

FROM ANTIQUITY TO UTOPIA: A METACHRONISTIC JOURNEY THROUGH TIME

by Heinz
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What country is this? Antigone, child
of a blind old man: Whose city is it?
Who'll offer any pitiful gift today
to wandering Oedipus, the homeless man?
He asks little and gets less, though even less
than little is enough.*

* All quoted verses from *Oedipus at Colonus* are drawn from: Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, trans. Eamon Grennan & Rachel Kitzinger, New York, Oxford University Press, 2005.

Apart from the innocence of the guilty, a main theme of the Sophoclean drama *Oedipus at Colonus* is death, or more precisely dying, and the question as to what remains where of one's mortal shell after one's passing. The drama grapples neither with metaphysics nor with religion, despite our reverence for the azure of the Greek sea and sky. Eternity is reserved for the philosophers, immortality for the gods, and *ataraxia* remains an unattainable dream of happiness, especially for the skeptics. In her installation *Oedipus in Search of Colonus*, artist Loukia Alavanou is also concerned with people, with human dignity and freedom—the freedom to decide where and how one dies. Where and how one is buried. Where one's last resting place will be, one's eternal heaven on earth, so to speak.

Alavanou invites her audience on a journey through time that unfolds along this theme. The core of the work *Oedipus in Search of Colonus* is a short film shot using Virtual Reality, a complex technology that transposes the almost 2,500-year-old drama of the poet Sophocles into the present through intentionally amateur acting. Alavanou, who through her previous films has experience with filmic collage, tells a linear narrative for the first time, through a bold combination of documentary, fiction, drone flights, slapstick, pop-inspired video clips, crude farce, and a complex VR technology. Infamous for his horrible deeds, from patricide to incest, Oedipus is banned from Thebes, a city of savage power struggles. Old and blind, he happens to come to Colonus, a holy site dedicated to the Furies. This forbidden place is where Oedipus chooses to die. For the first time, he goes against the will of the gods, who had until then dictated his ill-fated life. Finally, he wishes to choose his own destiny.

In her films Alavanou likes to wander across the garbage dumps of the free-market economy and explore the hidden corners of Greece, which is marked by its natural beauty and social disparities and poised between its magnificent antiquity and chaotic, or even bitter, modern history. She filmed her version of the final drama of Sophocles, which he completed when he was over ninety, in the shanty settlement Nea Zoi in Aspropyrgos, located to the west of Athens, an area close to what once was Colonus, where today a large community of Roma live. As in many of Alavanou's films, the soundtrack tells the actual story, which is sketched out but not really dramatized by the Roma amateur actors. An invisible chorus describes the shock of nearby inhabitants when they recognize the blind Oedipus, who clutches his daughter's—and sister's—arm. All of the roles in the drama, including that of Theseus, King of Athens, who is summoned to the scene, are played by the Roma with conscious exaggeration and obvious enjoyment—including the apparent farce of being able to die in freedom. The Roma of Nea Zoi thereby mimic their own fates—from armed disputes among each another to the struggle against the Greek authorities who do not allow them to be buried there, a place where they have managed to put down roots.

In her work Alavanou is not primarily concerned with antiquity, the intellectual legacy of Sophocles, who happens to have been born in Colonus and whose dramas made him immortal. Nor is her main interest in the terrible life of Oedipus, his crimes and divinely guided offences committed during a struggle for power. Instead, she focuses more on the realities of today; not only the inhabitants of Nea Zoi, but also the sad stereotype of all Roma as nothing but antisocial beggars and thieves, a conniving familial clan living on the fringes of society. This is the

central theme of the drama and the installation: resisting one's fate and asserting one's right to a dignified death—whether it is blind Oedipus, as in the drama of aged Sophocles, or the stateless Roma that are doing so. The latter are not familiar with artistic traditions or the myths of antiquity in rehabilitated form; they neither aim for power or recognition nor openly call for revolution. Still, they do not simply abandon themselves to their fate. They too wish to be able to determine where they can die and be buried.

I seem of little or no account, although
I have been subject to greater hardships
than any that have tried any man in the world.

The cleverest device of Alavanou's work is first how she manages to take this journey from the past into the present one step further, into the future of technological advances. Secondly, thanks to the spatial design of her installation, she manages to circumvent the usual navel-gazing of the international art scene during major exhibitions, that is, the see-and-be-seen of this kind of mega art show.

