

# Lessons from Makronisos: 'Fictions' of the Camp in Documentary Practices

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## ABSTRACT

*Cultural imaginaries of the modern Greek state often draw on the legacies of ancient Greece and the city-state of Athens to invoke the democratic principles of legal equality, personal freedom and governance by the people. These principles have been reprocessed in art, literature and film, in Greece and other European countries, for purposes of self-definition, nationalism and cultural memory. A different moment in Greek history and memory is called up in four recent works of documentary practice. They include Swiss filmmaker Olivier Zuchuat's Like Stone Lions at the Gateway into Night (2012), South African artist Penny Siopis' The New Parthenon (2016), Greek artist Zafos Xagoraris' The Concession (2019) and Greek-American filmmaker Eva Stefani's tripartite Anaglyphs (2019). All four pieces of film and installation art reference a moment in the history of modernity when fascist regimes in Europe made widespread use of camps as a strategy to punish, oppress or destroy political opposition from the Left. This article explores the formal, cinematographic and aesthetic operations that become 'visible' in these works and invoke the 'concentrationary' logics of the camp – not only with regard to the past, but also to other systems of violation against the human in the present.*

## KEYWORDS

camp system

the concentrationary

film and installation art

Makronisos

multidirectional memory

politics of aesthetics

Cultural imaginaries of the modern Greek state often draw on the legacies of ancient Greece and the city-state of Athens to invoke the democratic principles of legal equality, personal freedom and governance by the people. These principles have been reprocessed in art, literature and film many times, in Greece and other European countries, for purposes of self-definition, nationalism and cultural memory. A different moment in Greek history and memory is called up in four recent works of documentary practice. They include Swiss filmmaker Olivier Zuchuat's *Like Stone Lions at the Gateway into Night* (*Comme des Lions de Pierre à L'Entrée de la Nuit*, 2012, 87'), South African artist Penny Siopis' *The New Parthenon* (2016, 15'), Greek artist Zafos Xagoraris' *The Concession* (2019) and Greek-American filmmaker Eva Stefani's tripartite *Anaglyphs* (2019). All four pieces of film and installation art reference a moment in the history of modernity when fascist regimes in Europe made widespread use of camps as a strategy to punish, oppress or destroy political opposition from the Left. This article explores the formal, cinematographic and aesthetic operations that become 'visible' in these works and invoke the 'concentrationary' logics of the camp – not only with regard to the past, but also to other systems of violation against the human in the present.

### **MAKRONISOS: A POLITICAL READING OF THE CAMP**

In Greece, the first prison camps were established during the dictatorship of General Ioannis Metaxas (1936–41) and, again later, when the Axis powers, Nazi Germany in alliance with fascist Italy, occupied Greece from 1941 to 1944. In the late 1940s, the system of camps reached from mainland Greece to the nearby islands of Agios Efstratios, Ikaria, Limnos, Samothraki, Thasos, Trikeri and Yiaros, forming what camp historian Polymeris Voglis has called a whole “archipelago of punishment” (2002: 2). One island was notorious for its harsh detention methods: Makronisos. From 1947 to 1950, during the height of the Greek Civil War, over 50,000 political dissidents, mostly Communists, were held there in camps to undergo a state-regulated ‘rehabilitation programme’ or what was officially called a “brilliant experiment in moral re-education” (Becatoros 2016: n.p.).<sup>1</sup> Forced to work under extreme conditions,

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<sup>1</sup> Internees were also expected to recant their Communist ‘leanings’ or left-wing affiliations in a public ritual; and in order to be released again, a declaration of

many internees suffered from hunger and thirst and a debilitating lack of hygiene. Former inmates also recall “severe beatings, being dunked in the sea until nearly drowned, and intense pressure to denounce communism” (n.p.). In 1950, when the new democratic government under Nikolaos Plastiras took up office, the camps on Makronisos were closed. But for circa 3,000 political exiles the ordeal was not over: more than 500 women with children were transferred to Trikeri and nearly 3,000 men were exiled to Agios Efstratios, a Greek island further out in the Aegean Sea, where they lived under relatively isolated conditions for another decade.

Today, the camp structures of Makronisos no longer exist; the last time the island was used for the imprisonment of political opponents was during the military dictatorship of George Papadopoulos (1967–74). By that time, the old buildings from the 1940s had already been substantially demolished in an attempt to help rebuild the Greek capital in the 1960s, when construction material was scarce. In *Like Stone Lions* Zuchuat thus makes use of a series of formal and cinematographic techniques that invoke, rather than represent, the camp. I will show in more detail how this filmmaker works with landscape and the archive to allow some ruins on a hillside become cyphers for the terror and violence experienced by those who survived the camps. For other filmmakers the challenge lies not so much in the invocation of the Makronisos camps *per se*, as in raising corresponding questions concerning human fragility and systemic forms of violence and oppression. The use that is made of the archive can thereby differ substantially from work to work: in *The Concession* and *The New Parthenon*, for instance, the camps are almost absent; only the title of Siopis’ film essay and subtitles superimposed on home footage of an island refer us to the historical site; in Xagoraris’ *The Concession* a few stock photos from the Makronisos archive bear witness to the past. By comparison, Stefani’s silent piece *Mouth* (2019, 3.5’), which is one part of *Anaglyphs*, and Zuchuat’s *Like Stone Lions* provide spectators with extensive visual material from the topography of the camps. The essay film also consists in large parts of footage shot by Zuchuat on the island in the 2010s. Common

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repentance had to be signed, confirming their loyalty to the regime. Civilians who did *not* sign the declaration risked being transferred to one of the military battalions where systematic violence led to better results. Cp. Resolution 73, *Government Gazette* 226 (14 October 1949) for a retroactive sanctioning of this programme; see also Voglis 2002: 529 n.19.

to all four works, however, is that they form complex and multi-layered assemblages of disparate audio/visual material. As such these works encourage us to think with the past and the conceptual figure of Makronisos, in particular, through far more pervasive logics of oppression and violation against the human in the present.

