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### **Rethinking Stasis and Utopianism:**

#### **Empty Placards and Imaginative Boredom in the Greek Crisis-scape**

Maria Boletsi

The following phrase appeared on an Athenian wall as part of a street artwork created in 2013 by the Greek public artist known as bleepsgr (Figure 1):

“Crisis... what else?”

The graffiti showed a woman carrying a small placard with the message “Against cultural hegemony” with one hand, and with her other hand pushing away a male artist wearing a T-shirt with the writing “artistes systemiques” on it.<sup>1</sup> The graffiti was conceived as a critical response to a street art festival with the title “Crisis? What Crisis?”, organized by the School of Fine Arts in Athens.<sup>2</sup> The work issued a critique of the institutionalization and commodification of street art (and art in general) and the instrumentalization of artists

by the capitalist system. The artist's statement that accompanies an image of the graffiti on his website, criticized the exclusion of independent Greek activists from cultural initiatives that projected Greece's artistic production in the midst of its socioeconomic crisis. The same statement also called for forms of agonistic artistic resistance that could take on the task of "producing new subjectivities" and "new worlds" (Kakouris n.pag.).

*Figure 1. "Crisis... what else?" by V.M. Kakouris aka bleepsgr (Athens, 2013). Image reproduced by kind permission of the artist. [in published article]*

The graffiti and its critical message were indicative of the heated discussions that have been taking place in Greece in recent years on the role of art in the context of the country's economic crisis that broke out in 2009. Central to these discussions has been the question of whether art—street art in this case—can offer alternative languages of resistance to the all-encompassing framework of crisis, as it took shape in Greece since 2009. The phrase accompanying this graffiti—"Crisis... what else?"—underscored the omnipresence of crisis by projecting it as *lack* of choice: an all-encompassing, normalized framework that seems to leave no room for alternatives. Crisis indeed turned into a master-narrative in Greece, which provided legitimation for harsh austerity measures, exacerbating conditions of precarity for a large part of the population and radically changing people's experience of their present and future.<sup>3</sup> Since 2015, the discursive framework of crisis was further shaped by the entanglement of the sovereign debt crisis and the social and humanitarian crises it engendered, with what has been dubbed the 'migrant' or 'refugee

crisis.’ This entanglement made Greece the epicenter of multiple declared crises or what Anna Carastathis called “nesting crises” (2018, 142).

It should be noted here that since the official end of the international bailout program for Greece in August 2018, dominant political rhetoric in Greece has been shifting: from a narrative of crisis that ‘demands’ sacrifices and resilience from the population, political leaders have moved towards a rhetoric that taps into the vocabulary of recovery, rebuilding, and a new beginning after the traumatic crisis-years.<sup>4</sup> While the persisting conditions of precarity and poverty of a large part of the population are starkly at odds with this new political narrative, it remains to be seen whether this shift in political rhetoric will consolidate a new hegemonic framework of *post-crisis*, and how art and literature will respond to this framework.

The framework of crisis in Greece largely affected the terms of production and reception of art and literature created in the crisis-years. Art forms like street art, poetry, theater, and cinema, experienced a remarkable efflorescence and started receiving international attention,<sup>5</sup> but this attention was usually, in one way or another, framed by reference to the ‘crisis,’ even though many filmmakers and artists resisted this framing for their work.<sup>6</sup> The reduction of artistic forms of expression in Greece to by-products of the ‘crisis’ risks affirming crisis as a hegemonic narrative and interpretive framework for those works, while steering their reception in restrictive ways (Boletsi 2017, 256).

Nevertheless, exploring how literary, artistic, and other cultural objects engaged with the framework of the crisis does not necessarily entail treating these objects as *products* of this framework. Many forms of artistic and sociocultural expression devised agonistic forms of engagement with dominant crisis-discourses or experimented with

expressive modalities that registered what some have called a “crisis of meaning” in Greek society (Psaras 2016, 2, 4). This “crisis of meaning” was accelerated by the major rearrangements in the Greek social fabric brought about by the financial crisis of 2009, but can already be traced before that, in the events of December 2008: the massive protests and demonstrations that took place in Greece following the killing of a sixteen-year-old boy, Alexis Grigoropoulos, by a policeman. The December 2008 events registered a widespread discontent among the population, and the younger generations particularly, which commentators and politicians had a hard time framing within existing discourses and political categories.<sup>7</sup> In art and literature, the crisis of meaning involved a reconfiguration of people’s relation to history and to past (ethnonationalist) narratives that defined Greek identity, but also radical engagements with futurity. Dimitris Papanikolaou coined the term “archive trouble” for this “iconoclastic return to the past” during the crisis, showing how writers, poets, artists, and filmmakers were turning to past archives and reinventing or reconfiguring “the past and its remnants” while trying to give expression to a precarious present of crisis (2017, 41, 46, 47).

While I focus on the Greek context, the framework of crisis I probe is not limited to Greece, despite the undeniable particularities of the Greek crisis-scape. The experience of crisis as a chronic framework of living rather than a singular turning point extends far beyond the constellation known as ‘the Greek crisis.’ The phrase “Crisis... what else?” also captured a broader understanding of crisis in neoliberal capitalism as an enduring state that contracts the space of political choice and the imagination of alternative futures. Crisis-rhetoric amplifies what Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi has called the “slow cancellation of the future” since the universalization of neoliberal capitalism (2011, 18)—a process that

started already in the late 1970s and 1980s but took a more totalizing form after 1989 and the fall of Eastern-bloc communism. This neoliberal capitalist totality established what Mark Fisher called “capitalist realism”: an anti-utopian outlook on the global present marked by “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it” (Fisher 2009, 2). Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri famously used the term “Empire” in their homonymous book (2000) to name the deterritorialized, decentered, supranational form of power that took shape in this new global order to which there is no outside.