In Venice, Alavanou constructs an imaginary carousel that is typical of her work. Taking a detour through antiquity, she steers towards present conflicts and simultaneously away from the self-absorbed promenade of contemporary art, which is particularly evident at the oldest and most important art biennial. While Documenta, Kassel's competing art event, tends to dream of making the world—and not just the world of art—a better place, either due to or despite its questionable ideological past, the Biennale di Venezia is a showcase exhibition. Steeped in glamour and parties, the opening week is a high point of the international art world circuit for professionals with expense accounts. Every two years Venice becomes a meeting point of the global art industry. Collectors, museum directors, curators, and gallery owners and employees make their pilgrimage along the Canal Grande to the Arsenale and Giardini. Among them are thousands of art critics, who can feel important here, as if they were still the weighty cultural influencers they once were.

Born just a few years after the end of the US-supported military dictatorship in Greece and having grown up in an environment steeped in the militant opposition of a young democracy, Loukia Alavanou left her home and spent 15 years abroad, studying at the London Royal College of Art, doing her post-graduate work at HISK in Ghent, and travelling with fellowships and residencies. Since the very beginning she has been an outsider in contemporary art, without the backing of a strong gallery and with an unwieldy oeuvre that is void of commercial charm.

Coupling the ancient drama of Sophocles with the utopian vision of Greek architect Takis Zenetos—her concept for the Greek pavilion at the Venice Biennale—is a stroke of genius. Zenetos committed suicide in 1977, and only a few of his buildings remain, one of which is the only partially preserved Fix Brewery in Athens, today the home of the National Museum of Contemporary Art (EMST). Zenetos, who trained in Paris, was fundamentally concerned about the relationships among occupants or users, collective internal or external spaces, transparency, lines of sight, and spatial exchange. In his futuristic sketches his ideas went further, designing a networked world. For his architectonic sheltering

nests, or capsules, he dreamed of omnipresent wiring, copper or glass fibres, serving as an adult umbilical cord. Zenetos was interested in creating vital architecture that fostered connections between people.

This utopian notion of exchange and mutual understanding is something that Loukia Alavanou consciously and casually introduces in relation to the theatrical world of Sophocles, which as early as more than two thousand years ago revolved thematically around the understanding and tolerance of inhabitants surrounding a sacred site such as Colonus. With an obvious affinity for farce and pop culture, Alavanou brutally sticks her finger in the wound of contemporary neoliberal societies—not just of Greece—who mistrust anything foreign and violently try to exclude it. At the same time, she distances herself from elements of contemporary art that have hardly any familiarity with marginalized groups such as the Roma, but then are happy to celebrate their willing embrace of minorities for an audience.

Within the not particularly cosy interior of the Greek pavilion, Alavanou is having four hemispherical domes of different sizes constructed in accordance with a design by the Athens architecture office AREA and the architect and engineer Dimitris Korres. These domes consist of an aluminium framework lined with sound-absorbent material on the inside. Their form plays on the antique Pantheon and, of course, also on the geodesic domes of American architect Buckminster Fuller, thus drawing a conceptual arc that extends from antiquity to the futuristic realm of Takis Zenetos. Loudspeakers directed toward the inside of the central hemisphere are suspended between the sound-absorbing material and the metal framework, and are invisible to viewers. Also hidden in this way are the numerous electrical cables necessary for the atmospheric lighting of the semi-dark pavilion space through spots directed at 15 seats. This seating is inspired by Zenetos and designed by Dimitris Korres, resulting in a unique hybrid between a television and a desk chair. Specifically constructed for the biennial, these seats guarantee maximum freedom of movement for viewers, enabling them not only to see but also to experience the 360-degree range of the VR film—unfortunately only virtually, but with an atmosphere enhanced by the dome architecture, directional sound and beams of light, through which the members of the public are guided to their individual seats.

This leads us to perhaps the most unsettling element of Alavanou's Greek pavilion: VR, or Virtual Reality. The use of VR for narrative films is very unusual, in contrast to documentaries. This is due to the immense technical and logistical effort required for filming and postproduction. It is also rare because of the persistently problematic and physically taxing presentation requiring the use of a special headset, usually made by Oculus, a technology firm that, along with WhatsApp, belongs to the controversial internet giant Facebook, now re-branded as Meta. After almost ten years without any major advances in its presentation format, VR is no longer considered a future-oriented technology for narrative. Instead, it can be relegated to the same garbage heap as future cinema, computer-generated narration, and viewer-friendly interactivity. Even its developmental relative, augmented reality, is today largely used in commercial contexts, for example by real estate agents or in simulations used for military or aviation purposes, etc.