In my argument I draw on a series of books on ‘concentrationary’ art, cinema, memories and imaginaries, co-written by Griselda Pollock and Max Silverman who recur in their use of the term ‘concentrationary’ on David Rousset. His account of the German camp system in *L’Univers concentrationnaire* (1946) was based on his personal experiences in Buchenwald as one of a group of French political prisoners, including, most notably, Robert Antelme and Jean Cayrol. Upon their return to France in 1945, as survivors of the Nazi camps, these men felt the necessity to report to the world what they had endured in the camps. As Pollock and Silverman point out, the significance of Rousset’s text “lies not in personal testimony of his experience” (2014: 2), but in realising that camps are a symptom of a logic of human destruction that did not vanish with the defeat of Nazi Germany or the end of the Second World War. Rousset “was appalled to discover camp systems still functioning elsewhere after 1945” (2–3). He drew on examples from Russia and its satellite states – “the ‘gulag archipelago’ of Stalin’s Soviet Union” (3) – but also China and Spain. These camps were not “localized sites of internment and torture but [...] symptoms and laboratories of an anti-political system unleashed on the world” (2). Such system poses a constant “menace to the social and political foundations of plurality, spontaneity and creativity” (2). Where logics of ‘the concentrationary’ rule, “thought is deadened, action is programmed, and there is no vigilant anxiety about or active resistance to the absolute corrosion of human singularity and human rights” (3). Under such conditions “everything is possible” (3), as they conclude with Rousset.

To be clear: I am not arguing that Makronisos indeed was a concentration camp, although claims in this respect have been made.<sup>2</sup> But, in light of the current rise of populist, authoritarian or dictatorial regimes worldwide, these artists and filmmakers seem to ask: what can Makronisos, a site of profound human suffering, teach us with regard to our own present and

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<sup>2</sup> Cp. the flyer for the Greek Pavilion at the 58<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (2019), the Makronisos Political Exile Museum in Athens or Hamilakis (2002: 307).

foreseeable futures? Has the horrific potential of 'the concentrationary' perhaps not yet been fully actualized? In asking such questions, these works of film and installation art seek to tap into the unsettling and traumatic histories of Greece, indeed of a wider European past, to expose 'the concentrationary' as a transnational trait of modernity, traceable from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, not only in countries like Greece or Germany, but also South Africa or, more recently, the United States, a nation with an explicitly democratic tradition.

The selected pieces respond to these difficult questions primarily on an affective level, which is, according to Erin Manning, what assemblages typically do: marked by exchangeability and multiple connectivity, they "always open the way for relation to be experienced" (2012: 41). Affect – that which is in a state of pre-articulation and escapes conventional forms of representation – is generated in the works through the oblique operations of metaphor, metonymy, association or correspondence; a disjunctive ethos is practiced that makes use of montage, juxtaposition, intervals, gaps, rupture, dissonance. In *Like Stone Lions* an underexposed gaze, sculpted voice entities and a layered soundscape further point us to the trauma suffered by those who experienced the terror in the camps. *The New Parthenon* deploys association and analogy to foreground the correlational quality of different oppressive systems in the present.

By occasionally stretching the documentary character of the material to its generic and media-specific limits, the four aesthetic works singled out here invoke 'the concentrationary' to the extent that they also complicate, disrupt, contradict and thereby resist its dehumanizing logics with all its shades of authoritarian, totalitarian and exterminatory politics. The use of the artefact or audio/visual document is thereby not restricted to its indexical or iconographic qualities but allows something else, i.e. "a different sense of reality" or "fiction", to speak with Jacques Rancière, emerge from the scene. "Fiction does not mean the invention of imaginary beings in contrast with solid reality", as he writes in his summary from 'Fictions of Time',

Fiction is a structure of rationality that is required wherever a sense of reality must be produced [...] by the cutting out of the scene, the identification of its elements and the modality of the description [...] it is a form of linkage between events that makes them coexist or follow one another, establishes causal

connections between them, makes sense of that connection and gives to that connection the modality of the real, the possible or the necessary (2016: n.p.).

In their encounter with the film or artwork spectators are asked to become active co-agents in the construction of such 'fiction'. 'Reading' the film or 'making sense' of the installation is to have an encounter with the respective work; it is to actively engage oneself – intellectually and affectively – in a process of *co-poiesis*; to think-and-feel-with the constantly shifting movements, forces and intensities that carry the film-aesthetic or sculptural event as multiply enfolded re-semblage.

### ***LIKE STONE LIONS AT THE GATEWAY INTO NIGHT***

In their book series Pollock and Silverman also introduce us, for the first time, to the ideas of Holocaust survivor and French poet Jean Cayrol on 'the concentrationary'. Cayrol – better known for writing the narration of Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog (Nuit et Bruillard, 1955, 32')* – deploys, as they write,

the Christian figure of a man resurrected miraculously from the dead, Lazarus, as the symbol of the new art after the camps. This art, that he termed both 'concentrationary' and 'Lazarean art', will show human life shocked out of its familiar contours through revealing the 'invisible thread' that ties it to the presence of death, humanity haunted by its inhuman double, the known always shadowed by the unknowable. Lazarean art, for Cayrol, is therefore founded on a 'doubling' (and troubling) effect to cast us into a state of the 'in-between'. Its duty is to alert us (the unbelieving, those who want to re-establish the comfort of 'ordinary life') to a radically altered reality in which the concentrationary cannot be confined to the past but is still present today in different forms and under different guises (2014: xix).

I see such doubling as troubling-at-work in Zuchuat's essay film on Makronisos. What in *Like Stone Lions* at first appear to be solely a few stone barracks left to fend off the incoming winds from the Aegean Sea, slowly but surely acquire meaning as relicts from a camp, opening up to the 'concentrationary' terror experienced in this place at some point in the past – and thus to a different reading of the documentary imagery.



**Figure 1:** Crumbled brickwork disclosed as camp ruins. Screenshot.

*Like Stone Lions* begins *in medias res*, with a three-minute-long sequence of medium to close-up travelling shots that direct the spectator's gaze along the cragged textures of some ruins under a cloudless blue sky. Through a series of rectangular wall-openings we gain restricted views of the Aegean Sea. Then the gaze is both arrested and expanded through a hard cut to an extreme long shot of the island. By means of this montage, spectators are afforded a good look over a stretch of land that is mostly empty, except for a few broken pillars and a group of forlorn wall structures. Then the title credits that echo a verse from 'The Old Men', a poem by Greek poet Yannis Ritsos, appear in the right upper corner. The superimposition of the film's title on these images suggests a shared allegorical significance between ruins and 'stone lions' in their function as symbolic guardians of a culture's most treasured objects or values. The relation between image and text is enigmatic, however; something of the past is passed on to us but in an encrypted form.

