversupply of labour and the replacement of theatres with an artistic imprint by the here called "supermarket" theatres. In addition, we follow the attempt of the "Stegi" by the Onassis Foundation to emerge as the central holder of the (symbolic) capital within this theatrical field, occupying the place Amore Theater used to have. Finally, it is concluded that the theatrical field - and because of the pandemic that followed the economic crisis - resists against fully mapping, as new initiatives and groupings are still taking place within it.*

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## INTRODUCTION

### From Amore Theatre to a Fragmented Theatrical Landscape

If we were to point to a milestone regarding the Greek financial debt crisis of the last decade,<sup>1</sup> this would be the then Prime Minister's declaration—from the borderland island of Kastellorizo—of the country's recourse to, and borrowing from the International Monetary Fund on April 23, 2010. Two years earlier, on May 31, 2008, a terrible piece of news shook the theatergoers: "Amore Theatre" in Athens, which hosted the "Theater of the South" ["Θέατρο του Νότου"], shut down, thereby discontinuing its seventeen-year presence in the city's theatre scene.

"Amore" was not just a private theatre:<sup>2</sup> having gathered a vigorous team of translators, contributors, but also, mainly old, and younger actors, around itself, its founder and art director Giannis Chouvardas (as well as his other two fellow art co-directors, Thomas Moschopoulos and Eleftheria Sapountzi) had managed to determine the country's theatrical trends. With hundreds of new plays being presented, as well as new directions of classical texts, with its hundreds of productions (all of which were sold-out), "Amore" had in fact accomplished the mission of a (the) National Theatre. During its active years, the theatre

managed to scenically work through the classic dramaturgy, create new trends in direction and acting, offer young, talented people the opportunity to work alongside the more experienced, older ones, and introduce the Athenian audience to contemporary writings, as well as to modern directing and scenographic foreign attempts. In retrospect, the association of its shutdown with the forthcoming economic crisis was self-evident; its closure seemed to foreshadow the future of Athenian theatres during the austerity environment that would follow.

Nonetheless, just as the economic crisis had, in fact, started earlier (Garefalakis et al. 2017: 177-187; Sarafalidis, 2017: 1-35), so too the problems in "Amore Theatre" were not new, the most serious of which were, as reported by the contributors in its shutdown letter, the low profits, despite the state grants, but also the preexisting – already before the economic crisis – uncertainty over those grants. To this we can also add the expiration of the tenancy agreement, possibly the – by then – inappropriateness of the space (there were two stages: the big blackbox one and a smaller one), which was maybe pushed to its limit after 17 years of operation, as well as the undertaking of the art direction of the National Theatre by Giannis Chouvardas, in 2008 (Loverdou, 2008).

Someone would think that since "Amore" had closed, precluding the economic sparsity in the theatrical field, more Athenian theaters would follow, after the outbreak of the economic crisis. This would not only be due to the total eclipse of state funding since 2012, so vital to the survival and flourishing of all non-commercial theatres over the past decades, but also to the fact that no other theatre institution at the time seemed ready to present an artistic programme similar to "Amore's" one, becoming the "centre"

1 An overview of the Greek debt crisis can be found in: Kouretas and Vlamis 2010: 391-404; Baltas, 2013, 32-37; Ardagna and Caselli, 2014, 291-323.

2 "Amore", like many other theatres in Greece, was a private non-profit organisation, partly financed by the state (Ministry of Culture), through a grant system for theatrical productions. This system can be considered responsible for shaping the modern Greek theatre landscape, since it freed the non-state theatres from (some) financial pressures, creating (especially in Athens) competitive theatre structures against the state-financed National Theatre itself. The Ministry of Culture's grant system operated from the 1990s until the outbreak of the financial crisis, when funding for non-state theatres was completely cut off.

of Athenian theatrical life. In other words, nobody seemed ready to concentrate the biggest share of the symbolic, alongside the financial capital, into the new disrupted environment the austerity had imposed. And, in fact, some other “players” will be forced to follow “Amore” during the next years: Patsalidis and Stavrakopoulou (2014: 10) note about the Greek theatrical landscape during the crisis that “even companies which for many years managed to maintain impressive standards have run out of steam (e.g. “Aplo Theatro” [Ἀπλό θέατρο], “Theatros Anixis” [Θέατρο της Ἀνοιξίς], “Amphitheatro” [Ἀμφι-Θέατρο], “Piramatiki Skini” [Πειραματική Σκηνή], amongst others)”. In any case, as wages and pensions were cut, all kinds of capital grants disappeared, the living standard of a large part of the population plummeted, and social peace seemed to be more fragile than ever – in a few words, a volatile social setting was created–, no one would expect to favour theatre, and primarily, audience attendance. However, just like in more tragic historical times, such as the Nazi Occupation (1941-1944), what was observed in Greek theatre during the economic crisis was the exact opposite; and this constitutes, of course, an indication of theatre’s endurance against any social agitation.

