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The destruction of the Parthenon

INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTOS CHRYSOPOULOS CONDUCTED BY PIERRE JASSOGNE

Abstract: The Greek novelist and essayist Christos Chryssopoulos was inspired by the surrealist poet Yorgos Makris imagining, during World War II, the "total destruction of the classical monuments" starting with the most prestigious and symbolic of all, the Parthenon. He has built his novel *The Destruction of the Parthenon* upon this story, combining history with the contemporary and fiction with documentation. Since the economic, political and social crisis is ravaging the writer's country, his novel's impact seems to be notably amplified. The author's interview by the Belgian journalist Pierre Jassogne, in the midst of 2012's autumn, is based on such a point of view, asking him as well to cast his opinion about the role of the intellectuals in these times of crisis. The most recent book by Christos Chryssopoulos (*Une lampe entre les dents. Chronique athénienne*, released in February 2013) mingles a poetical meditation with fiction and a review of the present situation. Published by Actes Sud, those books have been translated by Anne-Laure Brisac.

Résumé: Romancier et essayiste grec, Christos Chryssopoulos s'est inspiré du poète surréaliste Yorgos Makris, qui, en pleine seconde guerre mondiale, imaginait la « destruction totale des monuments classiques », à commencer par le plus prestigieux et symboliques d'entre tous, le Parthénon. Il en a construit son roman *La Destruction du Parthénon*, qui mêle histoire et contemporain, fiction et documentation. Depuis que la crise – économique, politique, sociale – ravage le pays de l'écrivain, tout se passe comme si ce roman prenait une résonance plus vaste. C'est de ce point de vue que l'a interviewé le journaliste belge Pierre Jassogne, à l'automne 2012, lui demandant également de revenir sur la place de l'intellectuel en temps de crise. Le dernier texte de Christos Chryssopoulos vient de paraître (février 2013), qui associe méditation poétique, fiction et chronique du temps présent : *Une lampe entre les dents. Chronique athénienne* (tous ces ouvrages sont publiés par Actes sud et traduits par Anne-Laure Brisac).

The destruction of the Parthenon

Interview with Christos Chrissopoulos

Pierre Jassogne

Pierre Jassogne : Why did you decide to write about the destruction of the Parthenon? Is it an echo of the crisis in Greece?

Christos Chrissopoulos : The Parthenon has a uniquely symbolic cultural significance for Greece and Europe, so it is inevitable that my book "The Parthenon Bomber" will be read in the light of the current crisis. But when the book was published in Greece in early 2010, the dire socioeconomic crisis that soon befell the country was not yet a fact of life, but only an imminent probability.

The starting point for the book was political of course, but also historical. The book is a short novella based on a real story that took place in 1944, soon after the Nazi liberation of Athens and right before the breakout of a long period of political turmoil that led to the 4-year Greek civil war of 1946-1949. On November 16th 1944 in Athens, the obscure poet and intellectual George Makris prints a pamphlet titled: "Proclamation No1" asking for the "complete annihilation of all classical monuments, starting with the Parthenon", but nothing more has been heard of the infamous Proclamation No1 ever since. The "Parthenon Bomber" is based on Makris' proclamation, contemporizing this historical precedent through the story of an equally obscure present-day Athenian who finds a copy of Makris' text and decides to act on his demand. In my book the Parthenon is shattered and the building of a "new Parthenon" is commissioned in its place.

In reality, of course, the Athenian Acropolis still lies unharmed at the top of the city. But – to my surprise – soon after the book was published in Greece, the Parthenon suffered a number of different misfortunes.

The Parthenon was destroyed on the front pages of international magazines, and has been lying in symbolic ruins since then. A hyperrealistic "ruin in ruins". So, yes, the "Destruction of the Parthenon" echoes the crisis, whether I intended it or not. In some sense we have already bombed the Parthenon. But the symbolism reaches far beyond the locality of the actual monument. The Parthenon lies in ruins as a symbol of a "united" Europe in its harshest socioeconomic crisis yet.



The Economist, May 2010



The Economist, November, 2011



Focus, September 2011

I think that for readers beyond Greece the symbolism is of a European ruin, possibly beyond repair. Or even worse, of a proposed repair far worse than the present ruinous situation of Europe.

