

## **Greek History as Environmental Performance: Iannis Xenakis' *Mycenae Polytopon* and Beyond**

*Marina Kotzamani*

---

Iannis Xenakis' *Mycenae Polytopon* (1978) was a performance work of light, movement, and sound which took place at night, in early September, in a vast open air space of twenty five kilometers in the region of Argolis. This was the last of a series of site specific works, the Polytope that the distinguished composer and architect had presented internationally in the 1960s and 1970s. *The Mycenae Polytopon* engaged a large number of professional and amateur performers, from musicians and singers to soldiers and shepherds with flocks of sheep. The citadel of Mycenae, the neighboring archaeological sites of Argos and Tiryns, as well as the planes and mountains of Argolis became the site of a popular ceremony in this work, connecting ancient Greece to the technological era. The *Mycenae Polytopon* has attracted scholarly attention recently, in relation to cultural life in Greece in the immediate years following the fall of the 1967 junta, as well as more generally, in the context of research on the Polytope performances (Tsagkarakis 2013; Fayers 2011; Sterken 2007 and 2001; and especially Touloumi 2012 and 2009).<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this study is to flesh out the significance of space and performance to Xenakis' approach to history and national identity and to relate it to earlier and later environmentally sensitive art work in Greece, including the Delphic Festivals of the interwar period, the opening ceremony of the 2004 Olympics, as well as contemporary experimental performance. My study is relevant to recent scholarly attention on the impact of space and performance to the conception of national identity in modern Greece (Ioannidou 2010; Yalouri 2010; Papakonstantinou 2010; Fournaraki 2010; Van Steen 2002; Leontis 2001).

---

### **The Mycenae Polytopon**

There is a documentary on the preparation of the *Mycenae Polytopon* directed by Kostas Ferris, who followed Iannis Xenakis and his team around *in situ* for about a week before the opening (Ferris 1978).<sup>2</sup> This film makes

- 
1. Touloumi's 2012 study makes use, for the first time, of material on the *Mycenae Polytopon* included in the archive on Iannis Xenakis deposited at the National Library of France, in Paris.
  2. Apart from scholarly, documentary, and critical material on the *Mycenae Polytopon*, this study also draws on my own experience of seeing the performance, as well as on an interview I conducted with Kostas Ferris, on September 5, 2014.

a strong case that the *Polytopon* should be viewed not as an abstract spectacle of light and sound, but as a popular ceremony. Its central highlight is an interview with Xenakis, who talks about the conception of his work. A Greek of the Diaspora who had fled to France in the late 1940s as a political refugee, Xenakis explains that his work intimately relates to Greece. The *Polytopon* is primarily directed towards the people of Argolis for whom Mycenae is essentially a tourist site, alien to their lives. The artist proposes another way these locals, and by extension Greeks, can relate to each other and towards history; this way goes through ceremony. Although the work aspires to present the performance of a ceremony at Mycenae, Xenakis is careful to point out that its success presupposes the existence of a tightly bound community with a strong sense of identity. The artist hopes he can contribute to the search for collective identity through stimulating people, in physical terms, to become aware of the energies of past civilizations, inherent in their own space. In this respect, the enlisting of volunteers becomes significant to the project and process, the preparation of the performance becomes part of the work. Accordingly, the film focuses on rehearsals in the landscape of Argolis, recording how the efforts of team members to adapt to the space and to the ensemble are inscribed in their bodies. For example, there are close-ups of Xenakis and volunteers moving stones in the fields, or close-ups of an open air percussion performance where the dynamism of sound is related to bodily strain and to resonance in the environment.

Xenakis adopts a popular and at the same time a performative approach to history, which is site specific. The artist appeals to and engages the senses rather than the understanding, as stimulated by the identity of the chosen site, forged through time. Historical knowledge becomes associated to memory, it intimately relates to how the collective past is perceived and remembered in the present, through performance. Indeed, Xenakis refers to the *Polytopon* in the film as a memorial service, in honor of the Mycenaean civilization that thrived at Argolis. Evidently, this sense-based, ceremonial approach to history has a strong artistic quality. Xenakis ends his note in the *Polytopon* program on the optimistic remark that the performance will interweave art and history (Xenakis, *Mycenae Polytope* 11). The project's focus on perception and on memory also implies that Xenakis departs drastically from traditional readings of history as a grand narrative. His own view of history is selective and fragmentary rather than monolithic, inviting diversity and polyphony. Indeed, the artist mentions that he used the Homeric epic as model for the composition of the *Polytopon*, noting that the structure of the rhapsodies is essentially a stitching together of thematically and linguistically diverse segments (Ferris 1978). In a similar manner, the *Polytopon* is composed of distinct fragments relating to the Mycenaean civilization, from Xenakis' electronic compositions to recitations in Linear B, and excerpts from Homer and the *Oresteia*, in the original language and in modern Greek translation. Xenakis had also incorporated into the performance Mycenaean designs from the artifacts he had studied.<sup>3</sup>

---

3. For pictures of Xenakis' notes and designs relating to the Mycenaean artifacts he planned

Xenakis' experiential approach to history is emphatically subjective, privileging the subject's perception. This is not to say that what is out there is irrelevant; rather, the physical remains of the Mycenaean civilization need to be re-contextualized so that contemporaries may have the freedom to relate to them in new ways, or ways that express the present. Re-contextualizing involved cleansing audiences of all beliefs and presuppositions about the monument, whether as a site described in Homer, as a tourist attraction, or as a national landmark. This was probably the signification of purifying fires in the vicinity of the citadel, emitting enormous clouds of smoke, which would wipe the monument out of perception. At other times, enormous air force projectors emitted a blinding light, or the entire citadel was illuminated in a blurry, hazy light, rendering its identification impossible. All these effects created a sense of wonder. Mycenae re-emerged as an enigmatic site in utopia, about to be rediscovered.