Enamoured with just such garbage heaps, Alavanou insists on showing the film with the help of the Oculus headset, because she wants viewers to fully virtually immerse themselves in the shanty town of Nea Zoi. In contrast to her documentary film *New Horizons Pilot* (2018), which was filmed using VR 180-degree technology, she does not want to create a visual effect; she is aiming for a sensual experience. The viewers' brains should succumb to the seduction of the virtual, or perhaps, better said, become trapped in this world. In a Roma house we not only see a panorama image of the living room with the 'actors' in front of a blaring TV that is showing cartoons—a quotation from Alavanou's earlier films. One also sees an open toilet, and it only takes a few head movements to discover Antigone waiting at the kitchen table behind where one is sitting.

The pleasure in making such discoveries that every viewer must bring to the work does have its price. Alavanou's film consists of only 15 shots, which are tortuously long and static if viewers remain passive. The actual rhythm of the different shots depends on the viewers and their willingness to explore the space through their head movements. Conceptually engaging with the work is no longer enough; the work of art demands physical action.

This was always true for immersive works of art. Examples include the room covered with wall paintings in the Villa dei Misteri in Pompei, or the various panorama frescoes that have been perfected over the centuries. Today the mind-bending effect of such images is all the stronger due to the moving image. VR remains a challenge for the viewer, not least due to the headset, which is still much too heavy and presses against one's nose. However, if one invests the physical effort, one's concentration increases. This is very different from the immersive caverns that are currently the trend, where visitors wander through projections of artists from Van Gogh to Salvador Dalí and take selfies.

With the theatrical staging of the Greek Pavilion, Alavanou lures the public into surprisingly comfortable seats. There they entrust themselves to the artist. *Oedipus in Search of Colonus* may be a journey through time from the past to the present, but as previously mentioned, the journey is also a carousel that rotates around its own axis by definition. Just like art.

It's not my body you fear
nor what I've done. For know I suffered
more than ever I acted.

The best example is painting. Declared dead multiple times, it has fundamentally been said to have no future. Yet, again and again painting has demonstrated the power to fascinate, disturb, and move its audiences. NFTs don't have that capacity. Most compelling are their high profit margins. Particularly in turbulent technological times, art has a self-generated sentimentality that keeps it alive. Is it therefore not a deeply artistic and sentimental act for Loukia Alavanou to make use of VR, a technology that many consider passé, during such a major event as the Venice Biennale? Also because VR is a medium that reduces the accessibility of an artwork, since most prospective viewers are condemned to wait in line and are subject to additional sanitary measures during this period of the pandemic.



New Horizons Pilot, by Loukia Alavanou, 2018.
VR180 film, 08:57. Commissioned and produced
by Onassis Culture.



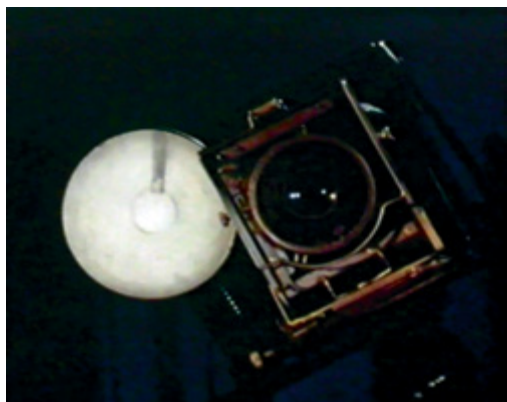
But Loukia Alavanou has never made it easy for her audiences. Her films are quirky, and also always demanding. Unlike some video installations in real time, the fourth dimension hardly plays any role at all. Film works such as *The Hunter* (2013–14) and *My My My* (2010) are short, non-narrative film puzzles, in which the collective and the private, the unconscious and the political, are negotiated with formal brutality. No compromises. Low-tech video effects recall the abstract experimental films of the 1960s, while repetitions in the soundtrack underscore the serial experiment. Figures from comics, found footage, and animated Walt Disney fairy-tales rummage through not just the collective cultural unconscious, but most of all Alavanou's own.