In 2009, that is before the outbreak of the economic crisis, productions of any theatrical kind, which were presented in Athens, were approximately 350-400 (Patsalidis, 2019). In 2013 the productions went up to 1.050, in 2014 to 1.447, in 2015 to 1.542 and in 2016 to almost 1.700 (Moundraki, 2017). Counting the total of Athenian theatres’ productions is maybe a feat that proves to be impossible–and this accounts for the deviation in numbers from one critique to the next–, since we will have to also include one or two-night presentations, experimental performances in various places

and not only in official theatres, as well as any kind of shows by one or more artists, and not necessarily theatrical. Critics, in fact, tended to complain about this plethora as it was impossible for them to attend as many performances as they would probably wish to. Likewise, in 2008, the recorded theatrical venues only within the boundaries of Athens (and not in the neighbouring municipalities-districts) amounted to 108, while by 2016 the venues-theatres would reach 133 and be on the increase. Over just the past year, in 2020, director Dimitris Karantzas announced the opening of a new (actually, older but under suspension) theatre, while “Cartel Theatre” moved outside of downtown to an abandoned factory space, funded by the Onassis “Stegi”. In fact, the mobility of troupes and actors from one space to another, given their lack of permanent housing, is another factor that does not allow, since today, for a complete record of all the productions.

The following article, drawing on examples such as the “Neos Kosmos Theatre” [“Θέατρο του Νέου Κόσμου”] and implementing the methodological principles of Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory, attempts to chart and provide an explanatory framework for this paradoxical theatrical landscape (less money-more productions and venues), which emerged in Athens during the debt crisis. A note is necessary here: in the article, “Greek” is identified with the theatre, which is produced and consumed at the capital Athens. Unfortunately, despite the decentralisation efforts made by local theatres (some of them with state funding) in the rest of the country, even in Thessaloniki, spatially, but also in essence, Greek theatre follows the concentration in Athens, which is also observed in many other areas of Greek social life.

## METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK:

### Bourdieu's Field Theory

In this journey throughout the recent Greek theatrical landscape, we will try to draw on field methodology, dealing with theatrical phenomena as inter-connected with each other into a network of interests. The concept of “field”, as developed by Pierre Bourdieu, attempts to overcome difficulties and shortcoming that arise from methodological views such as the communitarian one, incorporating at the same time all their positive elements.<sup>3</sup> The field is differentiated from the community as a concept, since it does not have an institutional sign, but also in terms of the degree of connection of its members. If, as Pierre Bourdieu notes (Bourdieu, 2007: 108–109, our translation), community should be seen as a “group whose members share a common goal and a common culture”, the field (or, better, the people who constitute it) avoids the idea that it forms something uniform and homogeneous. Thus, “the communitarian view fails to capture the very basis of the world as a competing universe” (Bourdieu, *ibid*). The field, instead, is an informal aggregation of subjects, who share some basic principles and values. In this sense, the field, avoiding “the realism of the structure to which objectivity leads [...] without at the same time surrendering to the cognitive processes of subjectivism” (Panagiotopoulos, 1992: 22; Bourdieu, 2006: 88, our translation), captures history and locates the principle of historical action, which “is not even in consciousness neither in things, but in the relation between the two states of the social, that is, of the objectified history, in the form of

3 For an overview of communitarian methodology, see: Frazer, 1999, 75; Selznick, 1992, 371-387; Selznick, 1986, 3-14; Cohen, 1985, 24-25; Simmel, 1964, 635-646; Etzioni, 1988, ix-xxv; Sandel, 2003, 21, 34 and 70; and Walzer, 2003, 26 and 90-91.

institutions, for example, and of the embedded history, of the habit(i)” (Panagiotopoulos, 1992: 24; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970: 20). This relationship, however, is anything but unchanged and static.

The field comprises of “structured forces” and it is precisely the social space of “struggle for the preservation or transformation of [these] forces”. (Bourdieu, 2007: 83). Each field, then, constitutes an arena of struggle, a “socially organised field, where the acting subjects, endowed with different resources, oppose each other in order to maintain or reverse the existing correlation of forces”. (Bourdieu, 2007 : 86) Within the field, the mechanisms of confrontation also function as mechanisms of control and sanctions. Because the field can operate with loose links, but also according to an informal hierarchy, a “belief in the [common] game” is demanded (Bourdieu, 2007: 120), in the “illusio” as Bourdieu names it (Bourdieu, 2003: 25 and 196), which is one of the parameters for granting or not granting, the right to enter the field.