‘Crisis’ is instrumental in this world order. As David Higgins writes, following Hardt and Negri, “Empire has capitalized on an environment of perpetual crisis in order to fold its exterior inward and to territorialize the entire globe within its domain” (2015, 53). Cultivating a sense of perpetual crisis becomes a mechanism for maximizing profitability for some, as well as authorizing exceptional measures, (semi-permanent) states of emergency, limitations in civic or human rights, and biopolitical control. In the era of finance capitalism, Brian Massumi writes, the problem of the inevitable “periodic economic collapse” in the “capitalist cycle” “has been solved—by *eternalizing crisis* without sacrificing profits. The future-past of the catastrophe has become the dizzying ever-presence of crisis” (1993, 19; emphasis added).

Thus, if one of the meanings of the word “crisis” in ancient Greek (*κρίσις* / *krisis*) was “decision” or “choice” between alternatives (Koselleck 2006, 358), recent mobilizations of crisis run contrary to this meaning: they narrow the space of real choices, critical reflection, and alternatives in politics. Crisis as an instrument, Stijn De Cauwer writes, “plays into the hands of those who want to claim that ‘we have no other choice’”

(2018, xxiii). It thus turns into a pillar of the ‘TINA doctrine’ (‘There Is No Alternative’),<sup>8</sup> which establishes neoliberalism as “the only rational and viable mode of governance” (Athanasίου in Butler and Athanasίου 2013, 149). Based on this doctrine, discourses of crisis render “critical thinking and acting redundant, irrational, and ultimately unpatriotic” (149). As a supporting mechanism for a doctrine of ‘no alternatives,’ crisis rhetoric reduces complex constellations to pseudo-choices between a right and a wrong, or a legitimate and an illegitimate alternative.<sup>9</sup> This binary logic also largely determines the way subjects are construed in this rhetoric as either active or passive, guilty or innocent, masters or victims. In my previous work, I showed how this logic determines constructions of Greek subjects in moralizing narratives of the Greek debt crisis: as either guilty and responsible for their country’s plight due to ‘bad conduct,’ or as passive, powerless victims either of a domestic flawed political system or of global forces outside their control (Boletsi 2016, 8-11).

Thus, if “crisis... what else?” is a *rhetorical* question that draws attention to a framework of crisis without an outside, how can this question become a *real* one? Can this “else”—alternative or even utopian political, social, and cultural spaces, times, narratives, subjectivities—be thought *through* but also, hopefully, *beyond* the ‘new normal’ of crisis? This essay traces the ways in which two works engaged with this question in the Greek crisis-scape: the short story “Πλακάτ με σκουπόξυλο” / “Placard and Broomstick” by Christos Ikononou (2010) and the wall writing “βαριέμαι ευφάνταστα” [variemai eufantasta], translated as “I am bored imaginatively” or “I am bored fancifully,” which featured on Athenian walls in the years of the crisis.

Both works evoke but do not directly address or thematize the ‘crisis’ in Greece. They respond to conditions of precarity and alienation that are simultaneously embedded

in a local context and exemplary of broader, global processes. Confronting contemporary experiences of dispossession and alienation as a pervasive narrative frame, Ikonomou's story registers the impossibility of stepping out of this frame but also the unyielding desire for alternative narratives. The wall writing reconfigures one of the symptoms of capitalist realism—boredom—into a language that, I argue, reimagines utopianism from *within* the neoliberal 'now' by tapping into the modality of the middle voice.

Even though these works perform different kinds of *stasis*, they both disengage from conceptions of subjectivity that rest on the binary choice of a *passive* or *active* subject—either an acquiescent victim without agency or a revolutionary hero who challenges power from its outside. The former option invalidates the possibility of resistance while the latter is an untenable position for resisting a late capitalist totality without exteriority. They both also respond to the impossibility of standing outside the totalizing framework they resist. They thus enact forms of stasis as an “internal contestation of power” (Lambropoulos 2018, n.pag.) that challenges neoliberal imperatives of acquiescence, normalization, and ‘moving forward.’ Both works—the one perhaps more convincingly than the other—enact, to borrow Arjun Appadurai's term, “a politics of possibility.” As a challenge to the neoliberal “politics of probability” that seeks to calculate, contain, and control the future, a politics of possibility remains open to languages and modes of being that cannot be fully articulated in the present and harbor the hope of different futures (Appadurai 2013, 1, 3).