These films share an important point of departure, which becomes clear to the viewer only after the films have been seen multiple times. Fragments from Alavanou's own biography are employed as leitmotifs, which are characterized by a subjective and often humorous look at her own person—at her childhood, her family, her own nomadic existence, in addition to her critical stance towards western societies shaped by the American 'way of life'. *My My My* is a brief seven-minute triptych, which begins with a parade of costumed figures, half harlequins, half monsters, accompanied by a distorted girl's voice from a radio production of Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, which laments: 'I wish I had a place to live'. Other horrific figures appear, mostly male, taken from popular films such as *Freaks*, *The Shining*, or *Alice in Wonderland*, as the soundtrack becomes increasingly chaotic through a mixture of mechanical sounds and chirping birds. Snow White's desire for a place to live, her own home, becomes louder, until at the end the wonderful film song 'Someday My Prince Will Come' resounds.

In *Ducktator* (2012), an elegant elderly woman appears on the screen and seems to be presenting the news—bad news, of course—excerpted from a Greek channel dating from the years of the dictatorship in the 1970s. However, the woman's mouth does not sync with the sound. In reality, as we discover from the accompanying text, this is Alavanou's grandmother who has Alzheimer's and who rattles on about her own memories from that time. She then hoarsely sings a song, and suddenly she is wearing a grimacing mask, of the kind that also appear in the film of the Sophoclean drama.

Masks, masquerade, disguise—an additional leitmotif of Alavanou's oeuvre. The masks often appear like grimaces, a mixture of horror and carnival. In recent years this ambivalent mood has been accompanied by an increasingly political view of social problems. Sometimes full of humour, as in *The Hunter*, which deals with the theme of gold. The original inspiration for the film stemmed from the dubious sale of a state gold mine in northern Greece. Footage she shot herself from the mine is interwoven with found footage about gold, for example including a funny segment in which elegant and distinguished gentlemen, all dubbed by Alavanou herself, debate about taxing nobility. There are also old-fashioned doll houses with petit bourgeois furnishings, and of course pictures of hens laying golden eggs.

My My My, by Loukia Alavanou, 2010. Three-channel video installation with sound, 07:00.





Ducktator, by Loukia Alavanou, 2012. Single-channel HD video installation with sound, 4:3 screen, 04:30. Commissioned by Onassis Culture.





The Hunter, by Loukia Alavanou, 2013–14.
Single-screen HD video with sound, DCP, 08:00.



Bananaland (2017) deals with the banana cultivation in Latin America imposed by the United States—that is, the United Fruit Company and the propagandistic US evocation of a better future. Set in a village in Ecuador plagued by the impact of this monoculture, real-life scenes were filmed using effects reminiscent of a cheap horror movie, the light of a strong flashlight and a wide-angle lens.

In the grip of disaster I destroyed and murdered.
But I came to it innocent in law:
I knew nothing.

Within the frame of a painting, the freedom of the painter is perhaps endless. Within the bounds of language, so is that of the writer, as evinced by poetry and contemporary prose. New music teaches us an existence beyond traditional harmonies but within a traditional system of rules. Only cinema lags behind. Today's cinema is not an art. In radical terms, cinema is defined by the cultural colonializations of the Hollywood industry and its streaming platforms. Auteur film, which runs counter to this, has been stuck in a formal standstill for many years, regardless of its origins—Europe, the Middle East, or the American independent scene. Where can one find any originality in terms of narrative? In art. Whether the museum is going to become the cinema of the future is another question, but breakthroughs in narrative freedom are currently largely found in contemporary art, as well as where an attempt is made to draw on outdated technologies and lend them a meta-function, as with black-and-white film, the traditional film material, and certainly also VR. Progress can backfire, while anachronism can take an artform a step further. This is particularly true when current issues are treated seemingly anachronistically. Every work of art is political—a platitude for prospective art historians. However, does art not become all the more political when it consciously rejects the mainstream and reigning zeitgeist?

If this is true, then we live during a time when anachronism can become avant-garde, even if it is no longer described by that name. Loukia Alavanou's *Oedipus in Search of Colonus* may be unwieldy and seemingly out of step with the times, but its metachronism is by no means a fallback to the past. Instead, it promises serious resistance to fashions and commercial formatting. It is motivated by, and moving because of, its contemporary political grounding and futuristic ideas that point in the direction of utopia, the dream of an impossible place. Is this dream still viable in contemporary art? This could be considered a real anachronism.

Bananaland, by Loukia Alavanou, 2017. Single-channel HD film with stereo sound, DCP, 16:30. Commissioned by PCAI – Polyeco Contemporary Art Initiative. Commissioning curator: Nadja Argyropoulou.