Relationships within the field are determined by the distribution of different types of resources or “capital”, so we must distinguish the types of capital that are allocated within it. According to Panagiotopoulos (1992: 45), capital is not only economic, but also cultural (*capital culturel*), e.g., knowledge, specialties and other cultural acquisitions, as evidenced by educational or technical qualifications, as well as symbolic capital (*capital symbolique*), e.g. accumulated prestige or prestige “. And exactly one of the most important properties of fields is “the way they allow one form of capital to be converted into another” (Panagiotopoulos, *ibid*).<sup>4</sup> As Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 2007: 87) puts it:

“The structure of the field is character-

4 On the “capital”, see also: Robbins, 2000, 13-30; and Moore, 2004, 445-456.

ised by a more or less high concentration of capital but will always be organised around the dominant opposition between the rulers, which economists sometimes call first movers, emphasising the margin of initiative they enjoy, and the sovereigns, the challengers [...]. [The former] have crucial advantages in terms of competition, among other things because they are a mandatory point of reference for their competitors, who, whatever they do or want, are actively or passively called upon to take a stand [...] The question therefore arises as to how real transformations take place within the field at a time when field forces tend to strengthen their dominant positions - bearing in mind, however, that, as in the area of the economy, changes within the field are often defined by redefining the boundaries between fields, which is linked (as a cause or effect) to the sudden entry of young people with new resources. This explains why field boundaries are almost always the subject of controversy within the field’.

The goal of any field remains to achieve its highest degree of autonomy from historical precedents or to mutate and adapt to historical precedents - and this is precisely the reason why a field is formed. This “intermediate universe” between actors and the social environment consists of opposition to all forms of submission and dependence and claims the right to determine for itself the principles of its legitimacy (Bourdieu, 2002, 113-115; Bourdieu, 2002, 232-246). The establishment of the field occurs by invoking a “common ideal”, while the [previous] external compulsions, of any nature, exercised [now] only through the field, are mediated by the logic of the field. One of the visible manifestations of field’s autonomy is the ability to refract, translating them in a special form, external compulsions or “demands”. So, is not the field subject to pressure from external factors? The answer

comes from Pierre Bourdieu himself (Bourdieu, 2007 111-112, our translation):

“Considering a field as an autonomous space, we consider that it is in fact subject to (external) pressures, it includes tensions, understood as dynamics that break down, separate the constituent elements of a body. By arguing that the field is relatively autonomous in relation to the surrounding social world, I mean that the system of forces that make up the structure of the field (intensity) is relatively independent of the forces exerted on the field (pressure). In a way, it has the necessary ‘freedom’ to develop its own necessity, its own logic, its own law (nomos)”.

As it is obvious from the above, the field is a “construction”, which allows us from one hand to gather, and from the other, to abstractify social phenomena, to better understand their mechanisms. With this in mind, and dealing with the Greek theatre as a field, with loose ties, whose “right of entry” depended more on artistic (symbolic) criteria, and in which the place of the “first mover” (“Amore Theatre”) was not disputed until the outbreak of the crisis, we will be able to approach the shifts that occurred exactly during this economic crisis. With the closure of “Amore Theatre”, the position of the “first mover” was left vacant and the “struggle” between the various actors of the theatrical landscape will culminate. To win this “struggle”, however, issues of an economic nature also need to be considered (since the crisis had wiped out state money for culture). If Bourdieu’s view may seem to refer mainly to symbolic (in our case, artistic) processes of raising capital, a parallel view requires us to also treat theatrical landscape as a “circuit of commerce”, according to the terminology of Olav Velthuis (Velthuis, 2005: 5; Velthuis, 2012: 37): a network of “dynamic, meaningful, incessantly negotiated interactions among the sites”, where the “pres-

ence of an institutional structure” is implied and where “ties among participants have some shared meanings” (Zelizer, 2004: 125). In other words, and since a theatrical environment consists also of an “imaginary” (Velthuis, 2005) market, where services, goods and relations of production are exchanged to contribute to its formation, and where market laws seem to apply, we should take under consideration that, in an era of economic austerity, the new “first mover” may not only be someone with an artistic capital anymore, but also someone who has the ability to concentrate the biggest share of financial capital. If the relation between a “field” and a “circuit” has already been pointed out by Zelizer (2011: 308), nowhere else but in Greek theatre, during a period of debt crisis, will this relation become more obvious in theatrical activity; the new holder of the biggest sum of artistic capital will be, literally, a financial giant. But let’s follow the major changes that occurred at the theatrical field before the emergence of this “giant”.

#### FROM VENUES OF ARTISTIC RESEMBLANCE TO ‘SUPERMARKET’ THEATRES

After the closure of “Amore Theatre” and during the crisis, the most significant shift which occurred in the profile of theatres as we saw, was the proliferation of proposed performances. But this proliferation was accompanied with the abandonment of a clear aesthetic signal. The repertoire abundance of ‘Neos Kosmos Theatre’, a particularly well-loved venue, outside of the city centre, which was founded by the director Vaggelis Theodoropoulos in 1995, is indicative.<sup>5</sup>

In the first place, “Neos Kosmos Theatre” always –apart from its own productions–

hosted productions of new groups who rented one of its three stages. Those groups belonged to the artistic atmosphere of “Neos Kosmos” (that is, contemporary theatrical plays, mainly from the Anglo-Saxon tradition, of strong political subject-matter and social reflection), thus, for an artist to ‘cross the threshold’ of the theatre, even if they could bear the cost of the rental fee, was considerably difficult. That being the case, in the period 2000-01, barely three performances were presented on all the stages of the theatre. On the contrary, in the very first year of the economic crisis (2009-2010), the performances had reached 14, with this number soaring to 33 performances by 2019-2020 (including the summer productions-tours). In addition, during the last years of the crisis, “Neos Kosmos Theatre”, functioning as a theatre production company, had also expanded to more Athenian stages assuming the running of other theatrical venues as well, to house its gigantic repertoire.