The citadel was somewhat higher from the level where the audience was seated, across the plane from Mount Zara, in front of a ravine. The orchestration of light and sound was not only focused on the monument; it encompassed the entire landscape in front of the audience, encouraging the viewing of the citadel in relation to its surroundings. For example, illumination would pick narrow strips of the monument but also of rocks at mount Zara and of trees in the ravine, inviting associations—albeit elliptical—between them. Immersed in obscurity, children on the planes would draw in the air with lighted pyres Mycenaean symbols and designs. Processions of small circular lights and of flames would unpredictably emerge anywhere. This complex choreography of light conveyed a vivid impression of the citadel as part of an entire cosmos, the man-made, the natural, and the supernatural world, all viewed as luminous fragments of a puzzle in the dark. Light complemented a powerful aural performance, rich in diversity and polyphony. Auditory fragments from various periods of the ancient Greek past would fill the night sky with full, round sounds. At times, these would weave into each other, as a recital of passages from Homer in Spyros Sakkas' baritone voice, followed by a translation of the segments in modern Greek at a higher register, by the female voice of Olga Tournaki. At other times, the recitations would be in agonistic relation or there would be dialectic tension between the instrument of the human voice and electronic sounds. Indeed, the performance encouraged the audience to appreciate the individual character of the stimuli and their minimalist and fragmentary quality. The Mycenaean civilization and the way it has been remembered through time came to life in the form of traces, luminous points and distinctive sounds, transitorily emerging and then drowning in the black night. This inspired a reflective mood of historical progress on the audience as a battle with oblivion, with some traces persisting in memory. The past was darkness or a void, but a void full of energy in performance.

A distinctive aspect of the Mycenaean *Polytopon*, as of Xenakis' *Polytope*

---

to use in performance see Touloumi (2012) 109 and 116. For a detailed list of the performance's program see Xenakis (1978) 12-13.

in general was that energy had a concrete, sensual quality. A metaphysical view of the history of the space emerged as an intriguing presence-absence of traces, hard to articulate. The absence of life associated with the citadel in the past acquired an eerie quality of presence, of body. Although this sense of presence was not illusory, it continuously harked back to absence in cyclical interplay. The *Mycenae Polytopon* can be viewed as a proto-virtual spectacle, where Xenakis outlined transcendental spaces in the night sky by means of light and sound. Indeed, this artist methodically explored affinities—or intermediality, in contemporary terminology—between architecture and music (Sterken 2007, 2001). Similarly to music, he viewed architecture as an art in time and employed light to draw virtual, non Cartesian coordinates. In this way, architecture became medial and acquired a continuous and transitory quality. At the same time, Xenakis approached music in spatial terms, highlighting material qualities of sound, or sound masses. On this conception, the placement of sound in space became of utmost importance in conveying a sense of material presence (Fayers 7).

The *Mycenae Polytopon* supplies many examples of experimentation with novel ways of perception. In his first experiments with audiovisual installations in the spirit of the *Polytope*, Xenakis had been using the term “void sculpture” or “audiovisual event for the void” (Touloumi, “The Politics of Totality” 105-06). Indeed, sound and light were effectively used in the work at Mycenae to create the impression of matter. I still have a strong impression of the recitation of the Homeric passages in Archaic Greek and in modern Greek as two concrete columns of sound ascending from the ravine onto the vastness of the sky. Xenakis’ percussion music for *Persephassa*, with deliberate and intense rain-like sounds hitting the ground and creating resonance, sounded like an invocation to the earth, or a ceremony, evoking, through contemporary means, the primal origins of Persephone, the goddess of the underworld worshipped by the Mycenaean.

Similarly to sound, light sculptures had a dynamic, performative quality. There are images of illumination of the Mycenaean citadel highlighting two independent areas, top and bottom, corresponding to the citadel and the burial grounds, respectively (Psychramis 1978). The top looks like an otherworldly, cosmic object. With general illumination in narrow, syncopated strips, the bottom part created a transitory sense of becoming, of movement. Light also stimulated the sense of touch, as any concrete sculpture would, with narrow rays travelling through the wall of the citadel in a way that drew attention to its texture. Similar attention to texture was given in the illumination of rocks and of the tops of trees on the mountain. Light would travel from the remains of a civilization to the landscape, outlining the coordinates of a virtual, abstract sculpture, which invited audiences, in Xenakis’ words, to feel out, in concrete terms, their relation to the past and to history (Ferris 1978). Without exception, everybody who saw the *Mycenae Polytopon* remembers an extraordinary sculpture of light and sound, made of a constellation of lights and harmonized sounds of bells slowly rising up the ravine and disappearing over a dark ridge. The effect was created by a flock of sheep that had flashlights on them and synchronized bells. Besides high-

lighting Xenakis' sensual approach to the past, the animal procession also gave a sense of the continuity of history, as integral to the Argolis region as sheep, grazing on its ground since Mycenaean times.

