

OFF-HISTORY

Selini Halvadaki, video with sound, 19:10 min

(All dialogue translated to english in this transcript).

Transcript:

[On-screen caption]: There is a building at the front of the harbour in Piraeus close to where the ships dock. I have seen it many times leaving or returning from the islands of Greece. It stands like a giant ghost among the neighbouring buildings.

[English voice-over]: I search for images of this building in different archives. I navigate within the logic of the specific archive. At first there is nothing to be found. At some point I abandon the logic searching techniques of the archive and replace them with a random flipping through the many images. This is where the tower appears. It is revealed in the background when the logic of the archive is abandoned. In a short description of the TV clip I read that it was shot in 1976 and shows the annual Easter celebration, which include the tradition of blessing the water in the port of Piraeus. The President of the Republic is participating as well as other dignitaries and a crowd watching. The image is not only a representation of a historic event; it also acts like a mirror in relation to a ghost, revealing the withdrawal of what we think is still there.

I find a report in one of the archives on the development of Real Estate properties. I read:
"The Piraeus Tower was erected in the early 1970s. The building has not been completed yet, as the construction of the higher floors is on-going". Further down I read: "The Building has a total of 25 floors. It as was implemented in order to become a landmark of economic and urban development of the area as well as to promote the city's image as a shipping and commercial centre. Only the first three floors of the building have been completed since and accommodate various functions. The other floors of the building have not been completed".

[English dialogue][Kalliopi]: So, the mayor who gave the orders for the tower to be built was not chosen by the citizens of Piraeus. He was actually chosen by the dictator. So, within the spirit of the dictatorship wanting to build building that would show their triumphs and their glory they decided to build this tower instead of building a contemporary market.

[Greek voice-over]: The archives that you mentioned have similarities with empty structures and different kind of ruins. They both originate from a certain system. One is collapsed or abandoned. It has been discarded by time and history. The other is intact, a repository of documents. Just as the archive preserves the past through the graphic witness of original records, the ruin too, constitutes a form of writing in which historical consciousness is expressed through the material witness of fragments.

[English voice-over]: In searching for images of the Piraeus Tower I find plenty of imagery shot in the years around its construction. I have seen this kind of images before and recognize them as images of power, of politics. They are monuments, constructed on the film scroll instead of in stone or concrete. How does the story of these images relate to a possible story of the Tower?

I leave the archive in order to find people who can and to the story of these images and their relation to the empty Tower.

[Greek voice-over]: The history of this building could start on this day. April 21, 1967. We are at the Syntagma Square, in Athens, in front of the parliament. This is the day when the military dictatorship took power of Greece. I was 14 years old back then. And I remember the building was build during this period. We see Georgios Papadopoulos who was the head of the Junta, greeting people. There are plenty of these kinds of images if you want to see them. I guess their purpose is similar to the intention of the Tower that you are asking about.

[English dialogue][Gregory]: It is an urban void. It is a living witness of cancellation; *ματαιώς* or something that was not meant to be.

[Maria]: No, it is not so present for many reasons. Although, it is part of recent history and some times it comes back. For some reason Greeks have put it away in their memory. I think that mostly because it was connected to a very big trauma of our recent history, which is the Cypriot case. This was the worst thing that happened to Greece after the civil war. In a way the dictatorship was the end of the civil war, I mean the last phase of the civil war, which was so long for Greeks that they tend to forget it, they need to forget it although it is impossible to forget. In my opinion the civil war is in our everyday life although we do not recognize this. In my opinion the crisis of today is not just now, it started in 1974 because it was about the way we handled the democracy we finally had.

[English voice-over]: I apply for permission to film inside the empty floors of the building. Different people working at the municipality of Piraeus tell me that the process of getting permission would take too long. Then they are not sure whom I should talk to. Later I am told that the municipality is looking for private investors to buy the tower. In the end they tell me that there is no need to film inside the empty floors. “If you were to film”, a man tell me in his office, “then, you see it would become a document”.

[English voice-over]: By coincidence I met a woman who owns a shop next to the Tower. She is part of a group that has proposed various ideas on how to use the empty floors. She shows me how to access the empty floors. I film the empty floors.