However, of great interest is the percentage of hosted performances within the total number of the company’s performances; from 7 performances (that is 50% out of 14 shows in total) in 2009-2010, in 2019-2020 only 5 performances (including one for children, which was a rerun) were the theatre’s exclusive productions (approximately 15%). Conversely, all the remaining ones were either co-productions (actually, most of the time, productions, where “Neos Kosmos” provided only the space) or presented by groups that rented the theatre, while a special category of performances is of exceptional interest: those which were re-purchased and rerun by “Neos Kosmos Theatre” in one of its scattered-around-the-city venues, although they had been successfully presented in other theatres in the previous season. This last category also includes a performance that was put on for three consecutive years (until

5 All following information comes from the theatre’s website: : <https://nkt.gr/>

2018) in “Tzeni Karezi Theatre” (also run by “Neos Kosmos”) and which was initially presented by the National Theatre itself: the play *Stella koimisou* [*Stella, go to sleep*] by Giannis Oikonomidis, also directed by him.

This “aggressive” policy regarding both the repertoire and the geographical dispersion of the activity of “Neos Kosmos Theatre” in various venues (almost out of necessity, as it was impossible for so many productions or hosted performances to fit into the initial theatre’s old tobacco warehouse, even on its three stages) was implemented under the direction of Milto Sotiriadis, son of Vaggelis Theodoropoulos. Besides, Vaggelis Theodoropoulos himself had undertaken in 2016 (up to 2019) the artistic direction of the Greek Festival (comprised of Athens and Epidaurus Festivals), implementing a seemingly similar decentralising policy regarding its active spaces, with the section “Opening to the city,” which started in 2017. The Greek Festival enjoyed an already highly level of acceptance in the public consciousness under the previous artistic administration of George Loukos (Ioannidis, 2014: 81) but, it was identified with its home, the premises of an abandoned industry on Peiraios Street. The “Opening in the city” tried to disseminate this logic across the Athens conurbation, and so at the strategic planning of the Greek Festival unexploited, unconventional and, possibly, non-theatrical and non-artistic venues were included, to reflect the culturally differentiated mosaic of the city.

Nevertheless, the case of the extension of venues as well as of the repertoire (or, perhaps, the opposite?) of “Neos Kosmos Theatre” did not follow a similar logic. It would make sense, in a period of economic crisis, for these movements and for the dispersion of any theatre’s activities in multiple places –and since no restrictive policy equivalent

to the imposed financial austerity was followed, which would be normal– to attend the demands of economic development (or/and economic decline) as they are inscribed on the urban setting. In a corresponding example on the impact of financial hardship on theatrical geography, Jasmine Mahmoud describes the movements of the theatre collective “Implied Violence” in neighbourhoods of Seattle USA, on account of the raise in rents in specific parts of the city’s centre, of an excessive neo-liberal housing development, and vice versa, due to the ‘decline’ of other neighbourhoods, which were massively evacuated when the housing development proved to be a bubble (Mahmoud, 2019: esp. 58-59). But this was not the case for “Neos Kosmos Theatre”: for example, “Tzeni Karezi Theatre”, which was mentioned above, is situated directly opposite the Hellenic Parliament (namely in the most central part of the city) and something similar is true for the rest of the venues, the running of which was assumed by “Neos Kosmos”. Respectively, under no circumstances did these new theatres’ performances (and contrary to Greek Festival’s ones) aim at giving a new meaning and renegotiating of the urban landscape, to showcase, through theatre and art, the tectonic shifts in the profile and in the economic and social composition of the city (and the country) during and because of the crisis. It was about, in most cases, successful performances able to–or provably, such as *Stella koimisou*– commercially succeed; even worse, it was about performances by small theatrical groups that only just could afford to pay the theatre’s rent.

The paradigm of the “Neos Kosmos Theatre” soon found imitators. Theatres, such as “104” and “Fournos”, all set at the downtown periphery, started, during the crisis, to operate without art direction or any kind of effort to have a coherent artistic imprint, but only

with production organisation. This means that any theatrical group that could bear the cost of the rent, irrespectively of the quality of their work, could be included in the theatre's season programming. These "supermarket" theatres, discontinuing an artistic face control, certainly provided new experimental groups, which would be excluded from institutional theatres and venues otherwise, with a platform to present their work, but, even so, in very few cases did they manage to stand out inside the flurry of equivalent and "opposing" groups. Made up of same-year drama school graduates, the life of these groups proved to be short—rarely did it exceed one or two performances—, since it was about the need to "work," and not the artistic vision, that united its members. Let us stress, here, that the maintenance costs of a group (mostly the actors' insurance contributions which were sharply increased during the crisis) in conjunction with the absolute lack of state aid for a private (non-commercial) theatre, proved to be, many a time, unbearable for new actors.