Clearly, in the *Mycenae Polytopon* Xenakis outlined a metaphysical approach to space and to history, combining transcendental concerns with a performative approach, drawing attention to physicality, and encouraging new forms of perception. The artist fleshed out a poetics of space and of history as interplay between presence-absence, which highlighted *catharsis* of received knowledge, the re-contextualizing of Mycenae in multiple performance spaces, and the use of the void as a dynamic element of artistic creation. The performance also aimed at defining a liminal space where the expression of collective spirit could happen, whether in the participation of volunteers in the making of the spectacle or in the active role of the audience in visualizing the sculptures for the void.

Did the performance successfully carry out Xenakis' ambitious goals of relating history, space, and popular art? We lack, at present, a comprehensive evaluation of its reception. My notes on Xenakis' reading of history must be weighed against mercenary interpretations in which the *Mycenae Polytopon* is emphatically presented as a work serving national, even nationalist aims.<sup>4</sup> On a relevant note, the project had obtained sponsorship from an impressive array of national institutions including the Ministry of Culture and Sciences, the Ministry of National Defense, the National Tourist Organization of Greece, the Greek Radio and Television and the National Theatre (Xenakis, *Mycenae Polytope* 2, 15). There is another video of the *Mycenae Polytopon*, besides Ferris', directed by Psychramis, in which the performance's minimalism is approached as shorthand, evoking a fundamental tenet of national identity: the continuity of the Greek civilization through the ages (Psychramis 1978). Accordingly, performance footage is framed by images of artifacts and other historical material forming a seamless cultural narrative from pre-history to the seventies. The video ends with the nationalist exultation: "no new society, no new civilization can be created without being Greek" (Psychramis 1978). Rejecting didacticism, Xenakis himself referred to the *Mycenae Polytopon* not as a model but as a proposal for a popular ceremony, drawing attention to its open-ended quality and its potential to inspire new work (Ferris 1978). What room did nationalist appropriation of the performance, however, leave to the audience to appreciate its experimental subtleties?

### The Delphic Festivals

Body and space have had a central role to play in fleshing out historical knowledge in the *Mycenae Polytopon*. In this respect, the *Polytopon* has close

---

4. For example, in his introductory address, in Xenakis (1978) 6, Panagiotis Lambrias, General Secretary of the National Tourist Organization of Greece which sponsored the event, writes: "a Greek, Iannis Xenakis, internationally recognized as one of the architects of 20th century music, returns as a pilgrim, . . . tens of centuries back, to find his inspiration and to pay pious tribute to the undisrupted continuity of so many thousands of years."

affinities to the monumental project of the Delphic Festivals of 1927 and 1930, envisioned and organized by the poet Angelos Sikelianos and his American first wife, Eva Palmer Sikelianou at Delphi. Both works are environmental and performative, focusing on the interaction between body and space. Moreover, both are sensitive to the history of the archaeological spaces they are set in, offering experiential, non-text-based readings of Greek antiquity with a view to unraveling its contemporary significance. Another important similarity between the Delphic Festivals and the *Mycenae Polytopon* is that both were designed as popular works, aiming at having an impact on culture at large and at encouraging communality and participation. I will be focusing the discussion mainly on the Delphic Festival of 1927.

Just like the *Mycenae Polytopon*, the first Delphic Festival took place in the open air, with a central focus on the homonymous ancient site. Similarly to Xenakis, Sikelianos had a strong interest in space. Indeed, Delphi, along with Jerusalem, was among certain special sites, which, the poet thought had a key role to fostering cosmic awareness, understanding between people and cultural progress (Leontis 109, 114-15). The scale of the first Delphic Festival, however, far exceeded the *Polytopon* in epic proportion and monumentality and is impressive, even by contemporary standards. The Festival unfolded over the entire area of Delphi, including not only the ancient sites of the oracle, the theater, and the stadium, but also rural areas outdoors, as well as the entire village of Delphi. According to the distinguished choreographer and dancer Koula Pratsika, a close associate of Sikelianos and Palmer, setting the events in this vast and diverse space involved re-shaping it on a Herculean scale by opening up roads in the village, bringing irrigation to the houses, and whitewashing them. Moreover, it involved hiring a boat for the accommodation of guests at Itea and opening a road from this coastal village to Delphi (Papastathis 1998). By contrast to the *Mycenae Polytopon*, where the performance lasted a few hours and the audience had a conventional, frontal view of the performance, the first Delphic Festival lasted two days, encouraging thorough immersion into Greek culture and close interaction with the space.

The Delphic Festivals featured a rich program of events, all of which formed part of a holistic vision of antiquity as a multi-faceted culture, affecting all areas of life (Glytzouris 2092; Leontis 103). Apart from theater production of ancient drama, the program included a dance performance of the fight between Apollo and Python, performance of Byzantine music, folk singing and dancing, exhibitions of folk art, dining, lectures, athletic contests, and tours of the archaeological site. In her vivid reminiscences of the first Delphic Festival, Pratsika presents it as a richly stimulating experience, in intimate connection to the natural landscape (Papastathis 1998). Not only would watching performances at the ancient theater and at the stadium, in the round, envelop the viewers in the space and make them better aware of their surroundings. Audiences would, also, have sensually engaging experiences of the archaeological site through watching a torch relay conducted in the Sacred Way by athletes. Dining outdoors at Alonia stimulated not

only taste, but also hearing, sight, and smell. Audiences could attend folk singing and dancing and smell the fragrant branches of pine trees covering an overhead shelter. Departing from the conventional viewing of art in an exhibition space, the prominent ethnographer Angeliki Hadzimichali had set up the folk artifacts in the homes of the villagers, encouraging a contextual interpretation of the exhibits. These examples indicate an intention to shape events in relation to the space which deserves closer study.