### **Empty Frames; Or How to Imagine Stasis Beyond Revolutionary Heroism and Passive Acquiescence**

The story “Placard and Broomstick” was included in the short story collection by Christos Ikononou *Κάτι θα γίνει, θα δεις / Something will Happen, You’ll See*, published in 2010.<sup>10</sup> The collection became a best seller and—owing also to the timing of its publication in 2010—it became, according to the synopsis of the book’s English translation, “the literary emblem of the Greek crisis.”<sup>11</sup> The book’s haunting stories feature poor, working class, vulnerable, laid-off, unemployed, or indebted characters, watching their dreams of a better life dissolve under the material and symbolic violence of sociopolitical and systemic conditions that stifle possibilities for resistance or escape. Many stories stage small acts of protest or resistance to these conditions, ranging from (unrealized) fantasies of escape to extreme violent acts against the self, as in the story “Penguins Outside the Accounting Office,” in which the narrator’s father swallows five metal tacks upon seeing his wrongfully arrested son in handcuffs at the courthouse. Even though these acts of protest carry a bitter taste of futility, the book’s title underscores the stubborn hope for an event—the “something” that, against all odds, will introduce a dissonance in the ordinariness of a crisis without prospect of resolution and will open up the future.<sup>12</sup>

Even though most stories in the collection were actually written before the financial crisis erupted, they were largely received within the framework of the crisis, that is, as responses to social conditions and inequalities the crisis exacerbated. Even when critics took into account that many of these stories were created before the watershed year of 2009, they still framed them as “harbingers” of the crisis (Hadjivasileiou 2012; Bekos qtd. in Kapsaskis 2013; Raptopoulos 2010): stories that may have not explicitly addressed the crisis but foreshadowed it by showing a society at a critical point (Hadjivasileiou 2012, 91). Regardless of this framing, the writing of these stories before the outbreak of the crisis

certainly complicates clear-cut distinctions between a ‘pre-crisis’ and ‘crisis’ Greece and problematizes prelapsarian understandings of the pre-crisis years. The substandard living conditions of the working classes, the inequalities, disposability, and lack of future prospects sketched in the stories, can be related both to domestic sociopolitical structures and to systemic conditions in neoliberal capitalism that preceded 2009.

In “Placard and Broomstick,” the protagonist, Yannis Englezos, tries to come to terms with the death of his best friend Petros Frangos.<sup>13</sup> Petros, a steelworker, was electrocuted at the construction site he was working, in an accident that happened because the contractor had pressured him to work late into the evening on a Thursday, just as Yannis and Petros were preparing to leave for Yannis’ village in the mountains of Epirus to spend Easter together (Ikonomou 2016, 91). Petros dies two days later in the hospital from severe burns. His death also puts an end to the escape-plan the two friends had been fantasizing about: leaving the city for the countryside. “Things here are getting rough, everyone’s losing it, these days people scare me . . . I’m telling you, the future is in the mountains,” Petros kept telling Yannis before the accident (92). To them, the mountains posed as an escape from an unfulfilling urban life of social alienation, apathy, and hardship.

Unable to process his friend’s painful and senseless death, Yannis is struggling to find words to capture his and his friend’s experience. All words, however, feel foreign, borrowed, and ill-suited. During Petros’ last days at the hospital, Yannis’ dramatic plea to the doctors to save him—a plea Yannis believes is not taken seriously because he does not have the money for serious treatment—feels like words that “have come straight out of some series on TV” (97). The language of soap operas and popular entertainment makes his desperation sound like a melodramatic cliché, alienating him from his own emotions.

To fathom Petros' pain, he then turns to the language of *arithmetic*, trying to break down and quantify his friend's pain in numbers: "He divided 24,000 by Petros's age to see how many volts there had been for each year of his friend's life. He multiplied Petros's age by 365 and divided that into 24,000 to figure out the volts per day. Then he calculated the hours and the minutes and the seconds" (93). His need to protest leads him to attach a piece of cardboard onto a broomstick, making a makeshift placard. Thinking of what to write on that placard, however, words fail him again:

He wanted to write something that would express unspeakable rage and hatred and love and despair all at once. Or maybe it should be some plain, dry slogan, the kind of thing a political party might say about workplace fatalities, about people who die on the job. Or maybe something like the things they write on the gravestones of people who die in vain, or too young. Something about god and the soul and angels and the afterlife. (94)

The vocabularies he considers—political rhetoric, gravestone inscriptions, religious sermons—sound like clichés to him that fail to articulate his and Petros' experience. Leaving the placard empty, he walks to the building site where his friend died and holds the placard high. He spends the whole day there, hoping, to no avail, that his wordless protest will attract some reaction by passersby or that someone will become interested in his story.

While waiting for something to happen, he ponders ways to emplot his protest and endow his empty frame with meaning. In this attempt, two hegemonic narratives are

‘tested’ as potential analogical vehicles for his act of protest: history and religion. Following the logic of analogy, Yannis seeks to counter his dispossession and social invisibility by tapping into the (masculine) heroic ethos of ancient, Byzantine, and modern leaders and heroes of Greek History. If people came to him, he thinks, “He wouldn’t tell them his real name. He would make up some other name, more suited to the circumstance, a nice heroic name. My name is Achilles. Achilles Palaiologos. Or Alexander. Or Thrasyvoulos. Alexander the Great Thrasyvoulos Nikiforidis” (99). The irony of the analogy is unmistakable: this hyperbolic list of heroes is ill-fitted for the anti-heroic figure of Yannis, whose wordless protest stands no chance of becoming part of the historical record.