And now, we faced another paradox: the more performances in Athens, the more their quality and their actual artistic impact lessened. One would expect with the plethora of performances, new genres of theatre would emerge, new schemes of collaborations would be developed, and innovative artistic proposals would jump out. Nothing similar happened; or to be more precise, as we will see in a while, the change came not by the proliferation of venues and performances, but from the emergence of a new "centre" in the Athenian theatrical life.

But to close this chapter, we should mention that, throughout the crisis decade (2009-2019), there was only one exception to the theatrical plethora and polyphony, or rather cacophony: the legendary, Xenia Kalogeropoulos's "Porta Theatre", the artistic direc-

tion of which was taken over by Thomas Moschopoulos (former Amore co-director). After restarting its performances in 2014, after a set-aside period, "Porta Theatre" started its journey following Amore's paradigm of an overwhelmingly shifting repertoire. Rapidly, and since it only featured one stage, working paces became exhausting (e.g., the setting needed to be changed up to three times a day or the theatre needed to be cleaned similar times so that it could welcome the spectators of the following performance), while the artistic (as well as the financial) result was not as expected; featuring 300 seats (400 before its renovation), since the days of prosperity, the theatre seemed to be empty even with 150 spectators ( 50%). Situated outside the traditional theatrical district, on the fringes of the city's centre, "Porta Theatre", under the new direction, struggled to make its imprint visible, until Thomas Moschopoulos decided to drastically reduce the theatre's productions (either its own or the hosted ones and the co-productions). By a letter, instead of a press conference during the announcement of the new season's (2018-2019) programme, he explained the reasons behind his decision (Moschopoulos, 2018 [our translation]):

"What once appeared in the theatre of Athens as a necessity and filled a gap of variety of different artistic voices and creative pluralism, has turned out to be a spasmodic—without thought and proposal—habit, an addiction for internal consumption, closely linked to the need to maintain the voice of the artists who appeared and matured (?) during the years of theatrical inflation".

To sum up, it is obvious that what we have here is a decentralised theatrical field, which, after the removal of "Amore Theatre" seemed to have lost its orientation. The criteria of entry, having been artistic over the past few years, now were transformed into financial



ones, allowing former “excluded” players to enter the field. But this development affected the field’s profile, or, to use Bourdieu’s terminology, its autonomy. When the state’s grants were ensured, a coherent, although differentiated ‘class’ of artists could survive; now artistic vision seemed to have been replaced by a hunt for rent money. But how did we get here?

### THE OVERSUPPLY OF LABOUR

The letter by Thomas Moschopoulos—a director that, many times, did not hesitate to publicly point out the distortions of the theatrical market – continued as follow:

“Parallel phenomena are drama schools that, to maintain their existence, ‘promise’ a non-existent theatrical education without real criteria and claims, theatrical ‘groups’ of an opportunistic nature, etc. etc.... All distortions of ‘free market’ laws inextricably linked to the once flourishing television market that demanded ‘new indestructible faces’, while new unemployed actors continue to be created, who will most likely create their own mortal theatre group at some point, sailing, looking for a shore to land safely”.

Thomas Moschopoulos, an intellectual as well as a director, seemed to propose an explanation on the multiplication of venues and productions during the economic crisis; and he was right. At the time when even the institutional theatres (primarily the National Theatre) seemed unable, as was expected every year, to fully employ its own graduates, government funded Drama Schools, and several private drama schools (some of them with a questionable curriculum), were developed. To be more concrete, apart from state drama schools of the National Theatre in Athens and of the National Theater of Northern Greece in Thessaloniki, as well as of the School of Drama in the Aristotle University of Thes-

saloniki, 24 more operating Superior drama schools of three-year studentship emerged during the crisis decade, 19 of which were situated in Athens, and from which at least 480 professional actors graduate, until today, every year (24 X at least 20 graduates per school).<sup>6</sup> The graduates of all these schools, state and private, with all the enthusiasm of their youth and unable to find a proper job in the professional theatre, formed, most of the times, experimental theatrical groups to present their abilities. They were certainly not paid for their activity; on the contrary, they were disposed to bear the cost of the rent of a theatre, as well as fully fund the production using their own resources. As could be expected, the formation of these groups still complies with the law of the market (as implied by Thomas Moschopoulos in his letter): as soon as one of the participants would gain access to paid employment in an institutional or more prestigious theatre, the group would be disbanded on its own. Most experimental groups, therefore, used to constitute just a temporary stepping-stone towards institutionalising their own members, in a profession where exposure and public relations are, many a time, synonymous with job security. Savvas Patsalidis will detect the cause for the disintegration (that reaches dissolution) of the Greek theatrical landscape in the lack of duration and patience on behalf of these, so-called, experimental groups (Patsalidis, 2019).