[English dialogue][Gregory]: It’s like a symbol of cancellation the way it stands now. And it also shows the fact that, and this is what really bitters me I mean, it shows the fact that a whole society could not deal with its creations. Past or future. It’s like we say in Greek; “τόσο βουρύσαμε τόσο καναμε” meaning that was as far as we could go, we build the frame, we are not able to complete the cladding and make it habitable. Which is not true of course.

[Greek voice-over]: Ruins are a legacy that can be neither fully remembered nor fully forgotten; they point to the presentness of disaster, its capacity to spill out of the present into our sense of the past and our expectations for the future at a given time.

[English dialogue][Christina]: The unfinished building is something complex because it has a later implied or a tomorrow that didn’t happen for some reason. The layer of both a past a future and a now that has to exist. Looking at the future there is also a need to look at the past. What is the before? In Greece the before is always the ancient. The idea of the ancient. This glorified past that you somehow have to live up to. I mean it’s been glorified so much that it has become a myth and you can’t live up to a myth. This is a certain history that is a very complex construction that again relates to the Greek identity somehow but very much also the identity of the entire western world having this myth as its basic past somehow.

[Maria]: I mean we have lost our authenticity and we have tried to be Europeans in a very superficial way. The result is that we do not function in it. The ones who accept this plan, wanted to show themselves that they are modern. And it was the same with those who build the tower of Piraeus. It is a symbol of failure I think, for Piraeus and for Greece.

[Gregory]: Back in the days the New York port authority was building the World Trade Centre, so these guys here tried to create something like that. It was supposed to be a trade centre similar to the World Trade Centre.

[Christina]: I feel like there is a lot of pressure around being something that you are not. And at the same time feeling some kind of forced shame about what it is that you are. I think this has something to do with what westernization has done globally. Each place is experiencing it differently and with different complexities. But I feel a kind of pressure that comes after a century of film, photography and music. We consume all these images of a certain idea. And in the end these images are messages of what you are supposed to be, or how you are supposed to live. And sometimes it feels like it hasn’t really been processed. How much of these ideas do we actually need? Do we still believe in these ideas? For example the idea of a certain way of being European or modern like the building implies. Do we still give value to these ideas?

[Greek voice-over]: Memory is a constant battle wherein different groups are constantly trying to define the parts that form a contemporary memory. The product of this battle is what constructs our collective social memory at a given time. The ruins of modernity point at possible futures that never came to be. But those futures do not necessarily inspire restorative nostalgia. Instead they can make us aware of the vagaries of these specific modern visions as such.

[English voice-over]: When people talk about the Tower a variety of different stories and connections seem to unfold. They expand from the emptiness of the tower onto various issues of politics, of identity, of economy. As the tower stands today it questions the certain idea of modernization it was suppose to promote. The material witness of its decay conducts an anti-monument revealing the shifts and possible deficiencies within its own original idea. As it appears in the background of an image it becomes a way of abstracting new narratives within existing material. Reading history from the background of the images, which conduct it. The Tower is not only an unchangeable product of a material history. It reveals additional narratives within the many sideways of history; an off-history.

Credits:

Conversations with:
Kalliopi Dalakleidi
Christina Thomopoulos
Maria Velaora
Gregory Maloukos
Nikos

English speak: Therese L. Henningsen
Greek speak: Kostas Halvadakis

Translation:
Kalliopi Dalakleidi
Kostas Halvadakis

Archival footage: Hellenic Public Radio Television

Text fragments:
Architecture of the Off-Modern by Svetlana Boym
Irresistible Decay: Ruins Reclaimed by M.S. Roth, C. Lyons and C. Merewether
The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster by Jalal Toufic

Special thanks to:
Lars Kristensen
Tobias Corell
Angela Melitopoulos
Therese L. Henningsen
Christina Thomopoulos
Kostas Halvadakis
Eva Maria Hartvig Lund
Lise Christensen
Aristides Antonas
Mariana
Kalliopi Dalakleidi
Carseten Juhl
Chari

Thank you:
The Danish Institute in Athens
| ν σ τ ι τ ο ύ τ ο τ η ς Δ α ν ί α ς σ τ η ν Α θ ή ν α

Selini Halvadaki 2014