Central to this enigma is the figure of the ruin. In 17<sup>th</sup>-century European painting, ruins often represent *vedute*, i.e. symbolical portals or entry points for an imaginary passage into a different world or time. This convention is inscribed in the scene, but it remains unclear what these ruins

point us to, precisely. A notion of belatedness comes into play, “of having come to a scene too late, as though the presence is defined by what fails to materialize in the present” (Trigg 2009: 98). The fragmented structures or ‘wounded’ stones in Zuchuat’s opening sequence appear to be the ruins of 20<sup>th</sup>-century buildings, but their specific geographical location on a Greek island also calls up ancient Greek architecture, more than 2,000 years old. The archaeological sites of Kameiros, a former Hellenistic city, on the island of Rhodes; the Terrace of the Lions, a series of stone lions facing east towards the Sacred Lake of Delos where ancient Greek scholars believed Apollo had been born; or, the Lion of Kea, an inanimate critter carved from natural stone slab prior to 600 BC, come to mind. These invocations of ancient Greece resonate with a scene that otherwise points us to events that happened here in the more recent past.

Preceding the visuals is a quotation from Agamben on the camp as the space where the state of exception becomes permanent.<sup>3</sup> This quotation is still palpable when the opening sequence rolls and the title credits appear, channelling our view in a specific way. The fractured stone walls become camp ruins, shifting attention away from associations with ancient Greece. The semantic proximity of these relicts to the camp marks the poetic title of the film as well; ‘night’ is a metaphor of the camp and the hard cut from the wall structures in medium close-up to the panoramic view of the island gestures towards the violence that characterizes the gaze of surveillance in the camp. In another chain of associations ‘night’ and ‘camp’ allude to Resnais’ *Night and Fog*, which for Pollock and Silverman – in explicit revision of readings that have placed this film in a tradition of the Holocaust film – constitutes “the classic commentary on the concentrationary universe” (2011: 2). Resnais’ film starts with travelling shots that transform a few non-descript fields and a barbed wire fence, somewhere around Auschwitz, into the former

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<sup>3</sup> In Agamben’s philosophical project, the camp becomes the *nomos* or constitutive logic that corresponds to the modern sovereign state. Sovereignty or supreme power, that is, the power of the state to govern itself, positions the modern state both inside and outside of law, as Carl Schmitt explains. The state can rule by *transcending* the rule of law in its ability to declare a ‘state of exception’ (German: ‘*Ausnahmezustand*’) in the name of the public good. Relating Hannah Arendt’s insights on totalitarianism to Michel Foucault’s bio-politics, Agamben speaks of ‘bare life’ (*zoe*) – a form of life that is no longer sacrificed as it has lost political recognition; such life can be killed any time *with impunity*; cp. *Homo Sacer* (1995) and *State of Exception* (2005).

concentration and extermination camp. When Zuchuat's camera travels along the camp ruins on Makronisos, it forms a belated extension of Resnais' treatment of Auschwitz in the 1950s.

The voiceover for *Night and Fog* was written and spoken by Cayrol. In his narration he develops a complex argument on the "deadly proximity of horror and the everyday and the fragility of the boundaries that we imagine keep them apart" (Pollock and Silverman 2011: 10). A similar Lazarean logic underpins Zuchuat's essay film; for instance, when his camera captures the Mediterranean sunshine and deep blue sea while the subtitles read: "under the stars sail boatloads of deportees and the storms wash up sackful of legs, and sackful of arms, and sackful of corpses, on the beaches of Lavrion". Borrowing Ritsos' poetry for one of his several lyrical voiceovers that constitute the often contrapuntal and multi-layered audio track, Zuchuat here also invokes the Makronisos camps to gesture to the Mediterranean refugee crisis in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



**Figure 2:** Archive shot of tents and public assembly in the camps. Screenshot.

Six minutes into the cinematic essay, a cut to a historical black-and-white photograph of the living quarters on the island leads to another abrupt change

in perspective. Through this photo and other material from the 1940s, spectators subsequently gain insights into the topography and historical reality of the prison camps. The montage includes archive shots of inmates peeking out of tents, walking behind barbed wire fencing, carrying stones and other heavy material, or marching and gathering in public places. The visuals are matched to different effects with two voiceovers, performed by Greek actors Manos Vakoussis and Periklis Moustakis, which draw on the two newspapers, *Anamorphosis* and *Skapanefs* ('Soldiers'), that were published on the island. In the essay film their right-wing content feeds into the voices of an otherwise invisible camp administration, providing us with information on the absurd practices of drill, discipline and terror that characterised life in the camps.