Indeed, recent research has shown that the performance of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* (1927 and 1930) and of the *Suppliant Maidens* (1930) at the ancient theater attempted to integrate the natural landscape into the interpretative design of the play's setting and movement. Gonda Van Steen's stimulating observations, which are based on photographs of the productions by Nelly's, point towards a performative, body- and space- based interpretation of the plays (Van Steen 2002). In *Prometheus Bound*, the set consisted solely of the Titan's rock of martyrdom, which, placed beyond the orchestra, looked like a part of the ragged landscape; all the more so as it had been reduced in size for the revival of the production in 1930. Van Steen has identified a circular design of movement in the production, in which the rock functions as the center of a circumference mentally linking the space of the orchestra with the landscape beyond it. The raised platform where the rock stands functions as the diameter of this circle, highlighting a juxtaposition between the worldly and the transcendental, central to the play's theme (Van Steen 385).

Van Steen's work indicates that a comprehensive study of the interpretative contribution of space to theater production at the Delphic Festivals would be forthcoming. Research could be complemented through recourse to the filming of the 1927 production of *Prometheus Bound* by the Gaziadis brothers. It is clear in the film, for example, that the larger rock of the original production incorporated functional openings and stairs, allowing characters to perform within the set, in intimate connection to it and to the surroundings.<sup>5</sup> Exploration could also be extended to the magnificent, handwoven silk costumes for both productions, which might have functioned as a mobile set. Indeed, as Thanos Veloudios, another associate of the first Delphic Festival mentions, Palmer insisted that the costumes worn by soldiers for a representation of the ancient Pyrrhios war dance should be heavy, clearly outlining movement and fleshing out its functionality in relation to the space (Papastathis 1998).

As this example suggests, the spatial dimension of the Greek drama performances should also be studied in relation to all other events which took place at Delphi, with which they formed an integral whole. Although the holistic nature of the Delphic Festivals is acknowledged, recent research to date has tended to focus on the Greek drama performances, marginalizing, in effect, the importance of other events (Glytzouris 2010; Michelakis 2010; Van Steen 2002). On a relevant note, while the Delphic Festivals favored body-based performance

---

5. A good selection of excerpts from the original film is included in (Papastathis 1998).

and hand-craft, they had recourse to the new media of the time, such as film and photography, to record events. These documents should perhaps be considered as part of the work too, in the sense that, just like a lecture or a tour of the archaeological site, they aim at enriching discourse on Greek culture through variation and use of multiple media.<sup>6</sup> If the first Delphic Festival can be approached as a boldly inclusive event, featuring a broad spectrum of media, from hand-crafted artifacts to film, in this respect too, it invites comparison to the *Mycenae Polytopon*.

The two works also have affinity in their popular character. Both were successful in drawing large audiences and at inspiring cultural discourse on ancient Greek culture, not only in a Greek, but also in an international context. In spite of their cosmopolitan character, however, both works were also directed towards the common people living in the area. In the first Delphic Festival, there was a special production of *Prometheus Bound* for the villagers and the organizers took cues of their appreciation of the play (Van Steen 377). Interpreting the significance of the production for the common folk is far from simple, as it probably exemplifies ambivalence, meshing elitist or patronizing with democratic attitudes. Indeed, from a political point of view, the ideological identity of the Delphic Festivals is not clear-cut (Glytzouris 2102; Van Steen 377-78). Still, Sikelianos' and Palmer's interest in the peasants was earnest and extended beyond the grand show of the Festivals, whereas in Xenakis' work, the local people participated as performers; also, both works enlisted the help of volunteers at the preparatory phase. Indeed, in the first Delphic Festival the involvement of volunteers was integral to the project and long-term, extending beyond several days or weeks—as in the *Polytopon*—to years. For example, the female chorus of *Prometheus Bound* was composed of members of *Lykeion ton Ellenidon*, who laboriously rehearsed Palmer's intricate choreography for over a year.

Given the aim of the Delphic Festivals to inspire the spirit of Greek antiquity to the people, the preparatory phase of these events, including spatial parameters, such as rehearsing at the ancient theater, might be considered as forming part of them. In modern terminology, Xenakis' *Mycenae Polytopon* and, especially, the Delphic Festivals highlight the importance of process to the conception of the work as a whole. On a relevant note, given their holistic conception, the afterlife of both works, that is, their impact on the popular spirit, should perhaps be considered as part of the works too. Indeed, Sikelianos and Palmer as well as Xenakis regarded their performances as part of a more ambitious plan of drawing on antiquity to inspire contemporary culture at large and in the long run. For example, Xenakis hoped that the *Polytopon* would inaugurate “a new chain of in-

---

6. Indeed, Van Steen emphasizes that Nelly's pictures express the interpretative import of Eva's vision: “Nelly's . . . was able to capture in pictures Palmer's thinking about circular forms in theater, in choreographic movement and also in Delphi's physical environment” (Van Steen 384).

ternational cultural celebrations where the ancient and the contemporary will be interwoven” (Xenakis, *Mycenae Polytope* 11), while Sikelianos and Palmer had plans to found a university at Delphi. Although the university did not materialize, Van Steen observes that the Delphic Festivals had an impact on the favorite practice, in Greece, since the mid 1950s, when the Festival of Ancient Greek drama at Epidaurus was inaugurated, to stage the classical plays outdoors (Van Steen 20). On an anecdotal note, Pratsika mentions that at Palmer’s funeral at Delphi (1952), a local midwife spontaneously recited excerpts from the chorals of *Prometheus Bound*, mixing them with traditional folk dirges. Pratsika mentions this story in support of Palmer’s conviction that villagers could undertake the role of the chorus in a production she was planning shortly before her death (Papastathis 1998).