The religious narrative that underlies the whole narration is the Christian narrative of (self-)sacrifice and salvation. The story is interspersed with references to Easter. The analogies the story implicitly constructs are between, on the one hand, the passion and sacrifice of Christ, and, on the other hand, Petros’ painful death but also Yannis’ placard as a modern version of the cross. The story starts on the Monday after Easter, as Yannis is preparing for his protest (the accident and Petros’ death are narrated through retroversions, mostly mediated by Yannis’ recollections). The accident happens on Maundy Thursday and Petros dies on Holy Saturday. In his last painful hours in the hospital bed, Yannis

saw Petros’s arm or foot suddenly flail, two or three or four times in a row, and Yiannis’s eyes would fill with tears and to steel his nerves he would repeat words to himself from some old prayers that he had mostly forgotten. But that flailing wasn’t the work of god. It was just the current shaking Petros’s body—that’s how

much current was still in his body. (89-90)

If the shaking of Petros' body gives the momentary impression of a resurrection—a projection of Yannis' hope for his friend's recovery—this turns out to be not “the work of god” but the cruel, continuous effect of the cause of his death, yielding a pain without end and a sacrifice without redemption. Petros' sacrifice (a sacrifice that was not his choice) and Yannis' makeshift ‘cross’ not only fail to lead to a form of salvation but they also seem to have zero impact on the rest of the world. The religious analogy therefore falters before it is even erected. In fact, since the Christian narrative of sacrifice does not support any prospect of salvation in the story, it is more convincing as an allegorical vehicle for the passivity of acquiescent subjects that the neoliberal governmentality of crisis breeds. As Athanasiou writes, “Under the truth regime of ‘crisis,’ not only do people have to engage in a daily struggle against economic hardship and humiliation, but they are also called upon to bear all this without any sign of outrage or dissent” (in Butler and Athanasiou 2013, 149).

As a result, the evocation of Christian and heroic national narratives ends up underscoring the incommensurability between those narratives and the characters' experience. These attempted transhistorical analogies prove unable to offer consolation, understanding or a well-articulated critique of the present. As no past narratives provide the framing Yannis is looking for to piece together his experience and find his place in the present, the muteness of his placard is highlighted even more. “This,” Yannis thought, “is the most pathetic, most ineffectual protest since the birth of the workers' movement” (Ikonomou 2016, 102). Ironically, the only metaphorical vehicle in the story that proves

convincing is one that captures his inability to *transfer* (the original meaning of ‘metaphor’ from the verb *metapherein*) his experience to language: “All the things he had inside, everything he was feeling, were like these fish he’d seen once on TV, strange fish that live deep down in a lake in Asia somewhere and when you take them out of the water and the sun hits them they rot right away and dissolve and disappear” (100-101).

His protest ends as he lights a cigarette at night and watches the smoke “slowly rise under the yellow street light and then disperse in the darkness like the smoke from some pitiful ancient offering that no one even noticed, neither gods nor people who believed in gods” (103). As a final attempt to relate his ‘now’ to other spaces and times, this “offering” fails to establish a connection with the Greek gods in search of meaning or justice: it dissipates without a trace, just as the protest of the empty placard found no audience or sympathizers.

Yannis’ placard signals a crisis of language and representation, which, notwithstanding the story’s anti-heroic ending, projects the need for alternative languages for the experiences of subjects exposed to social disposability. If there is a ‘felicity’ then to be found in this (speech-less) speech act of the empty banner, it lies in its stubborn refusal to be appropriated by established frameworks—be it popular entertainment, arithmetic, Christianity or Greek History. Such frameworks, as Yannis knows, would make his and Petros’ experience “dissolve and disappear” like those strange fish as they reach the sea’s surface.

Is the empty placard mute? If not, what space for dissent does it forge in an alienated present of normalized crisis in which workers are exploited (Petros’ precarious working conditions led to his death) and in which there is no hope for justice or a different future

(their utopian escape to the mountains remains unrealized)? Yannis' protest can be seen as a form of *stasis* that unsettles the neoliberal, nationalist, and religious discourses eager to capture his experience and subjectivity through established formulas. As a speech(less) act, his protest proclaims an epistemic crisis in available discourses that cannot speak for the dispossessed. In that sense, the placard's emptiness signals the insufficiency of *those* discourses rather than his own.

*Stasis* in ancient Greek accommodated several meanings: “stand” (from the verb *ἵστημι* / *histēmi* that meant “to stand”), “position,” “standpoint” and gradually dissension, “conflict” between groups with opposed standpoints, civil war, revolt, popular insurrection (Hansen 2005, 126-27). Stemming from the root *\*sta*, the polysemy of *stasis* can be schematized in two opposed clusters of meaning, “one signifying immobility, the other signifying mobility” (Vardoulakis 2018, 95).<sup>14</sup> In his article “Greek Democracy in Crisis or Stasis,” Vassilis Lambropoulos distinguished two ways of approaching the decade of the 2010s in Greece: the one is the dominant model of “a biopolitical crisis whose victims need the government’s pastoral care” and the other is the model of *stasis*, “an alternative model of institution” in which “actors contest self-rule agonistically” (2018, n.pag.). In the model of crisis (which Lambropoulos ascribes to the hegemonic Left), the collective’s behavior is disciplined by “the normalization of resistance,” that is, “the availability of the morality of resistance to the entire population that acquiesces so long as it can claim to do it heroically” (n.pag.). By contrast, what Lambropoulos understands as the model of *stasis*, which he associates with the autonomist Left—the Left of “the excluded and marginal forces that do not fit the crisis narrative”—privileges “internal contestation of power,” “the politics of autonomism” and “the power of solidarity” (n.pag.).<sup>15</sup> Disavowing two

hegemonic narratives that often pose as sources of consolation, identity, power, and even remedy to crisis (Greek Orthodox Christianity, Greek nationalist heroism), Yannis' stasis can be seen as such an autonomist gesture that combines (seemingly) passive standing (waiting in the same position throughout the day) with a standpoint without content. The paradoxical combination of *immobility* (sitting or standing still) and *mobility* (contesting, taking a stand) in his gesture exemplifies "the bewildering multivalence of the term" stasis that, as mentioned above, signifies both movement and its opposite (Vardoulakis 2018, 95): "standing still but also taking a stance and taking the stand: at once motionlessness and insurrection" (Athanasίου 2017, 183). But if his standpoint has no content, what does this standpoint contest, exactly?