There is no doubt that, in a largely unregulated setting, which seems even today unable to enumerate exactly how many professionals throw themselves into the job market, there is a connection between the oversupply of graduate-job seekers and the proliferation of the-

<sup>6</sup> These data come from the official website of the Ministry of Culture and Sports, which supervises these Drama Schools: <https://www.culture.gov.gr/el/service/SitePages/view.aspx?> (5.6.2021)

atrical performances (and venues) in Athens during the crisis. The economic crisis came after a decade of unprecedented economic growth (2000-2010), followed by a crooked development of private mass media, namely private TV channels. This development gave birth to a superficial star system, full of well-shaped (but not always so talented...) actors and actresses, as well as singers, models, chefs etc. But when the crisis broke, this system, having no depth and real structure, fell apart and found itself unable to adjust to the new social and economic conditions. So, it continued to produce young graduates with big dreams, which would be disproved after some years. In the meantime, the above-mentioned “supermarket” theatres, sometimes as parasitical organisms, emerged to fill the gap left by the private TV channels. The “supermarket” theatres could not and cannot also afford to become the “centre” of the Athenian theatrical life, the way “Amore Theatre” was. They just imitated its multivocal repertoire, but without a severe and cohesive artistic vision, such as the one proposed by Giannis Chouvardas and Thomas Moschopoulos.

But there is something more here: there is a disconnection of labour from the offered product. In theory, there are analyses on whether the performer artist is a worker participating productively in the capitalistic process of creation and disposal of a commodity, or not. Since “art is, always has been, or has recently become nothing but a commodity” (Beech, 2015: 1), Theron Schmidt remarks that “artists, performance based or otherwise, can no longer claim some vantage point outside of advanced capitalism, but, it may be argued, are its most exemplary labourers” (Schmidt, 2013: 15). Michael Shane Boyle, similarly, reflecting on Marx’s concept of productive labour, argues that theatre is a space of productive labour, meaning a labour “the social

form’, of which ‘refers to the specific relations that emerge among parties involved in a given production process’ (2017: 2), while Popović and Ratković (2013: 205) support that the oversupply of labour in arts is structural at least since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, along with unemployment and the necessity for artists to be multiple-job-holders. But no one ever dared to think of performing artists as paid workers, but rather as someone who would pay for his/her job; someone who would pay for providing in other words its “commodity”. Finally, the above-described situation devalorises the product itself, in our case, theatre and performance. It transforms theatre into a leisure time hobby, or, even worse, into an occupation suitable only for someone who has the money to fund it.

In fact, this “someone” seemed to exist, and it was (and is) the “Stegi [House] of Letters and Arts”, an institute funded by the Onassis Foundation.<sup>7</sup> “Stegi”, with its endless financial resources, managed to become, during the crisis, not only the most reliable “entrepreneur”, in Marx’s terms (Marx, 2005: 21-22), someone who “buys the temporary disposal over the labour-power of” (performing) artists, but it also imposed a specific style and form on the produced theatre. And here we find ourselves in front of the re-formation of the theatrical field, around a “centre” which has not only the financial resources to emerge as such, but also presents a distinct artistic imprint.

7 The Onassis Foundation is the manager of a large part of the vast fortune of the shipowner and businessman Aristotle Onassis (1906-1975). The Foundation develops a wide range of activities in Greece, but also abroad, which include, from scholarships for studies to the establishment and operation of a model cardiac surgery hospital in Athens. The Onassis Foundation also aims at promoting Greek culture and civilisation.

## A NEW HOLDER OF SYMBOLIC CAPITAL: THE ONASSIS “STEGI”

Shortly before the start of the crisis, in 2000, the Onassis Foundation managed to establish the building of “Stegi” as a cultural and educational venue on Syggrou Avenue, far from both the conventional centre of the city and the rail modes of transport, in privately-owned grounds. The period of “Stegi’s” operation coincided with the start of the economic crisis (opening season: 2010-2011). In fact, the Onassis Foundation president felt the need, at his opening speech, to interpret the cultural proliferation that the presence of “Stegi” further created, associating the cultural boom of that period with the economic crisis (Papamitriou, 2010:2):

“We live in a time of crisis. We admit it every day. We talk about an economic crisis, a crisis of values, a crisis of politics perhaps and a crisis of culture. Sprinkling from books that are read by very few, on television and radio programmes watched by most, websites, and blogs (how should this word be translated?), with content both ephemeral and unworthy of attention, an infinite number of theaters, cultural centres and festivals [...].

We do not face abundance as an obstacle. Where others see only a storm, we, at the Onassis Foundation, see a cultural explosion”.

With the presentation of a miscellaneous programme in various art domains, especially a theatrical one, with several invitations from all over the world (to the Greek Festival’s standards under George Loukos and Vaggelis Theodoropoulos), “Stegi” shortly emerged as the main meeting point for most contemporary artists, Greek and foreign ones. In an aggressive programme, fashioned by Katia Arfara every year, the theatrical activities of “Stegi” included international names, such as Albis Hermanis, Robert Lepage,

Toshiki Okada, Falk Richter, DV8, Rimini Protokoll, Lola Arias, Joël Pommerat, Heiner Goebbels, Christoph Marthaler, Krystian Lupa, Dries Verhoven etc. – most of whom have been classified by Hans-Thies Lehmann (Lehmann, 2006, 23-24) as “Postdramatic”, as well as the Greek: Blitz, Bijoux de kant, Kanigounda, Thodoris Ampazis, Anestis Azas & Prodromos Tsinikoris, Lena Kitsopoulou, Michael Marmarinos etc, who also pioneer in contemporary Greek theatre.