This story about the afterlife of the Delphic Festivals also highlights the importance of modern Greek culture in these performances, to gaining insight into the ancient Greek spirit. Indeed, Sikelianos and Palmer had a keen eye for identifying surviving elements of antiquity in the folk tradition. They were not the first, though, to re-frame the continuity thesis in a performative context, engaging the body in space (Glytzouris 2090-100; Fournaraki 2010). However, their body-centered approach is acknowledged as unique for the breadth of its scope and the boldness of its vision as a synthesis, particularly in connection to the production of Greek drama. At the same time, there is criticism of Palmer’s recourse to folk culture, as expressed, for example, in the shaping of the choral performance for the productions of Greek drama, as being too intent on aesthetics, idealistic, or amateurish (Glytzouris 2101, 2103-07; Van Steen 377-78 and footnote 11). Moreover, there may be nationalist or even racist underpinnings to the assumption of continuity of the Greek civilization at the Delphic Festivals, which deserve closer attention (Glytzouris 2102-03 and footnote 75). Indeed, ideological ambivalence in these interwar works is more pervasive than in the *Mycenae Polytopon*, as the continuity thesis has formed an integral part of their conception. Still, comparison to Xenakis’ performance reveals that the Delphic Festivals place discussion of Greek history within a forward-looking experimental context worth exploring further. On a preliminary investigation, they exemplify features opening up to contemporary, post-dramatic theater, including performativity, the conception of the event as a meeting or sharing as opposed to spectating, the special attention to process and to the work’s afterlife, as well as the versatile usage of environmental space and of multimedia.

### **Contemporary Performance**

The opening of the twenty-first century in Greece was marked by the Athens Olympics of 2004, featuring the Opening and Closing Ceremonies directed by Dimitris Papaioannou. These festivities are directly comparable to the *Mycenae Polytopon* and the Delphic Festivals as attempts to present artistically valid work of large scale, while engaging questions of national identity. Papaioannou’s production clearly showed that the continuity thesis has enduring relevance in

Greece. As in the earlier spectacles, in the Olympic ceremonies the thesis has been articulated in terms of the performative body in historically charged space. Another similarity to the previous works is that just like the earlier works, the Athens Olympics attempted to highlight the broader cultural significance of antiquity in a contemporary context. The central aim of the Olympics as a national enterprise was to organize events on a human scale, reacting to the commercializing of the games today and re-affirming the ancient ideals of participation. As the heir of ancient Greece, the modern state emphasized its unique ability to meet this challenge and to claim, through its success, a more central position in today's global culture. The body was a key element in the staging in the Opening Ceremony, highlighting the emphasis of the 2004 Olympics on humanism. Indeed, the sound of the human heartbeat was the leitmotif of the ceremony, effectively re-linking humanist values and the performing man—and woman—to the Olympics. The heartbeat and, by extension, the body, also referred to Greece, ancient and modern, as anthropocentric cultures of handcraft. Moreover, it highlighted a performative approach to Greek history, which has close affinity to that of the *Mycenae Polytopon* and, especially, to the Delphic Festivals, in its determinist orientation. Papaioannou presented Greece as a nation in which history is carried in the body; it constitutes living culture or present. This approach aimed at showing that the rich history of ancient and modern Greece constitutes a continuum, at the centre of which are the performing wo/men.

The linking between humanism, Greece, and the Olympics in the Opening Ceremony became clear from the first scene of the spectacle. In addition to emphasizing performativity, this scene is also directly relevant to the *Mycenae Polytopon* and to the Delphic Festivals in that it connects the body to significant archaeological space. Indeed, with the exception of this introductory episode, the Opening Ceremony did not exemplify environmental features, as it was set entirely at the stadium. The ceremony began with the sound of the beating heart, which was combined with video projections of running legs and athletes in motion, thus associating the contemporary Olympics with human values and performativity. The sound of the heartbeat was then taken up live by a folk band of male drummers at the stadium, widening the connection between the Olympics, humanism, and performativity to include modern Greek culture. After this prelude, in a striking *coup de théâtre*, one of the drummers in the stadium synchronized his beat in real time with a folk drummer at Olympia, virtually present in the modern stadium through electronic projection. Clearly, the scene encouraged identification between ancient and modern Greek culture and presented the latter as an interpreter of the illustrious past. Indeed, it was the folk drummers who fleshed out the sound of the sacred space of Olympia. The connection appeared natural and unforced, just like the beating heart of a healthy human. Its taking place in real time signalled its immediate, non-representational character. Moreover, the act of drumming underscored the performative, embodied character of this connection. The use of fast media to connect the two

drummers drew attention to the continuing relevance of humanistic values in contemporary web culture, underscoring that their source is Greece.<sup>7</sup>

As this example indicates, in spite of its aesthetic sophistication, the Opening Ceremony upheld ideological orthodoxy with regard to the continuity thesis in a more single-minded and straightforward way than either the *Mycenae Polytoton* or even the Delphic Festivals. The politics of continuity, articulated through performance in archaeologically significant space, also surface in discussions about the “proper” use of the theatre of Epidaurus. For example, in the summer of 2014, the decision of Giorgos Loukos, the current director of the Festival of Epidaurus, to focus on productions by young theatre professionals aroused debate in the press on whether experimental work should be presented at the ancient theatre (Sella 2014). Indeed, rigid prescriptions as to what can be presented at Epidaurus and how reveal the quasi-sacred status of the ancient space in modern Greece and its quintessential connection to the continuity thesis and to national identity (Ioannidou 2010).