The hegemonic narratives he tests (and rejects) in the story rest on binary understandings of subjectivity along the lines of active versus passive: victims or heroes; passive endurance of pain or full mastery of one's fate; the masculine heroic ethos of Achilles and the imperialist drive of Alexander the Great (Ikonomou 2016, 99) or the passive Christian ethos of self-sacrifice. His stasis disengages from old recipes for countering the injustices of a present 'in crisis': he is neither the heroic individual, nor part of a collective revolutionary act, nor a messiah who sacrifices himself for the good of humanity. Words fail him because he refuses to side with either side of a passive / active binary. Viewed in this way, his placard is neither just the desperate act of an impotent subject nor a revolutionary call for a clean start. His stasis thereby becomes what Athanasίου describes as "an embodied practice of inhabiting the *polis* through contestation and dissent," that, by rejecting (heroic) accounts of the sovereign subject, manages to "stand critically beside the conceits of self-sovereign subjectivity" (2017, 42). His gesture

asserts the need to re-frame and rearticulate experience and subjectivity in the ‘now’ of a normalized crisis and to imagine alternatives that are not there yet.

If stasis requires a shared standpoint and a “politics of solidarity,” however, Yannis’ protest, which remains unanswered, seems to lack the reciprocation that could turn it into a collective form of dissent. Yet, even if he stands alone in the story, outside the story his placard does find transnational lines of connection with other ‘solitary’ forms of stasis that operated beyond frameworks of revolutionary heroism or passive acquiescence. One may recall the so-called ‘standing man’ protest by Erdem Gündüz, who stood still in Taksim Square facing the Atatürk cultural center in a silent, seemingly passive protest against police brutality in the Gezi park protests in 2013. Or the action of Aslan Sagutdinov, a man in Kazakhstan, who on May 21, 2019, was arrested for holding a blank banner in a central public square in the city of Oral. Although his banner had no message—or perhaps *because* of that—it confused the authorities and led to his arrest.<sup>16</sup> Yannis’ empty placard also resonates with the empty billboard frames in Yorgos Zois’ short-film *Out of Frame* (2012), the starting point for which was the recent banning of advertisements in large exterior billboards in Greece, which left hundreds of empty billboard frames around the country in a state of decay.<sup>17</sup> In these—and other—solitary acts of protest or estranging visual grammars Yannis’ act finds the interlocutors and the lines of connection he lacks in the intradiegetic world.

### **Imaginative Boredom; Or How to Rethink Utopianism Through the Middle Voice**

By disavowing established vocabularies that cast the subject as either active or passive, Yannis’ wordless protest points perhaps towards the modality of the *middle voice*, even

though this is never registered on the placard's empty space as an alternative expressive form. The middle voice was a third grammatical voice in ancient Greek, distinguished from the active and passive voices by the fact that the subject in middle voice verbs was *inside* the process designated by the verb, involved and affected by it, and neither just agent nor patient, but a bit of both (Benveniste 1971, 148; Pecora 1991, 210).<sup>18</sup> The middle voice vanished as a grammatical category from modern Greek (as well as from most modern languages) and its functions were absorbed by the binary distinction between the active and passive voices. However, linguistic constructions that convey the *meaning* of the middle voice through passive or active verbs are still operational in modern Greek. Beyond linguistics, thinkers have also conceptualized and theorized the notion of the middle voice as a mode of discourse that undoes binaries between active and passive, perpetrator and victim, subject and object (Barthes 1970; Derrida 1982; White 2010; LaCapra 2001). As a discursive modality, the middle voice captures a space of indeterminacy that shuns rigid oppositions and suspends *crisis*, understood here as binary choice.<sup>19</sup> It is also a space in which the subject is always implicated in discourse and cannot speak or act from an external position.

If the middle voice is evoked but never articulated in Ikonomou's story, it is explicitly taken up in the second case I engage with: a wall writing that fills Yannis' empty canvas, as it were, with a precariously hopeful response to neoliberal discourses of crisis. The wall writing comprises two words: "βαριέμαι ευφάνταστα" [variemai eufantasta]. The verb "βαριέμαι" [variemai] means "I am bored" while the adverb "ευφάνταστα" [eufantasta] has a double meaning: it can refer to someone with creative imagination or someone who makes up imaginary stories and lies. It would thus be translated as "I am

bored imaginatively” or “I am bored fancifully.”