For me, the European symbolism of a destroyed Parthenon means that, even if the crisis is eventually overcome and Europe remains "united", even if we are led to a more "federalist" union as it is often said lately, we already live in a very different EU than the one we had associated with the "European example". Democracy, social justice, protection against poverty and inequality, equal opportunities for culture and education, human and work rights, social welfare etc., all seem to be under serious threat. Sweeping market dominance has led to a frightening homogenization (and conservatization) of the political agenda, to the challenging of nearly all of the aforementioned characteristics of European sociopolitical identity and to widespread violence across Europe (especially the South): economical, psychological, ideological, even physical violence on the streets and inside households. Hence violence is not only multifaceted but also subliminal and personal.

My book ends with a calling by Giorgio Agamben from his book *Profanations* (2007): "The profanation of the unprofanable is the political task of the coming generation". I would like to think that this generation has already arrived

P.J. : In your book, the terrorist considers the destruction of this monument as a way to get rid of the past. You think that in Greece, the Greeks wanted to get rid of their past?

C.C. : The relationship with one's past (even the debate of what this "past" is made of) is a highly contested matter that raises deep and complex issues of identity. If I wanted to restrict this discussion to current matters, I would claim that "the past was already gone". Let me explain: I don't think that Greek society as a whole ever wished to radically re-negotiate its past. On the contrary, I think that Greek society up until a few years ago rested comfortably on a commonly accepted notion of its past and present. And then, suddenly, the crisis erupted in 2010. This was a major shock. No one ever imagined such a situation. No one expected it. And the political class never warned the common people of such a trajectory. This is a serious political crime. There was widespread political silence until the crisis blew up. And suddenly the people felt that they were robbed of their recent past of a few decades ago. Suddenly people were told that their past was a lie. And now, the past had changed and nothing has taken its place. A vacuum exists in recent Greek history. The recent past has been obliterated and this has affected Greek society's ability to understand itself. This is why it is so difficult for societies under crisis to react in a collective and decisive manner.

P.J. : Do you think that culture can be a way out of the crisis in your country?

C.C. : I am very sceptical about using culture as a response to real-life problems that affect people's ability to live decently. The current socioeconomic crisis has hit Greece very hard and people suffer. At the same time the burden is not fairly distributed. The response to this should be acutely political and with an appreciation for class distinctions.

Under these circumstances, culture is, of course, not an equally high priority when compared to employment, daily sustenance and basic rights such as those to health and social services. Also, because of the crisis, the cultural sphere has taken a big blow. People do not have money to spend on culture and there is minimal public support for the arts.

So, in short, culture has a place in the debate about the current situation of Greek society, and art is certainly acquiring a stronger political edge these days. I think this is time for political action as well as art-making. The former is now more important.

P.J. : In Athens, what are the places that best describe the current crisis?

C.C. : These are the places that no longer exist. Here I think culture is more central, because every cultural asset that disappears weakens a country's ability for self-knowledge. The historical consciousness is lost together with contemporary cultural heritage. As the cultural signs disappear a society becomes in some sense de-institutionalized.

For example one of the longest established theaters in Athens, the "Amphitheater" of Spyros Evangelatos, one of the best in the city, was forced to close after 36 years of life. For me this is a grave loss. Cultural organizations are closing such as "The European Translation Center EKEMEL" (<http://www.ekemel.gr/Content.aspx?C=150>) – this was the major center in Greece concerned with literary translation, translation training, etc. Art venues are also closing, e.g. DASEIN, the art space where I was organizing the DASEINFEST International Literary Festival (www.daseinfest.blogspot.com). "Parafono", one of the longest established jazz clubs in Athens, has closed. On their site (<http://www.parafono.gr/htmls/fgreekset.htm>) you can watch a video of their legendary piano being taken away, the last thing that left the empty club. Recently the Greek National Book Center EKEBI www.ekebi.gr was closed by government decree.

There are many more examples. The problem with austerity policies is not that cultural production gets temporarily curbed (fewer books published, fewer concerts organized, festivals cancelled etc.), the real problem – a real crime – is that the cultural infrastructure of the country gets destroyed. This is the gravest consequence for me.

There is a hopeful sign though and this comes from new forms of collectivity. This happens not only in culture, but also in other aspects of everyday life. People come together and they organize

events, projects, exhibitions etc. with little or no money, through voluntary work and involving as many people as possible. Exhibitions, performances, publications, bazaars, festivals are cropping up ad-hoc and this is a great boost for the city.