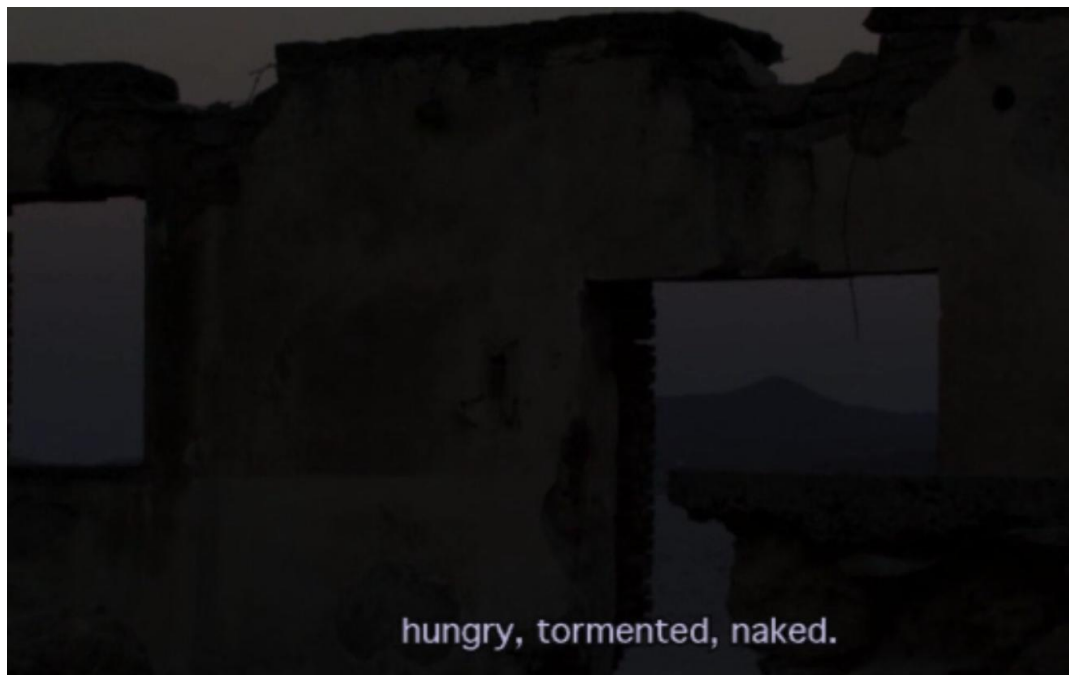
In one scenario the harsh voice of the military police, matched with footage from Makronisos in the present, engenders a discourse of purity, health and the body, firmly rooted in 19<sup>th</sup>-century traditions of the camp.<sup>4</sup> Political prisoners are given a "lesson in national conduct". Communists are compared to "invading bacteria" that attack and immobilize the "body of Greece". Propagated is the total destruction of the "Slavo-Bulgarian bacteria", which apparently not only weaken the nation's physical health – its immune system made up of "white blood cells, its soldiers" – but also "undermine its morale and integrity". This is the hostile language of authoritarian, if not outright dictatorial regimes with their range of linguistic assaults on the human condition, on difference and plurality. It is also the language of imperialism and war with its binary logics of ally/enemy or us/them, by which the 'other' is both produced and mobilized through analogies of the body and nation for propaganda purposes. A solution is sought in the creation of a "vaccine of National Ideals" that will turn "bacteria", i.e. communists, into "regenerated white blood cells, soldiers bolstered by the unwavering therapy provided by the doctors of Patriotism and our battalion-chief". An aggressive far-right nationalism is here ab/using the rhetoric of health for purposes of forging a new national purity.

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<sup>4</sup> In *Lager vor Auschwitz* (2013) Christoph Jahr and Jens Thiel point out that, as early as 1800, the identification of whole sections of the population as the 'enemy within' calls for and generates architectures and technologies of education, discipline and control through hard work (e.g. *Zucht- und Arbeitshäuser*, 10) that make the modern *Lager* system possible.

In a further scene the same voice threatens prisoners with mass execution, if they do not make use of “the opportunity to become Greek like us”. “You will submit or die”, the voice persona bellows: “We are the nation and you are traitors. [...] We could kill you all”. The historical reference point seems to be Emergency Law 511, passed in 1947 to “restore order” on the prison islands of Ikaria, Limnos and Agios Efstratios, where the bulk of political exiles was concentrated and living conditions were deemed to be “too lax” (cp. Voglis 1999: 95). Due to Law 511, certain camps became “subject to military discipline” and individual rights of prisoners more restricted. The phrase, “We could kill you all”, gestures towards a system that bears comparison with Agamben’s modern state – a system that acts as if it were in a permanent state of emergency and could take away life at any given moment with impunity.

The military voice also runs over a sequence of night images of present-day Makronisos. Apart from the moon and a few contours of bushes and wall structures hardly anything can be seen. An underexposed gaze on the level of image allows for a proximate yet disruptive encounter on the level of voice/sound. The contrapuntal use of image and sound impedes “complicit onlooking” (Saxton 2011: 141).



**Figure 3:** Underexposed gaze – what the camps felt at night. Screenshot.

Spectators are also prepared for “expanded listening” (LaBelle 2016: 77) that includes listening for excess. Such listening carries new possibilities for “affective apprehending” or “a mode of aesthetic wit(h)nessing” (3), as painter and psychoanalyst Bracha Ettinger argues, “where aesthetics approaches ethics beyond the artist’s conscious control” (qt. in Pollock 2013: 13).

The voice-body of the camp police always announces itself with a tinny, echoing sound, each time the microphone or loudspeaker is switched on or off. This sound, manufactured by Zuchuat and his sound team in the studio, is based on memories of former prisoners. It draws attention to the amplifying technology and, more significantly, becomes a sonic emblem of ‘the concentrationary’. Its re-appearance throughout the film mimics the form of aural conditioning to which prisoners were exposed; like the voices of the military/camp police, this fabricated non-human entity speaks to the terror prevalent across the different compounds.

Another sound is significant in this context: that of the wind, which provides the setting with more than ambience. Up to five location winds, at times mixed with winds from a private sound library, constitute the multi-layered wind-scape in *Like Stone Lions*. There is something relentless and maddening about its constant and fierce blowing, which affects us profoundly. It gestures to the unceasing flow of public exercises, endless chores of carrying stones, enforced listening to the daily propaganda, torture at night and the never-ending stream of new arrivals at daylight. Calling up systemic terror and carceral abuse by association, the wind also resonates with the damaged materiality of the ruin.

Zuchuat also deploys prisoner memoirs, letters and poems that were written clandestinely in the camps. Most recognizable are the poetic voices of Ritsos, Tassos Livaditis and Menelaos Lountemis, recited in the film by Greek actors Raptis, Kostas Vassardanis and Yiannos Perlegkas. Excerpts from the poems form the voice/subjectivity of those imprisoned in the camps and thus offer an important aesthetic source of potential resistance against ‘the concentrationary’. Ritsos’ poem ‘A.B.C.’ in particular, acoustically lines the film from the beginning to the end; it re-imagines the past as a series of intimate, sensory and affectively charged moments. The lyrics, inspired by its author’s detention on Makronisos, make explicit reference to the three military

battalions A, B and C.<sup>5</sup> In the opening scene, the “giant” and “whitewashed letters” loom large on “the rocky spine of Makronisos”, for those to see who come from the sea. By means of synecdoche (“A.B.C.”, “Battalion A...”, “Makronisos”) we are drawn in closer to the island. The camp itself is marked by a deadening logic expressed via a chain of signifiers (“black landscape”, “black sea”, “blacker than black”, “the barbed wire”) with ‘death’ as a shared referent. This logic recalls Rousset’s warning that once the destructive logic of ‘the concentrationary’ is unleashed, “everything is possible”.