*Figure 2. Version of the wall writing “Variemai eufantasta” [I am bored imaginatively] in the Exarcheia neighbourhood, Athens, 2010. Photograph reproduced by kind permission of the photographer. [in published article]*

The writing appeared during the years of the financial crisis in Athens. I was able to trace two renditions of it in Athens, but it is very likely that there have been more. Although I could not determine when it first appeared, a *terminus post quem* is 2010, since a blogger posted an image of it in an entry from 2010 (Figure 2).<sup>20</sup> “Being bored” could allude here to the idleness and emptiness of a middle- or upper-class consumerist lifestyle. But it also evokes the enforced inactivity of unemployment that sky-rocketed in Greece in the crisis years. The latter reading—the ‘boredom’ related to unemployment—is more in tune with the Athenian neighbourhood of Exarcheia, where the writing appeared. Exarcheia is home to unemployed youth and carries an air of insurrection and resistance to power, often materializing in clashes with the police, but is also a neighborhood from which many self-organized communities and solidarity initiatives have emerged, offering, for example, refuge to migrants and disenfranchised people. A blogger, for example, posted a photo of the wall writing in his “Diary of an unemployed” and used the phrase to title his entry on November 11, 2010, in which he describes his discovery of the writing during an idle walk as an unemployed “flaneur” in Exarcheia.<sup>21</sup> The peculiar figure of an unemployed flaneur already hints at the ambiguous subject that *variemai eufantasta* captures. The phrase links the passivity of unemployment with creative imagination: the latter promises future action

and the possibility of resisting conditions of enforced dispossession<sup>22</sup> (unemployment, precarity, disposability) through an exodus from the neoliberal demands of productivity that breed acquiescence and leave no time to think or contest the conditions of one's life.

Significantly, the phrase plays with, and inverts, a common phrase in Greek: *βαριέμαι αφάνταστα* [variemai afantasta], which translates into “I am unimaginably bored,” i.e., I am bored to death. The wall writing reconfigures the extreme boredom registered in this phrase by replacing the prefix *a-* (indicating *lack*) with the prefix *εύ-* [eu-], indicating something positive. This change of prefixes reinstates the “imagination” (*fantasia*) that is only present in *afantasta* by negation. The late capitalist *ennui* of an “unimaginable boredom” thereby becomes an imaginative use of that boredom to potentially change the conditions that induced it.

In the wall writing, dispossessed subjects are invested with the power to daydream, imagine, and potentially challenge the conditions of their abjection through their only valuable possession: time. The notion of imaginative boredom suggests a partial disengagement from the demands of productivity and from what Lauren Berlant calls the “cruel optimism” of attachments to “upward mobility,” “job security,” and other “conventional good-life fantasies” that prove untenable within the new normality of crisis in neoliberal capitalism (Berlant 2011, 2). If, following Berlant, in the “precarious public sphere” of crisis-stricken Greece such attachments have become “*more* fantasmatic with less and less relation to how people live” (11), the word *eufantasta* hijacks the “fantasmatic” from the affective structure of cruel optimism, reclaiming it for a quotidian utopian space that is shaped not outside but *within* the chronotope of capitalist realism and in agonistic opposition to it. Reconfiguring boredom from a space of inaction to one of

imagination, it exchanges the cruel attachment to “good-life fantasies” for a *stasis* that instills glimpses of utopianism into the new normal of crisis.

*Variemai eufantasta* joins what Harry Cleaver calls “the struggle against work” that resists “the endless subordination to work in order to gain space, time and energy to elaborate alternatives” (84, 2015). Like Yannis’ empty-placard protest in Ikonou’s story, this wall writing also has domestic, transnational, and transhistorical interlocutors. It winks, for instance, at Guy Debord’s famous wall-writing “Ne travaillez jamais” (“Never work”), which he painted on a wall on the Rue de Seine in Paris in 1952. It also converses with another wall writing that appeared in Greece during the crisis: “Δεν φοβάμαι τίποτα, δεν ελπίζω τίποτα, είμαι άνεργος” [I fear nothing, I hope nothing, I am unemployed]. This writing paraphrases a famous line by literary author Nikos Kazantzakis (1883-1957): “I fear nothing. I hope nothing. I am free.”<sup>23</sup> In the latter wall writing, the implicit casting of unemployment as a form of freedom (through the evocation of Kazantzakis’ line) certainly carries a bitterly ironic tone. But it also registers a potential side effect of contemporary forms of enforced dispossession, i.e., one’s disengagement from the “cruel optimism” of attachments to “good life” and consumerist fantasies.

The word “fantasia” (imagination) embedded in “eufantasta” also links the wall writing with the May ’68 slogan “all power to the imagination.” *Variemai eufantasta* tries perhaps to update that slogan and carry over its utopian energy into the world of capitalist realism. The utopianism of this wall writing, however, is of a different kind from the May ’68 slogan: to understand its mode of operation we can look at how its message and affective force are inflected through the modality of the middle voice. The verb constitutes a middle voice construction, since in *variemai* [I am bored] the subject is affected by, and

involved in, the process the verb designates. One could also read the phrase as a whole as cast in the discursive mode of the middle voice: the cohabitation of passivity and inaction with creativity and imagination yields a subject that is concurrently passive and active, disempowered and empowered, neither just agent nor patient, but both. It is also a subject *internal* to the late capitalist conditions that induce boredom (whether this boredom is related to precarity and unemployment or to a consumerist life-style), and thus implicated in the system it tries to resist. This already moves us away from a revolutionary utopianism that demands rebellious subjects seeking to overturn a corrupt system by opposing it from the outside. If there is no outside to the new world order of “Empire,” resistance and utopianism in a post-revolutionary world can take shape through different modalities.<sup>24</sup> *Variemai eufantasta* refuses to abandon utopianism, but rethinks it in a capitalist realist context through the expressive modality of the middle voice. Its precarious utopianism erupts within a quotidian space of normalized crisis and antagonizes its conditions (boredom) from within.