In recent years, productions approaching the stage almost as an empty space, such as Sophocles’ *Antigone* (2006), by the acclaimed director Lefteris Voyatzis or Euripides’ *Helen* (2014), directed by the young professional Dimitris Karantzas, lend themselves to explorations of environmental aesthetics. At the same time, these directors do not take the continuity thesis for granted. In *Antigone*, the circular space of the theatre functioned as the production’s set. Stones, earth, and numerous wheat plants thrown on it evoked a threshing floor, intensifying the harshness of the confrontation between Creon and Antigone, with its overtones of the Greek Civil War in the forties (Kotzamani, “Athens Ancient and Modern” 28-29). There was no attempt, however, to conflate the tragedy of the civil war with ancient myth, or to place it within a historical continuum. Indeed, Voyatzis has referred to his conception of the set for *Antigone* in purely structural terms, steering discussion away from historical continuity: “The set,” he has mentioned, “is the underscoring, the intensifying of the archaeological elements of the space” (Loverdou 2006). In the more recent production of *Helen* at Epidaurus, actors entered the stage trailing suitcases on wheels which functioned as a mobile set, thus highlighting transitoriness and change. Moreover, actors would frequently recite their parts in the third person, introducing a refreshing distance to the text as well as to the space, parting ways with modern Greek claims of ownership of antiquity.

The most original usage of the theatre of Epidaurus in recent years, however, was in Dimiter Gotscheff’s production of Aeschylus’ *Persians*. The director approached *Persians* as a metaphor for the *hubris* of saving banks and absolving capitalist aggression during the contemporary financial crisis. This extraordinary situation called for performance-like movement, extending beyond the traditional,

---

7. For more extensive analysis and examples of how the Olympic Games festivities, including the Opening and Closing Ceremonies upheld the continuity thesis, see Yalouri (2010), Traganou (2010) and Kotzamani (2009b).

focal area of the orchestra, where a set of the palace was installed. Subverting classical norms, Gotscheff put novel emphasis on hitherto ignored architectural features of the theatre, such as its vast seating area, and drew attention, in a refreshing way, to the theatre's relation to its surrounding landscape. Interpreted by the distinguished actress Amalia Moutousi, Atossa made an impressive, long entrance by precariously walking in high heels from the top of the theatre to the orchestra, vividly evoking the threat of catastrophe at Susa and in Athens, as well as the need to have gifts of balance. While descending through the seating area, Atossa treated the thousands in the audience as her subjects, transparently opening up the play to contemporary readings. Resorting to more extreme tactics, characters would visually impress upon the audience the hubristic behaviour of the court towards the people by stepping on the *omphalus* of the orchestra. This directorial choice caused annoyance to some audience members and was criticised in the press as disrespectful of the sacredness of the space, although the offence in the production was attributed to the barbarian ruling elite (Ioannidou 386; Ioannidis 2009). The director had also made the original choice to incorporate into the play a brief performance-like commentary on the action delivered by Lena Kitsopoulou, in the role of a Shakespearean-like anarchic clown, confronting the establishment. Just like Atossa's entrance, this performance piece encouraged exploration of the play's contemporary relevance, all the more so as it was set outside the orchestra, in the space reserved in antiquity for the set. Beyond introducing irony, the positioning of the clown also encouraged thinking about the crisis, whether in Persia or in modern Greece, in unconventional ways, going beyond the frame.

The examples of recent usage of the theatre of Epidaurus which I have presented so far suggest that there is more openness in twenty-first century Greece to exploring a conception of Greek identity in a spatial context which does not exclusively rely on establishing a direct and continuous historical connection to antiquity.<sup>8</sup> These examples, however, are circumstantial; to the best of my knowledge and allowing for historical evolution, there is no artist or group in Greece currently undertaking performative historical exploration through space in as systematic and passionate a way as Xenakis, Sikelianos, and Palmer did. Some of the performance works of the experimental theater group Blitz, such as *Katerini* (2009) and *Cinemascope* (2010), do have an environmental dimension. However, the space these productions engage with is primarily urban, rather than rural or archaeologically significant.<sup>9</sup> This work is indicative of an international

---

8. For a more pessimist conclusion regarding the relevance of the continuity thesis in Greece see Papakonstantinou (2010) 2011: "For almost two centuries, the integration of ancient Greek symbolism in national ideology . . . has partly compensated for the modern Greek deficiencies in the fields of politics, economy and technology. There is nothing in sight to suggest that the situation will change soon. . . . Antiquity in the service of nationalism is here to stay."

9. *Katerini* was set in six rooms and a public space at the homonymous provincial town. At *Cinemascope*, set at Bios, audiences frontally faced a street, through a large glass window.

art trend in recent years to approach the city in theatrical terms as *mise-en-scène* and to get audiences to act or interact in and with it.