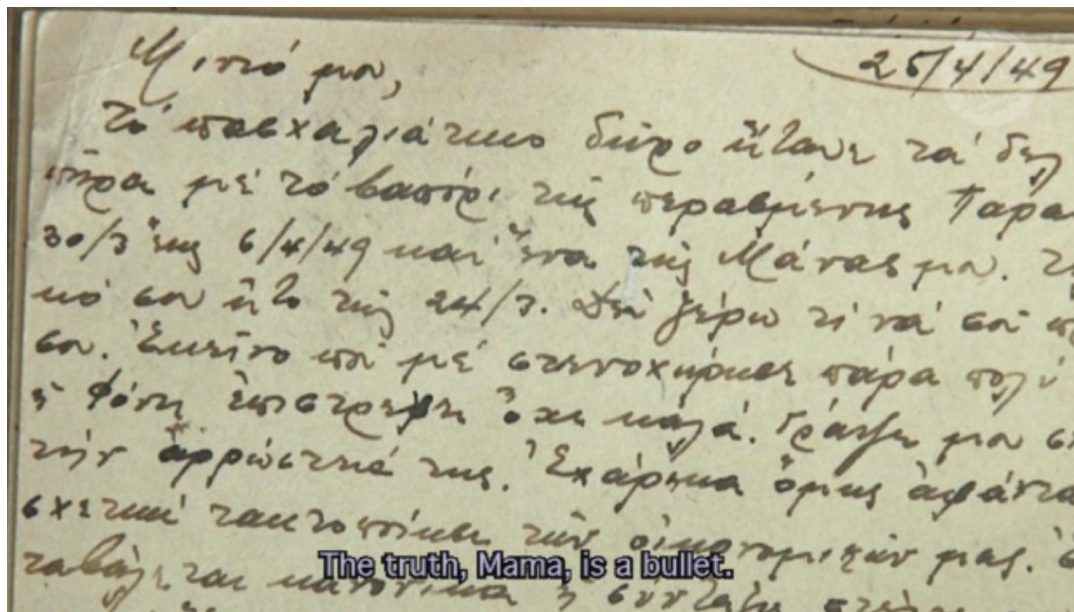


Figure 4: Some letters escaped censorship in the camps. Screenshot.

The point of the poem and, by extension, Zuchuat’s film is not to argue, however, that the possibilities of escaping ‘the concentrationary’ are exhausted. In a night scene that calls up Agamben’s notion of camp inmates as ‘bare life’ or Arendt’s idea of human bodies reduced to ‘living corpses’ these bodies are also still able to mobilise last residues of sanity and resilience

<sup>5</sup> As politically active intellectual from the Left, Ritsos was interned on several Greek islands, including Makronisos. When the campsite for political exiles was closed, he was moved to one of the military battalions where he spent some time in solitary confinement. This was in breach of the ‘Fourth Geneva Convention’ (CGIV), adopted in August 1949, ‘relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War’. Greece, however, did not ratify the CGIV before 1956.

against the oppressive demands of the camp authorities:

Halt! – halt! Halt! Who goes there? The dead. They want back the bread they never tasted. They want back the sun you stole from them. They want back the life you cut short. Halt! – halt! From the guard posts of night, all night through. Halt! Who goes there? The dead. Who goes there? The mad. Who goes there? *We do.* (my italics)

Right in the end the scene also invokes a sense of rebellion: ‘we do’ suggests that prisoners can actively retain some agency. Like Ritsos, who refused to sign the Declaration of Repentance when he was incarcerated on Makronisos, these Lazarean bodies collectively resist being reduced to a corpse-like existence.

### ***THE NEW PARTHENON***

Image excavation and prolonged attention to forms of human vulnerability mark the moving-image work of Penny Siopis. Internationally perhaps best known for her affectively charged paintings, object-based installations and work in photography relating us to issues of apartheid and colonialism, Siopis has continued to explore notions of subjectivity, violence, and trauma in her varied short films. *The New Parthenon* is only the latest example in her series of essay films produced over the last 25 years, including *My Lovely Day* (1997, 21’), *Obscure White Messenger* (2010, 15’) and *The Master is Drowning* (2012, 9’). Essay films are a hybrid, self-reflective and performative mode of documentary practice that makes ample use of poetic language and ‘the in-between’, as my reading of Zuchuat’s essay film has shown. These strategies become also manifest in *The New Parthenon*; once more, events from the past are less represented than allusively invoked. In this way different stories across space and time can exist side by side or intersect, allowing for anachronism, palimpsestic figurations or what Michael Rothberg (2013), looking at competing histories of violence, has called ‘multi-directional memory’.

*The New Parthenon* is made up of home movie footage, which the artist found on flea markets and in second-hand shops across South Africa or on her travels abroad. The footage, mostly from the 1950s and 1960s, includes sequences of open-air performances by Greek female gymnasts; men and women in traditional costumes dancing to Greek folklore music; young men

marching in the street, shouldering rifles and wearing red berets; men in rowing boats on a choppy sea, shouting, waving and apparently trying to get on board of a bigger boat, off-frame; a naked woman climbing down rocks to take a bath in the ocean; an elegant woman descending a spiral staircase; or tourists exploring the Acropolis of Athens. This discarded material, most likely shot on vacation or during times spent with family and friends, is submitted to a rigorous process of selection and re-sequencing, holding the grammar of the original works in tension with the new role it plays in her essay film.



**Figure 5:** Old home movie footage of an island. Screenshot.

*The New Parthenon* unfolds in multiply disrupted ways along a historical narrative of war and transnational migration. A Greek man, who is addressing a young woman, most likely his daughter, recalls fragments of his relocation from Greece to South Africa. Father and daughter are neither seen nor directly heard; his account is accessible to us through silent subtitles only. Like the heterogeneous visual material to which the account is loosely linked, the

man's subjective voice is a patchwork of excerpts from Greek mythology, songs, misquoted lines from famous poems, such as Greek poet Giorgos Seferis' *Mythistorema* (1935), and bits and pieces from Siopis' personal archive, including material from her maternal grandmother. Being part of the essay film, however, this material is not to be read in a strictly biographical sense. Rather, what is significant about these stories is that they gesture to more universally shared experiences of human fragility and suffering. These 'other' stories are, strictly speaking, not being told, i.e., spoken or narrated through words, but visually produced in the image. Meticulous attention must therefore be paid to the aesthetics of the image – to correlations of form and colour, to recurring patterns and rhythms – that become vehicles for the artist to critically reflect on more systemic forms of oppression, including forced migration, racial segregation or migrant labour exploitation under colonialism.