The wall writing refashions the “unimaginable boredom” of capitalist realism that promises no different future into a utopian space that dovetails with what José Esteban Muñoz calls “queer utopianism”: an “anticipatory illumination” that helps us sense “the not-yet-conscious” as “a utopian feeling” in certain properties of “representational practices” (2009, 3). This utopianism, channeled here through the middle voice, is neither passive nor active, neither acquiescent nor revolutionary, neither negative nor uncritically positive, but belongs, to speak with Shoshana Felman, “precisely to scandal: to the scandal of their nonopposition” (2003, 104; also qtd in Muñoz 2009, 13).

The message's optimism is certainly not unhindered: it is further undercut by the second meaning of *eufantasta* as "fanciful." Imaginative boredom may thus prove to be fanciful and fictional: a fake promise for an impossible exodus from the neoliberal governmentality of crisis. The message's promise may thus be cruel after all, articulating the fictitious musings of dispossessed people that pose no real challenge to power. *Variemai eufantasta* issues a message that contains its self-contestation, without, however, invalidating the utopian energy that motivates it. The double meaning of *eufantasta* activates an ambiguously utopian space that finds itself in an agonistic relation to the neoliberal conditions that threaten to undercut its optimism. The writing thus rethinks utopianism through and against the 'new normal' of crisis. It projects boredom both as a symptom of capitalist realism and a potential resource for imagining the *otherwise*.

### **From Crisis of Representation to a Politics of Possibility; Or, How to Rearrange Symptoms of Crisis in New Configurations**

The empty placard of Ikonomou's story and the imaginative boredom registered on the walls of Athens test modes of resistance to the alienation, dispossession, and contracting of the future in the 'new normal' of crisis: conditions that have taken shape in capitalist realism and predated the financial crisis in Greece, but were severely aggravated in the crisis-years. In Ikonomou's story, the protagonist is unable to find the words for his protest in nationalist narratives of heroism and in Christian narratives of self-sacrifice. His empty canvas challenges past hegemonic narratives as means of narrativizing the present or resources of wisdom and resilience in times of crisis. Although the story does not envision a new language of protest that would fill the blank canvas, the protagonist's stasis draws

attention to the inadequacies of existing frameworks and longs for a different vocabulary for articulating the experience of dispossessed, alienated people and for imagining the not-yet-there.

The wall-writing *variemai eufantasta* mobilizes the properties of the middle voice to rethink the possibility of utopianism and of imaginative spaces *within* the totalizing conditions of late capitalism. It does not pose as a new language of resistance untainted by, and external to, hegemonic narratives—the language that Yannis in Ikonomou’s story longs for but cannot find. Rather, *variemai eufantasta* linguistically and conceptually reconfigures one of the ‘symptoms’ that afflict subjects within the neoliberal governmentality of crisis: the “unimaginable boredom” linked to unemployment, consumerism or an indebted life without the prospect of a different future. If boredom is a symptom of the chronic ‘disease’ of normalized crisis,<sup>25</sup> the wall writing tries to counter the disease by placing this symptom in a new configuration through which it could yield different, more hopeful effects. A symptom like boredom that entails depletion of energy, passivity, acquiescence, compromised agency, may thereby turn into a resource for imagining different modes of being in the present and for inserting moments of utopianism in the ordinariness of crisis.

If Ikonomou’s story registers a crisis of representation and the inadequacy of existing narratives, *variemai eufantasta* revisits a symptom of neoliberal capitalism and ‘crisis’ through the modality of the middle voice: a modality that, it is important to note, does not always or by definition serve as an instrument of stasis and critique of hegemonic frameworks, but *can* assume this function in cases such as this.<sup>26</sup> The space of imaginative boredom that the wall writing fosters may be ambiguously utopian or even fanciful. But by

hijacking quotidian spaces from the governmentality of crisis, it can activate a “politics of possibility” (Appadurai 2013, 1, 3), momentarily enabling the imagination of those alternative configurations of subjectivity and agency that Ikonomou’s empty placard only dreams of.

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<sup>1</sup> An image of the graffiti can be accessed on the artist's website at <http://bleeps.gr/main/outdoor/crisis-what-else-9/>

<sup>2</sup> The graffiti and the accompanying statement protested against the initiative of the Athens School of Fine Arts to organize this street art festival, from which, according to the statement by bleepsgr, local Greek artists were excluded.

<sup>3</sup> The phrase "Crisis... what else?" and the graffiti by bleepsgr are also briefly discussed in Boletsi 2018a, 4.

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<sup>4</sup> Illustrative of this shift of narrative is the speech of then Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras on the occasion of Greece's exit from the bailout program in August 2018, symbolically shot with the harbor of Ithaca in the background, in which he evoked the homecoming of Odysseus after a long troubled journey in order to project a redemptive narrative of successful arrival after years of hardship ("We have reached our destination") and the commencement of a new chapter in Greek History ("Today is the beginning of a new era") (qtd. in "Alexis Tsipras' State Address from Ithaca" 2018, n.pag.). Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Prime Minister of Greece since July 2019, also announced in his victory speech that Greece will "proudly raise its head again" under his leadership (qtd. in "Kyriakos Mitsotakis" 2019, n.pag.; my translation).