Following this reasoning, and because of its endless financial resources, “Stegi” soon emerged as an ideal meeting point where Greek artists and the audience could discover and be inspired by an international theatrical vocabulary, which included every possible form of experimentation. More significant, though, was the fact that certain artists, through “Stegi’s” productions, were given the opportunity to experiment with these new forms, fueling, at the same time, a broader discussion about the profile of Greek theatre. This discussion, of course, was not limited to aesthetic parameters, which needed to be renewed so that they could square with the foreign theatre’s advancements, but, mostly, included a search for the kind of theatre which could better incorporate and express the political and social reality of a society during a crisis. It is no coincidence, therefore, that plenty of “Stegi’s” productions were documentary theatre performances. To cite just one of several examples: one of “Stegi’s” greatest successes (and the most toured to international festivals Greek performance) *Clean City* (2015) by Anestis Azas and Prodromos Tsinikoris is a documentary theatre performance, in which the experts are cleaning ladies, immigrant women who narrate, with oftentimes a lot of humour, their experiences regarding their integration in Greek society. The performance, except for its aes-

thetic imprint, functioned as an indication of “Stegi’s” infiltration in thematic areas which Greek theatre did not want until then or did not possess the suitable form and language to approach.

Moreover, despite its institutional profile, “Stegi” did not restrict itself to an effort to encapsulate contemporary theatrical creation, Greek and foreign, to safely offer it to a cliquish audience for consumption. On the contrary, apart from the contemporary political subject-matter of its productions, which it drew on previously inaccessible –for the institutional theatrical centres– areas, such as the everyday experience of immigrants, it dared to bring the representatives of these areas on stage. Something similar happened with the interactive installation *Bubble Jam* (2018) by Daniel Wetzel, the founding member of Rimini Protokoll: the teenagers themselves, the most “unknown” age part of Greek society (and audience), constituted both the spectators and the “players” of a live “game” via social media with a view to revealing the power as well as the dangers of this new media.

Similarly, and despite its architecturally flawless building, “Stegi” did not function as a closed shell but attempted to deal with the broader urban geography from a new perspective. Besides, during the economic crisis, it is argued that the most interesting performances –correspondingly, perhaps, to the political awakening, which incited large masses of society to demonstrate in the streets– “took place away from the proscenium and the black box which can render the spectators as passive spectacle absorbers, without motivating them to any form of social or political action” (Sidiropoulou, 2019). Thus, “Stegi” promoted performances and artistic actions which left the safety of its premises and aimed for the participants to discover, discuss, and

deal in a different way with the topography of a city that was rapidly changing, because of the crisis. To mention some of the examples: *No Man’s Land*, by Dries Verhoven, an ambulatory performance in the downtown area where, as the artist himself stated, what was researched was “what is a multicultural environment today’ through the performative staging of an encounter between ‘locals’ and ‘foreigners’, in the form of a reverse ‘guided tour’” (Chatziprokopiou, 2017: 162); the series installations *Appartments X*, by Katia Arfara & Anna Mülter, also in the poor neighbourhoods of the city, where fifteen artists “transformed” the inner parts of apartments allowing the audience to invade hidden personal spaces (Sidiropoulou, 2019), as well as the installation *Invisible City* by Gregor Schneider, which covered with fabric the central Omonoia square, which is now one of the most underprivileged and frightening places of the city; and the intimate performance by Fabio Rubio, *Everything by my side*, a one-to-one (spectator-actor) show at “Stoa tou Vivliou” [‘Arcade of Books’], located at a deserted during the night, totally unfamiliar shopping centre of Athens. All these did not just create added value, even temporary, in the urban landscape, but mediated on the degree of complicity of the participants, regarding both the spectacle and where it was taking place and the relationship among them, eventually creating a new form of collectivity and a sense of a political understanding of the city, “a sense of place” as a common locus “determined by personal experiences, social interactions, and identities” (Adams et al., 2017: 68)

## CONCLUSION

Another view of the cultural landscape in Greece, during the economic crisis, is given by Tziovias (2019, 4), who argues that since culture “encourages community and solidarity”, during the years of austerity in Greece, culture not only attempted to restore the idea of community “as something lost”, but it also gave “way to new forms of sociality and community”. He furthermore explains the “explosion of creativity witnessed in Greece during the crisis” as an attempt to blur “the boundary between those who act and those who look”, as a direct reference to the tectonic political and social changes that occurred in Greece during the crisis, the most important of which being the politicising of a former indifferent society”. By her part, Eleni Varopoulou in 2013, attempting to glean the characteristics of Greek theatrical life amid the crisis, detected the emergence of a new utopia, where old theatrical venues give their place to new ones, private patrons in art replace the state’s funding and the artistic outcome is again strongly related to politics. The example of venues such as “Bios” or “TV Control Centre”, which attempted to showcase and fund a new collective, concerned with social and political issues, or in 2011, the re-opening of the former iconic “Embros” Theatre –which had remained shut since 2007, and which was symbolically occupied by artists and academics who created a collective, introducing a special (and quite large) programme of actions, performances, and lectures (Argyropoulou, 2015: 115-128), seemed, at this time, to encourage her optimistic aspect.