Site specific performances set in Athens, such as Maria Papadimitriou's *Tama* and, recently, the Dutch director's, Dries Verhoeven's, *No Man's Land*, respond to different concerns than the Delphic Festivals or Xenakis' *Mycenae Polytopon*, exploring the effects of globalization in metropolitan areas and highlighting the need to define Greek identity in up to date, multicultural terms. Frequently, such work focuses on the city's marginalized and downtrodden areas and inhabitants. *Tama* was set at Menidi, at a Roma settlement, where daily life and its activities were presented as a living museum, drawing attention to destitution but also to a colorful, exuberant, and diverse culture (Kotzamani, "Athens Ancient and Modern" 24-26). As for *No Man's Land*, the initial inspiration for the performance, as Verhoeven has explained, was his realization that as a citizen, he arrogantly participated in the debate about refugees in Holland without actually being familiar with the life any of them led (Kouzeli 2014).<sup>10</sup> In *No Man's Land*, each audience member was assigned to a guide, who led them through a tour of Psyrri, an area below the Acropolis, where immigrants have a strong presence. The guides were immigrants themselves, lending authenticity to their contact with audience members and highlighting the non-representational character of the work. Indeed, this personalized, small scale conception of performance, which focuses on diversity and on appreciating the specifics of the individual case, has a different orientation from the earlier epic spectacles at Mycenae and at Delphi, directed towards large audiences. A central aim of *No Man's Land* was to set up a context within which unmediated contact between an Athenian citizen and an immigrant could happen, on a more equal basis than is normally possible in daily life. Reversing norms, the immigrant guide unconventionally had the lead in the walk, while I, following him and not knowing where I was going, found myself in a somewhat vulnerable position. At the same time, the tour gave me a chance to observe and appreciate the ethnic character of the neighborhood in a way not possible in busy daily life. As its title indicates, the setting of the performance created a no man's land out of an Athenian neighborhood, open to redefinition in terms of cultural contact and exchange, as opposed to continuity.

In spite of its alternative orientation towards multiculturalism, Verhoeven's performance shares a common emphasis on the body with the earlier works at Mycenae and at Delphi. In the few times my guide turned to face me there was only eye contact and no talking between us. Indeed, the *mise-en-scène* was effective in setting up a ritualized context in which humane contact with an unknown immigrant could happen through glances, through the experience of sharing the

---

The street functioned as the production's stage, which incorporated into the performance passersby. See <http://www.theblitz.gr>, accessed December 15, 2014.

10. Useful excerpts from interviews Verhoeven has given on *No Man's Land* are also included in Eptakoiki (2014).

walk or eating a tangerine he gave me. There was no resort to the mediation of words. Language was relevant to the spectacle only in as far as I would listen on an i-pod to stories of immigrants, recited by a Greek actor. These accounts were based on interviews with immigrants, combined into a single narrative by Verhoeven. The point was that one of these stories could be the story of my guide. This alienated context, where I would not actually hear the guide tell his life story, contributed in yet another way to the ritualized atmosphere of the performance. However, the nameless and not otherwise documented personal stories of hardship, violence, and victimization actually reverted back to generalization, to the generic and the melodramatic which the director was trying to avoid. With the exception of this choice, the production did succeed in exploring urban multiculturalism in Athens in an ideologically unconventional way, affirming humanism and democratic ideals through small scale focus on personalized, body-based performance.

To sum up, I have approached the *Mycenae Polytopon* as a paradigm of environmental performance focusing on national identity and historical knowledge and I have considered how it relates to other works of similar orientation, in a preliminary attempt to sketch a map, of what is still largely unexplored territory. The *Mycenae Polytopon* demarcates differences between pre-1978 and contemporary theater production relating to space in Greece. Xenakis' work is ambivalent regarding the continuity thesis, with the performance itself challenging it and its nationalist reception firmly reasserting it. As such, it contrasts with the earlier Delphic Festivals, which take the continuity thesis for granted, as well as with contemporary site specific work, which either ignores continuity or juxtaposes it with a multicultural conception of Greek identity. At the same time, the ceremonies of the Olympics of 2004 show that national rhetoric is extremely resistant to change. The experimental features of the *Mycenae Polytopon*, including the original usage of space, the postdramatic conception of the performance as sharing, the emphasis on the body, and the use of multimedia have affinities to the Delphic Festivals, as well as to contemporary work. Indeed, from an aesthetic point of view the works at Mycenae and at Delphi are both forward looking, although epic conceptions and total artworks no longer express the spirit of our era. Still, contemporary work is not as adventurous and dynamic in its usage of space as the earlier examples. In conclusion, the *Mycenae Polytopon* and the Delphic Festivals have potential to inspire new work.