<sup>5</sup> For example, several new anthologies of recent Greek poetry in translation written around or during the crisis have been published for international audiences. The most prominent are by Chiotis 2015, van Dyck 2016, and Siotis 2015.

<sup>6</sup> A good example of this tendency is the international reception of the films of the so-called 'Greek Weird Wave,' which critics tended to see as products of Greece's socioeconomic turmoil. Steve Rose, in an article that introduced the term "Greek Weird Wave," asked: "Is it just coincidence that the world's most messed-up country is making the world's most messed-up cinema?" (2011, n.pag.). See also Papanikolaou's essay on the 'Weird Wave' as a cinema of biopolitics in this volume.

<sup>7</sup> See Douzinas 2013, Kallianos 2011, Kornetis 2010, Panourgia 2010, Schwarz, Sagris, and the Void Network 2010, for indicative analyses of those events.

<sup>8</sup> A popular slogan first used in the early 1990s by Margaret Thatcher and other politicians to indicate the lack of alternative to neoliberalism.

<sup>9</sup> For this argument, see also Boletsi 2017, 260-61; De Cauwer 2018, xxiii.

<sup>10</sup> See also the essay by Jonas Bækgaard in this volume that focuses on another story from the same collection. The collection was translated in English in 2016 by Karen Emmerich.

<sup>11</sup> From the book's synopsis on the website of Archipelago books, at <https://archipelagobooks.org/book/something-will-happen-youll-see/>.

<sup>12</sup> For a brief discussion of the book and its title, see also Boletsi 2018, 22.

<sup>13</sup> The last names of the two protagonists mean—somewhat ironically—"English man" and "French man" respectively.

<sup>14</sup> The direction of the first cluster of meanings can be illustrated, for example, through words like "state," "static," or "status quo," while the second cluster that connotes movement is manifest through words "that confound the stability and unity of the state," such as the understanding of *stasis* as civil war or the Greek term for "revolution," *epanastasis*, that also derives from *\*sta* (Vardoulakis 2018, 97). Although these clusters seem contradictory, their interrelation has been explored by philosophers (Vardoulakis 2018; Schmitt 2008; Loraux 2006). See Vardoulakis' account of stasis and its relation to democracy that develops through an illuminating discussion of Schmitt's and Loraux's ideas on the matter (2018, 99-109).

<sup>15</sup> Lambropoulos traces the model of stasis in modern Greek poetry and its modes of expression and circulation.

<sup>16</sup> According to a statement by the activist, he wanted to show that he would still be arrested even if his protest had no message, hinting at the curtailing of freedom of expression in his country (Daniyarov and Morgan 2019, n.pag.). The protest was seen by

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some “in the light of the recent anti-governmental protests” in the country (Biedarieva 2019, n.pag.).

<sup>17</sup> See the synopsis on the film’s website (<https://www.outofframefilm.com>). The film’s synopsis ‘frames’ the empty billboards by asserting that “the empty frames are now the message. And we are out of frame.” Unlike Yannis in Ikonomou’s story, the film’s director did try to fill the void of these frames and signify them in a “director’s note” on the film’s website: “The empty frames above our heads, picture not only the current social and financial collapse, but . . . our bare inner world. They directly reflect our blank state of mind, our sentimental void and solitary existence. The empty frames are the contemporary monuments.” I am grateful to Georgios-Evgenios Douliakas for drawing my attention to Aslan Sagutdinov’s protest and Zois’ film.

<sup>18</sup> This exposition of the middle voice draws from a more detailed outline in Boletsi 2016, 11-12.

<sup>19</sup> For Jacques Derrida, for instance, the middle voice corresponds with his notion of *différance*, as the in-between repressed by conceptual dichotomies (Derrida 1982, 9; LaCapra 2001, 20).

<sup>20</sup> The blog entry, entitled “Ημερολόγιο ενός ανέργου—Ημέρα 116<sup>η</sup>: ‘Βαριέμαι ευφάνταστα’” [Diary of an unemployed—Day 116: ‘I am bored imaginatively’] can be accessed at <https://thestranger.wordpress.com/2010/11/11/log116/>

<sup>21</sup> See note 19.

<sup>22</sup> See Butler and Athanasiou for a delineation of ‘dispossession’ as both an ontological condition that stresses the relational constitution of the self (i.e., a condition of not ‘owning’ oneself) but also as the “enforced deprivation of rights, land, livelihood, desire or modes of belonging” (2013, 3, 5).

<sup>23</sup> In Greek, the line, which is engraved on Kazantzakis’ gravestone, reads: “Δεν ελπίζω τίποτα. Δεν φοβούμαι τίποτα. Είμαι λήπτερος.”

<sup>24</sup> According to Hardt and Negri, in the model of a “disciplinary society” individuals could oppose “the disciplinary invasion of power” from an external position. In *Empire*, however, biopolitical power subsumes “the bodies of the population” and the “entirety of social relations,” precluding resistance from the outside (2000, 24).

<sup>25</sup> In ancient Greek, the word *crisis* also had the meaning of disease (Koselleck 360).

<sup>26</sup> For the political and ethical risks in uses of the middle voice, see Boletsi 2016, 22-23.