But these efforts of “young artists, [who], with very little money and sometimes with voluntary contributions from the audience, have staged exciting performances and

responded to the crisis in imaginative and provocative ways” (Tziovias, *ibid*), are proven to be temporary, without a true imprint. In fact, some of them (as the occupation of “Embros”) don’t function anymore after the end of the crisis, failing to give theatrical activity a politically specific context. In any case, this “enumeration” doesn’t avoid narrating theatrical activity through the prism of actual or seeming innovation. According to this view, theatre activity (and theatre history) can be conceived as a succession of innovative trends, regardless of their actual impact, especially the financial one (Woods, 1898: 166). On the contrary, dealing with the theatrical activity as a field of interests, where a struggle among “players” occurs and symbolic (and financial) capital is gathered by a “first mover”, pushing the whole field to its ‘autonomisation’, we believe it is much more fruitful for the understanding of hidden forces and mechanisms.

Nevertheless, Varopoulou and Tziovias are right, since after the economic crisis – and because of the subsequent pandemic – the Greek theatrical “field” has not yet been stabilised and all its characteristics, as described above, continue not only to exist, but to determine it. There is still a plethora of spectacles provided by drama school graduates (some of which approach theatrical innovation), there is still “supermarket” theatre and, of course, there is still “Stegi’s” influence, which had led other artists to follow this pathway, in other words, to explore the form and content of this political engaged (documentary) theatre. To give only one example, Giolanda Markopoulou attempted to renegotiate historical memory in the way it is inscribed in the contemporary urban geography, by creating the performance *E\_fyga Micrasia [I\_left Minor Asia]* in Elefsina (2019). In Elefsina, an area of Attica which, during the previous decade,

suffered from de-industrialisation and unemployment, in the streets and yards of a refugee Neighbourhood built in 1922, an ambulatory documentary theatre performance was developed with the residents participating themselves. The Neighbourhood is now assimilated to the urban landscape (very close to the central square and Elefsina's archaeological site) but, in the past, it was divided due to social, racial and other differences, having preserved this memory, inscribed on its buildings and streets. The remarkable thing in Markopoulou's performance was that the memory of Minor Asia (where the refugees came from in 1922) as a "lost paradise," which typically constitutes the motif of every refugee narrative, was barely present. On the contrary, the accounts of the residents (now second-generation refugees) focused on the difficulties in their and their parents' adjusting to their new country, the suspicion of the local residents of Elefsina, the living agonies of their settlement and, of course, the uncertain present. *E\_fyga Micrasia* performed a movement from the collective as defined –in terms of time– by a common surviving memory, even though the present generations only bear it as a narrative and not as an experience, to the collective as spatially defined: even the audience's (from all over Athens) journey, through hidden yards and undeveloped plots, next to abandoned buildings and broken windows, gave new meaning to the geography and, consequently, conversed with the Neighbourhood's anthropogeography.

The Greek theatrical field, after ten years of economic crisis, seemed again ready to be re-autonomised, with less exclusions and giving newcomers more opportunities to perform, differentiate and acquire a certain amount of "capital". But its financialisation which happened during the crisis has not yet been overcome. After the pandemic, we will

see if the paths followed by the field's participants, old and new, and the structures and mechanisms created during the crisis will have been stabilised or not.

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## ПОЗОРИШТА-СУПЕРМАРКЕТИ, ПРЕТЈЕРАНИ УПЛИВ РАДНЕ СНАГЕ И НОВИ ИГРАЧИ У ПОЗОРИШНОЈ БРАНШИ ТОКОМ ДУЖНИЧКЕ КРИЗЕ У ГРЧКОЈ (2010-2019)

### Кључне ријечи:

*грчко позориште; економска криза; позоришта супермаркети; Пјер Бурдје; теорија поља; Оназис Стеги; дипломци драмске школе;*

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### Резиме

*Користећи методологију Пјера Бурдијеа, овај чланак покушава да одрази промјене унутар позоришне бранше у Грчкој током десет година економске кризе (2010-2019). У чланку су јасно означене девијације на позоришној сцени Грчке, као што су претјеран уплив радне снаге и замјена позоришта једним умјетничким отиском који се овдје назива позориштем-супермаркетом. Поред тога, пратимо напор Стегија (у власништву Фондације Оназис) да постане кључни играч на овом пољу, заузимајући некадашњу позицију Позоришта Аморе. На крају, закључује се да ова бранша – једним дијелом и због пандемије која је успједила након економске кризе – одолијева потпуном оцртавању граница пошто се појављују нове иницијативе и групације унутар ње.*

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*03.05.2022.*