P.J. : What's the situation of writers in Greece currently? Is it possible that the crisis has also affected literature and artists? What's your position on this?

C.C. : I cannot think of anyone in my circle that has been left untouched by the current situation. I myself can serve only as an example of a full-time writer in today's Athens. As a writer I have neither any social insurance nor any form of social benefits (including basic healthcare). Newspapers and magazines have been shut, so employment opportunities have diminished. At the same time, many people in culture (writers, editors, translators etc.) remain unpaid for work that has already been delivered months ago. It is a deadlock. I am able to survive because of my teaching and some projects abroad, but basically, because my partner and I have learnt to live frugally and have been doing so for a long time. We have never extended ourselves beyond our means and we have chosen a somewhat unconventional lifestyle devoted to our work.

But, as a teacher of literature, I wanted to stress that the worst consequences of the crisis do not affect established writers (those who have already developed a network of resources), but young writers who face a reality of very few opportunities. I am afraid that the crisis is here to stay for a number of years, and in the near future, a generation of young writers will be "silenced" because publishers will have a very hard time publishing unknown and unconventional writers.

P.J. : Do you think that writers should support events or take a stand to denounce the situation? Or should they stay away from society and devote themselves to writing? Does the crisis influenced the themes of your texts?

C.C. : I think that art and life are inextricably linked even though they are separate domains of our reality. Art does not necessarily have to follow contemporary life. Art is of course produced and it is "consumed" within our real situations, but it could be aspiring to the abstract, the imaginary, the "other", the ideal, the foreign, the marginal etc.. What I mean is that artists are free of contemporaneity when they are practising their art.

But, at the same time I think that artists, as citizens, have a social role to play and they should – like anyone else – be present and vocal in the discourse around our common life.

As for me personally, in the current climate I felt the need to take a stand both as a writer, as a citizen and as an Athenian. I felt the obligation to record my present. So, last winter I was driven

towards writing a non-fiction book. My last book is titled "Flashlight in the mouth" – "Une Lampe Entre les Dents" (2012) and it is an effort to portray the situation of a decaying city: Athens.

I was walking the city for three months (Oct-Dec 2011), taking photographs, talking to homeless people and then recording my contemplations upon this reality. It is a hybrid philosophical and journalistic diary. Through this work I felt that I fulfilled a duty to make a mark on our times.



On the book cover is my shadow photographing what I think is iconic of Athens today: the blanket of a homeless person laid down in the center of the city. Actes Sud will publish the book in French in February under the title "Une Lampe Entre les Dents". You can read two different excerpts in French on the Internet¹.

P.J. : What has changed in Greece since the beginning of the crisis? Many people have told me that it is the joy of living.

C.C. : In my understanding it would be naive to say that the "joy of living" has been lost, as if it were some genetic characteristic of the Greek way of life. I understand different ways of "Joie de vivre" (Greek, French, Indian... you name it) not as an inherent trait or lifestyle, but as a coefficient of many factors (socioeconomic, cultural, even climatic). The austerity measures that have been imposed upon Greece are both criminal and ineffective. This we know already and it is reflected in the wider European sovereign debt situation. People have no money to spend, so there is no incentive for new enterprises, unemployment and homelessness are booming, the social structures are disintegrating, populist and nationalist (even Nazi) rhetoric is surfacing, and

¹ Excerpt 1: <http://www.recoursapoeme.fr/chroniques/une-lampe-entre-les-dents/c-chryssopoulos>

Excerpt 2: <http://www.limpossible.fr/actualite/une-lampe-entre-les-dents-rencontres-avec-les-invisibles-d%E2%80%99ath%C3%A8nes>

the result is a fast shrinking society with no foreseeable way out of the spiral. It is hard to enjoy these aspects of life.

In my understanding we need a new left vision of politics for the whole of Europe and for Greece in particular. A more rational Keynesian economic mix where the state is efficient but primarily protects the people and not the markets. A program of progressive reforms and a vision of protection for our democratic heritage. The rise of neonazi, reactionary and nationalist groups in Europe is very alarming to me.

I think the crisis will be resolved one way or another. Our present has changed already. The future will surely change as well. The question is in which direction will things move? Here we all need to think and take a stand.