For some filmmakers, as Laura Rascaroli points out, "lyricism is an undoing that is essential to the disjunctive textuality of the essay" (2017: 163); the lyrical "can be at the heart not of an aestheticising, consoling function, or of the construction of an authorial style, but of a political argument about the inaudibility of marginal voices, who are lent both historical and aesthetic dignity" (2019: 12–13). For Siopis the re-assembly of lyrical home movie footage is certainly a way to alert us to the many guises of 'the concentrationary', as they present themselves to us today. Her argument already starts with the film title: *The New Parthenon*. The Parthenon is used as a conceptual nexus between the 'old' and the 'new', referring us both to the former lavish temple on the Athenian Acropolis, an enduring symbol of Ancient Greece, and to the camp structures of Makronisos in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which in the 1940s and '50s were cynically called 'the new Parthenon'. Narrative is opened up here to different connecting ideas of the Greek state: in one, the ideals of democracy are held sacrosanct; in the other, modernity's vision of racial purity ends in the camps or related systems of oppression, persecution and incarceration.

It is in this grimly lyrical vein that the narrative fragments fabricating the persona of the Greek man relate us to the song lines of Greek poet Iakovos Kambanellis, himself a survivor of the Austrian concentration camp Mauthausen-Gusen. His lines are set in the film to music by Greek songwriter Mikis Theodorakis, who was persecuted by the German Nazis and later

imprisoned on Makronisos. In a similar transversal push, the aforementioned rowing boat scene and footage of people swimming in the sea conjures up 21<sup>st</sup>-century news reports of migrants drifting in the Mediterranean Sea, begging for a safe rescue.



**Figure 6:** Refugee crisis in the Mediterranean Sea? Screenshots.

Here, as elsewhere in *The New Parthenon*, spectators are encouraged to alternate between the indexical and the iconographic in the image. Likewise, the synchronous movements of the female gymnasts call up the military drill practised on Makronisos, where camp inmates had to follow a strict exercise regime for ‘rehabilitation’ purposes.



**Figures 7:** Different modernist visions. Screenshots.

The young men shouldering rifles and wearing red berets refer spectators to the Greek Resistance in the 1940s; and the specific way the elegant woman is

descending a flight of stairs alludes to Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912). Including this sequence in her essay film, Siopis allows one multi-angled vision, that of Cubism, jar with another more narrow-angled 'modernist' vision, that of purity based on the pseudo-scientific ideal of a healthy national body, as propagated widely in Europe in the 1930s and '40s.

How close the peaceful and the most horrific *can* be – a lesson already learned from the cine-essayistic explorations made by Resnais and Zuchuat – becomes palpably tangible in *The New Parthenon* when we see a group of Greek men dancing to music in the living room. As soon as the visuals are matched with the line 'through labour you would know yourself, bring back love of your classical roots', the domestic scene loses its innocence and begins to echo the Makronisos camps where labour was experienced as futile exercise or potentially deadly wasting. These activities were carried by the same cynical logic of '*Arbeit macht frei*' that welcomed those who entered the grounds of Auschwitz.

In one scene from the film, a rather ambiguous light is thrown on the role the United Kingdom played for Greece in the political events of the 1940s. The visuals include a lyrical home movie sequence of an ancient Greek temple and unusual underwater shots of a lobster being caught by the harpoon of a diver. These images are matched with the following subtitles:

Britain took Greece and hung guns and binoculars on the marbles [...] The caryatid still cries for her sisters, they scrubbed her down to rid her of her red-brown stain [...] their classical must be white. Listen! It's not a catastrophe. She's not Antigone... what could Greece do? They stole her when she was asleep under the Ottomans.

The use of metaphor, metonymy and allegory makes it possible here to align Greek's struggle against Ottoman rule, which lasted from the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century until the successful Greek War of Independence in the 1820s, with another, more recent, struggle for recognition under British rule. A multi-layered argument is built, relying on several interlaced narrative threads, from which Greece and the United Kingdom emerge as two partly aligned yet unequal powers. In one of these threads the "caryatid" that "still cries for her sisters" refers us to the collection of classical Greek marble sculptures, which was illegally acquired by Thomas Bruce, 7<sup>th</sup> Earl of Elgin, and transported by sea to Britain in 1812. Although influential representatives of cultural and political

life and institutions both in Greece and the United Kingdom, since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, have publicly intervened to encourage the repatriation of the 'Elgin Marbles' to its rightful owners, the dispute over the return of the Parthenon Marbles still remains unresolved between these two countries.

But the story encapsulated in this poetic scenario does not end there. The subtitles also refer us to some form of cleaning procedure; if read in a more literal way, the whole scene indeed might remind us of the efforts made on both Greek and British sides to preserve and restore the ancient relics. In a more metaphorical reading that brings us closer to Makronisos, however, the scrubbing of the caryatid "to rid her of her red-brown stain" also gestures to the ambiguous role Britain played in a series of 20<sup>th</sup> century events, unfolding prior to the start of the Greek Civil War.



**Figure 8:** Encapsulated stories of political betrayal. Screenshot.

Shortly before the end of the Second World War, Britain 'liberated' Greece from Nazi Germany and Italian fascism; a few weeks before the German troops withdrew in October 1944, the British Command in the Middle East, together with the exiled government under the lead of Georgios Papandreou and representatives of the Greek Resistance (EAM-ELAS), also officially signed an agreement that secured the Left's participation in the formation of the new Greek Army, under the command of the British. Yet, on 1 December 1944, the British commander Ronald Scobie ordered the unilateral disarmament of EAM-ELAS. One political event led to another and the situation eventually escalated in an armed confrontation between EAM and the Greek government and later also the British military forces. The failure of the Left to consolidate its power in this conflict resulted in a massive persecution of members of the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) and former members of EAM-ELAS. In what is often seen as a wave of 'white terror' thousands of warrants for arrest were issued; communists and suspected communists were imprisoned and/or exiled to nearby islands like Makronisos. This national trauma, as I want to suggest here, is also *to a certain extent* encapsulated in the poetic-expressive line about scrubbing the "classical white" of its "red-brown stain".