*Assistant Profesor  
Department of Theater Studies  
University of the Peloponnese  
Nafplion, Greece*

## Works Cited

- Eptakoili, Yiouli. "Following an Immigrant." [«Ακολουθώντας έναν μετανάστη».] *Kathimerini* 27 Apr. 2014. Web. 10 Oct. 2014.
- Fayers, Eldon. "Utopian Aesthetics. Philosophical Perspectives upon the Work of Iannis Xenakis." *Proceedings of the Xenakis International Symposium*. London, 1-3 April 2011: 1-13. Digital File. Web. 10 Oct. 2014.
- Ferris, Kostas dir. *Mycenae Polytope*. [Πολύτοπο Μυκηνών.] ERT, 1978. Film.
- Fournaraki, Eleni. "Bodies that Differ: Mid and Upper-Class Women and the Quest for 'Greekness' in Female Bodily Culture (1896-1940)." *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 27.12 (2010): 2053-089 Web. 20 Oct. 2014.
- Glytzouris, Antonis. "Resurrecting Ancient Bodies: The Tragic Chorus in *Prometheus Bound* and *Suppliant Women* at the Delphic Festivals in 1927 and 1930." *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 27.12 (2010): 2090-120. Web. 20 Oct. 2014.
- Ioannidis, Grigoris. "Dynasties during the Period of Crisis." [«Οι δυναστείες την εποχή της κρίσης».] *Eleftherotypia* 3 Aug. 2009. Web. 13 Sept. 2014.
- Ioannidou Eleftheria. "Towards a National Heterotopia: Ancient Theaters and the Cultural Politics of Performing Ancient Drama in Modern Greece." *Comparative Drama* 44.4 (2010): 385-403. Print.
- Kotzamani, Marina. "Athens Ancient and Modern." *PAJ* 92 (2009a): 11-54. Print.
- . "Athens Olympics and Spectacle: 2004 and a Year After." *Contemporary Issues* [«Οι Ολυμπιακοί της Αθήνας και το θέαμα: 2004 και ένα χρόνο μετά».] *Synchrona Themata* 31.105 (2009b): 72-77. Print.
- Kouzeli, Lia. "Immigrants' 'No Man's Land.'" [«Η 'No Man's Land' των μεταναστών.»] *To Vima* 3 May 2014. Web. 20 Sept. 2014.
- Leontis, Artemis. "Mediterranean Theoria: A View from Delphi." *Thesis Eleven* 67 (2001): 101-17. Print.
- Loverdou, Myrto. "I'm not done with *Antigone*." [«Δεν έχω τελειώσει με την Αντιγόνη».] *To Vima* 30 July 2006. Web. 12 Sept. 2014.
- Michelakis, Pantelis. "Theater Festivals, Total Works of Art and the Revival of Greek Tragedy on the Modern Stage." *Cultural Critique* 74.1 (2010): 149-63. Print.
- Papakonstantinou, Zinon. "Prologue: Sport, Classical Antiquity and Bodily Culture in Modern Greece." *International Journal of the History of Sport* 27.12 (2010): 2005-13. Print.
- Papastathis, Lakis., dir. *Backstage. The Revival of Ancient Drama. Delphic Festival 1927*. [Παρασκήνιο. Η αναβίωση του αρχαίου δράματος. Δελφικές Εορτές 1927.] ERT, 1978. Documentary. Digital File. Web. 27 Oct. 2014.
- Papazoglou, Eleni. "Between Texts and Contexts." *Re-Imagining the Past: Antiquity and Modern Greek Culture*. Ed. Dimitris Tziouvas. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014. 209-19. Print.
- Psychramis, Fotis., dir. *Mycenae Polytopon 1978 – Iannis Xenakis*. [Πολύτοπο Μυκηνών 1978 – Ιάννης Ξενάκης.] Farko S.A., 1978. Documentary.
- Sella, Olga. "Epidaurus Keeps Causing Controversy." [«Η Επίδαυρος συνεχίζει να διχάζει».] *Kathimerini* 13 July 2014. Web. 15 Sept. 2014.
- Sterken, Sven. "Music as an Art of Space: Interactions between Music and Architecture in the Work of Iannis Xenakis." *Resonance: Essays on the Intersection between Art and Architecture*. Ed. Mikesch W. Muecke and Miriam S. Zach. Ames: Culicidae Architectural Press, 2007. 21-52. Print.

- Sterken, Sven. "Towards a Space-Time Art: Iannis Xenakis's Polytopes." *Perspectives of New Music* 39.2 (2001): 262-73. Print.
- Touloumi, Olga. "Between Nature and Culture: Composing the Aural Landscape." [«Ανάμεσα σε φύση και πολιτισμό: Συνθέτοντας (σ)το ηχητικό τοπίο».] *Claiming the Countryside: Nature and Social Practices in Contemporary Greece*. [Η διεκδίκηση της υπαίθρου: Φύση και κοινωνικές πρακτικές στη σύγχρονη Ελλάδα.] Athens: Indiktos, 2009. Print.
- . "The Politics of Totality: Iannis Xenakis' *Polytopon de Mycenae*." *Xenakis Matters: Contexts, Processes, Applications*. Ed. Sharon Kanach. New York: Pendragon Press, 2012. 101-25. Print.
- Traganou, Jilly. "National Narratives in the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the Athens 2004 Olympic Games." *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 34.2 (2010): 236-51. Print.
- Tsagkarakis, I. "The Politics of Culture: Historical Moments in Greek Musical Modernism." Diss. Royal Holloway, University of London, 2013. Web. 14 Dec. 2014.
- Van Steen, Gonda. "'The World's a Circular Stage': Aeschylean Tragedy through the Eyes of Eva Palmer-Sikelianou." *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 8.3 (2002): 375-93. Print.
- Xenakis, Iannis. "Mycenae-Alpha 1978." *Perspectives of New Music* 1/2 (1987): 12-15. Print.
- . *Mycenae Polytopon*. 1978. Print. Performance Program.
- Yalouri, E. "Fanning the Flame: Transformations of the 2004 Olympic Flame." *International Journal of the History of Sport* 27.12 (2010): 2155-183. Print.