*The New Parthenon* provides spectators with many such multi-folded threads that require further unravelling. In the same allusive way, another narrative fragment from the film's subtitles establishes an analogy between Makronisos and Robben Island. This place is invoked in the film not because of its status as a UNESCO World Heritage site (since 1999), but because of the role it has played as a prison island for black opponents of the apartheid regime, including the three future presidents of South Africa: Nelson Mandela, Kgalema Motlanthe and Jacob Zuma. Via the inclusion of sequences most likely shot in a South African rather than Greek context, *The New Parthenon* also builds a multi-directional analogy between the plight of tobacco packers in the 1950s and the current labour conditions of migrant workers. The sequence of shots that seems to display African workers dragging bulk ware compressed in baggy white cuboids down from a big pile of newly arrived goods conjures up images of Makronisos inmates carrying heavy white boulders from one side of the camp to the other.



**Figure 9:** Tobacco packers, invoking the plight in the camps. Screenshot.

Haunted as these scenarios are by violations against the human, they are also each a cypher of trauma and loss. Loss, disappearance and erasure are materially inscribed in the specific way the analogue film stock bears the imprints of destruction, decay or decomposition in the form of scratches, fibres, grainy spots or burnt parts. These marks demonstrate, as Rascaroli argues, 'the frailty of our technologies of record and memory, inviting by extension a reflection on film's limitations as a tool for preserving and mediating human experience' (2019: 13). They speak of our inaptitude to adequately preserve the past, even our perhaps most cherished memories from the home archive. Loss, however, can also open up space for the production of new knowledge – this is what Siopis' complex film essayistic ruminations also allow us to encounter.

## ***THE CONCESSION AND ANAGLYPHS AT THE VENICE ART BIENNALE***

The two recent installation works – *The Concession* by Zafos Xagoraris and *Anaglyphs* by Eva Stefani, exhibited side by side in the Greek Pavilion at the 58<sup>th</sup> Art Biennale in Venice in 2019 – take ‘fictions’ of the camp in an expanded cinematic sense beyond the screen.

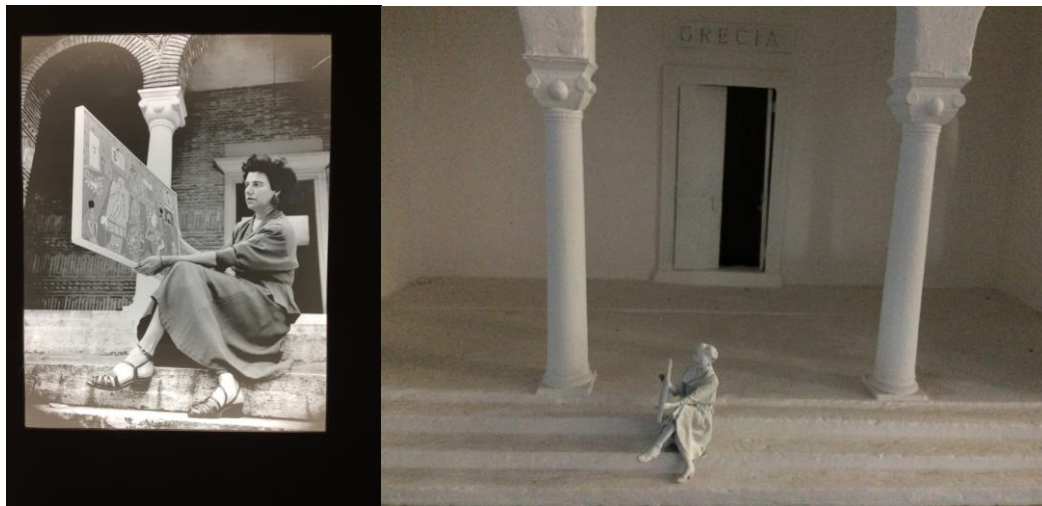


**Figure 10:** Invocations of the camp beyond the screen. Photos: author (left); Ugo Carmeni.

In these works, film and photo material from the Makronisos archive is re-organised in ways that trouble collective memory; in Xagoraris’ case, more particularly, they shine a self-critical light on the power imbalances that can mark the relations between artists, international art institutions and foreign politics. *The Concession* is a large mixed-media installation, partly made up of a display case (designed by the artist Katerina Stefanidaki) that includes archive material from the Contemporary Social History Archives and the Hellenic Literary and Historical Archive in Athens, the Biennale’s Historical Archives of Contemporary Arts (ASAC), the Peggy Guggenheim Collection Archives in Venice and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Archives in New York. Through his work the artist alerts us to the conditions that made it possible for Peggy Guggenheim to showcase her pivotal collection of modernist art at the 24<sup>th</sup> Biennale in Venice. By means of varied forms of reproduction, fabrication and miniaturisation a complex play of repetition and

difference is engendered across different discourses and spatiotemporal frameworks

Included in *The Concession* is a facsimile of the invitation letter to Guggenheim, dated 11 June 1948 and signed by T. Typaldo Forestis, Ex-Consul General of Greece, also an experienced art commissioner. A black-and-white photograph documents Guggenheim's actual presence at the show. We see her sitting in front of the Greek Pavilion, holding up a modernist painting from her collection. *The Concession* also provides us with a three-dimensional modulation of the same scene, in which the art collector is represented by a delicate figurine sitting, in the same pose, in front of an equally scaled-down model of the Greek Pavilion. Other archive material from the display cases – in particular two photographs from an art competition on Makronisos – raise questions with regard to the conditions that made it possible for Guggenheim to exhibit that year in the empty national Pavilion in the Giardini.



**Figure 11:** Peggy Guggenheim, at the 24<sup>th</sup> and 58<sup>th</sup> Venice Art Biennale. Photos: author.

When the Venice Biennale opened its doors to the wider public in 1948, the Greek Civil War was in full swing, and many of the country's most renowned artists, poets and intellectuals were imprisoned on Makronisos. Furthermore, US-President Harry Truman had just announced his foreign policy doctrine, whose declared purpose was to limit Soviet geopolitical expansion during the Cold War. For countries such as Greece or Turkey, which were geographically important for the United States as buffer zones against Soviet

communism, the Truman Doctrine codified mid- to long-term economic and security assistance, with far-reaching ramifications for the art and intellectual scene in Greece. This played out, as *The Concession* suggests, in the context of the 24<sup>th</sup> Biennale.

On one of the two historical photos we see an artist-comrade sculpting a replica stature of what looks like Achilles, the Greek hero of the Trojan War; in the other photo a group of artist-comrades attend to a scale model of the Parthenon. From their posture, we can gather this was a propaganda shot for the Ministry of the Interior. Such replica models, like the arches or slogans formed from stones on the hillside of the island, for camp historian Voglis represented 'kitschy imitations' (1999: 114). In his study of Makronisos he refers us to a visit to the camp made by Robert Miner, Second Secretary of the US-Embassy in Athens, on 19 August 1949. The historian uses this incident to alert us to the cynical attitude with which the camp administration bowed down to their powerful US-ally in the struggle against communism. Miner is quoted by Voglis to have written in his "Memorandum concerning a visit to the camp":

"Some of the decorations, such as scale models of the Parthenon and some of the paintings in the church, are very well done. When I remarked on the apparent wealth of artistic talent on Makronisos, Colonel Bairaktaris said, only half humorously, that all the young intellectuals in Greece had passed through this camp" (cp. 1999: 114, footnote 38).

The re-assemblage of archive material – including photographic exhibits of Guggenheim installing her collection inside the Pavilion, juxtaposed with archive shots of Makronisos inmates exercising on the public grounds of the camps – seems to further gesture to (and in doing so critically challenge) the cynicism with which intellectuals and artists from the Left were treated by the Greek state.



**Figure 12:** Archive stock photos from the installation displays. Photos: author.

For his show in Venice, Xagoraris also altered the structure of the Giardini Pavilion by clamping a reconstructed gate of the camps onto its triple-arched entrance. Here, too, images of the Makronisos archive formed the template for the artistic intervention, further contributing to the layering of the past. The ‘fiction’ of Makronisos that was fabricated in this part of the installation invokes the legacy of an-other Europe – one marked by collective trauma and silenced resistance. Does Forestis’ invitation letter to Guggenheim, one may wonder, constitute the concession that the enigmatic title of the work refers us to? Did Forestis concede to capitalism? Did his letter represent a bizarre form of surrender to a Cold War politics, which saw western countries involved in the internal affairs of other nations to prevent the ‘spread of Communism’? The mixed-media installation suggests this, particularly at a time when uneasiness with US-American foreign policy in the Balkan and Middle Eastern regions has eroded trust.

In the Greek Pavilion the larger display case was exhibited alongside Eva Stefani’s *Mouth* (2019, 3.5’), a silent piece that draws on news footage shot on Makronisos in the late 1940s, including official parades, collective celebrations and scenes of public recantation. *Mouth* is one part of the tripartite digital video installation *Anaglyphs*; the other two films are *Window* (2019, 2’), showing a half-undressed woman slouching nearly motionless in an armchair, and *Only Men* (2019, 70’), which documents the everyday life of a group of middle-aged Greek men. Their daily activities at home, including cooking or tending lovingly to their pets, present them in non-stereotypical ways. In *Mouth*, the documentary sequences from the Makronisos camps are repeatedly interrupted by intertitles, reminiscent of the narrative and theatrical strategies of early silent film. Key terms and phrases such as ‘Wind’, ‘Lies’, ‘God forgive us’, ‘I woke up in the sea’, ‘A huge stick is stuck in my

mouth', and so forth, momentarily arrest the flow of official news footage, pointing us to the voices of inmates, their experience and suffering, and the different types of torture practiced on Makronisos.



**Figure 13:** *Mouth* at the 2019 Venice Biennale. Photo: author.

A “sense of reality”, a ‘fiction’, is produced, as Rancière argues in ‘Fictions of Time’ (2016), that establishes “causal connections” between otherwise disparate elements and “gives to that connection the modality of the real” (n.p.). Such a ‘fiction’ operates as virtual depth-space, affecting us in palpably tangible ways.

The title of Stefani's installation-triptych, *Anaglyphs*, provides us with the necessary conceptual framework. An 'anaglyph' is the 3D-effect that is achieved by superimposing two images of the same object, but taken from slightly different angles, onto one another, whereby each of the images is created in a different colour, usually red and cyan. To create the desired effect, spectators have to wear glasses with lenses in the colours that are needed to filter out the unwanted image for each eye. When viewed through the color-coded glasses, each of the two images reaches the human eye it is aiming for, and the brain allows this stereogram then to create an illusion of depth. At the Venice Biennale the three films were projected onto three separate yet adjacent walls, bent at 90-degree angle. As these films were running concurrently, spectators were encouraged to move back and forth between the different projections. In this way a 'stereoscopic' image of Greece could be 'forged', which gained in detail and depth over time. The reality of the 'concentrationary' pain and suffering, invoked by the disjunction between the documentary imagery and the intertitles in *Mouth*, thereby seemed to linger on and affectively intersect or undercut the viewing of the other films. The foregrounding of illusionist viewing techniques in *Anaglyphs* allows us not only to reflect upon the impure and multi-dimensional nature of memory, but also on our own formative role as image-makers.

### CLOSING REMARKS

When, in the 1980s, Melina Mercouri, in her then function as Culture Minister of Greece, declared Makronisos a site of memory 'for all Greeks, and particularly younger generations, because it is a symbol of condemnation of the civil war, of all torture and repression wherever it originates' (Becatoros 1999: n.p.), she acknowledged to a certain extent the symptomatic character of the camps for other forms of systemic oppression in the present and future. Likewise, the four investigated works refer us to competing hi/stories of violence that, despite being situated uniquely, share structural similarities. They engage us in a politics of aesthetics that foregrounds affect as a constitutive component in the production and documentation of new knowledge and memory. In light of the current rise of conservative populist ideologies and autocratic leaders, in light also of unbroken traditions of violence and oppression worldwide, these works are immensely relevant for us today.

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