Art, Technology and Image

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Introduction

It is an honor and a pleasure for me to participate in your Conference. I congratulate you, because I believe that the issue you identify as the "intangible reality of the late modernity" is nowadays radically relevant for all, "*fasting and non-fasting*" («*τοὺς νηστεύσαντες καὶ τοὺς μὴ νηστεύσαντες*»)[1] Christians of all denominations, believers of other religions, and atheists, but also more broadly, for those who consider that the demand for truth, justice and beauty is ever present, because it concerns the whole of a stupefied humanity and a threatened planet that are suffering the consequences of a de-materialization in the name of the worship of matter and a de-bodying under the pretext of the worship of the body; a fall of the body that occurs due to the substitution of its functions by applications of technology, which tend to substitute personal memory "transplanted" into the body of various useful devices produced in the name of disengagement, although they often serve to the people's control.

The fecund agony, as the title of the conference suggests, lies at the heart of a timeless issue that is increasingly and dramatically present in our time, as it is related to the course and the survival of the planet: the universal and multifaceted conflict between the *sacred* and the *profane*. By the term *sacred*, I'm referring to many different traditions that nowadays are still seeking —each in its own way— that which, behind and beyond matter, but in dialogue with it and its manifestations, gives them their

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1. John Chrysostom, *Κατηχητικὸς εἰς τὸ ἅγιον πάσχα*, PG 59, 722.

meaning and, more broadly, the meaning of human life. Through the senses, faith, ritual or meditation, the sacred touches something that exists over and beyond them. In this search, art is also involved – in its own ways, in many of its versions. By the term *profane* I mean the tendency for a "metaphysical" dimension of life to be ignored, and quite often to be condemned and vilified, and for a hereness and amnesiac presentism to be adopted. The profane traps the senses within a flat secularization. What is the relationship between contemporary technology and profanity? Although in their historical path the relationships between religion, ritual, art and technique have been complex and evolving, I believe that the dominant current of technology is nowadays inscribed on the path of this profane way of seeing and experiencing the world.

A valid distinction between sacred and profane is difficult because of the centuries-old mutation of the sacred into the facade of the murderously profane, which we have seen to prevail in religious wars and we are seeing it surviving in phenomena in which intolerance is combined with symbolic or/and actual murderous violence. Apart from that, in the field of the profane conception of the world, many people, while they scorn metaphysics and despise or persecute every traditional faith, they simultaneously attribute to authoritarian persons and political formations or/and to technological achievements and their political and moral implications the status of an earthly atheist god. A leader, who is perceived as faultless and it is forbidden to be judged, is ready to become a punishing deity; a machine that is precluded from failing is on its way to becoming the dangerous substitute for the divine. One such example is Eugene O'Neill's dark theatrical play, *Dynamo*, staged on Broadway in 1929 at the beginning of the Great Depression, where electricity and the generators that produce it act as God's substitutes.

Among the machines that represent the successive phases of man's technical evolution, the new machine, the computer, unlike the previous ones, is not called a machine. Its image does not define its function. It can be the most minute object with the maximum functionality. It retains a playful element of the machine, a challenge for secret paths to be followed; it offers to its users a sense of a power that derives from their knowledge of using it, without often being aware of their dependence on it. By looking at some basic elements of the constantly

evolving computers, we can approach the world of AI not only through its practical applications, but also through its imaginary reception by the techno-culture and advertising, and grasp its relations with the soul, art and society. The computer seems like the most "human" of the "human" machines. It is an *achievement* of man; yet, by imitating the latter's language and behavior, it copies, substitutes, guides, and corrects him. At the same time, it supplements or replaces his memory -a basic element of his nervous system and psychic world-, and replaces the image, some functions and needs or pseudo-needs of the body – e.g., it substitutes the material, or even sexual, contact with other virtual bodies that can be perceived as real. The computer offers itself as an advisor to the researcher and the teacher and a partner to the artist, whom it often seems to compete with or even successfully replace. If we take away from the miracle its metaphysical dimension, it seems to be the most human, widespread, and enforced miracle of contemporary humanity – in terms that sometimes cause enthusiasm in some people, concern or speechlessness to others. Is this a situation totally different from what happened in the past? A more general genealogical retrospection of the technique and technological wonders, starting in ancient Greece, may provide us with some clues to an answer.

Art and Technique in Ancient Greece

It is imperative for as to have ancient Greece as a point of reference in order to talk about the dimensions of art and technique, and their relations with man, the sacred and the profane. Obviously, other civilizations also had great religions, arts and techniques, and indeed some of them preceded the Greek one in time and paved the way for it. However, basic notions and discussions related to these issues that concern modern humanity emerged in Greece.

The word $\tau\acute{\varepsilon}\chi\nu\eta$ in the early Greek meant technique, craftsmanship. Their common matrix is the verb $\tau\varepsilon\acute{\upsilon}\chi\varepsilon\iota\nu$, which means "produce by work or art", "make", "built". The craftsmen had their workshops on the outskirts of the city, at Dipylon ["Two-Gated"], the starting point of the great procession during the Panathenea festival, which ended

at the Parthenon. Thus, the square of the embroidered robe [χιτών] of the weaver goddess Athena participated in the annual ritual. The two edges, the profane and the sacred, coexisted; the first as a starting point, the second one as a perspective. The painters, sculptors and architects who created one of the greatest monuments of art on the Acropolis hill were also craftsmen [τεχνίτες]. Plato in his *Republic*, in the example of the bed[2], unquestionably degrades the painters in relation to craftsmen. The painters are only the imitators of the imitators, the copyists of the carpenters who copy the Platonic idea of the bed. In this part of the Republic, *mimesis* means passive copying, something which, however, will later be reversed, paving the way for the acceptance of art as creation by Aristotle in his *Poetics* and Plotinus and the subsequent intellectual processes concerning the question of icons in Byzantium, as expressed by John of Damascus and others. However, Plato's views at this particular point of his dialogue do not imply art's irreversible banishment from the ideal state; the philosophical myths of the cave and of Er in the same dialogue affirm the possibility of the mythical thought and art/technique's "good use"; thus, they return from exile to be incorporated into the ideal *polis* under the condition of expressing a truth beyond appearances.

Art and Technique in Myth and Fiction

On the border between myth and history, the figure of the Daedalus summarizes on the primordial coupling of art and technique as well as the latter's monstrous (wondrous and terrifying) element, but also the tragic fate that awaits anyone who exceeds the limits that men and gods must respect. The Greeks called δαίδαλα the abstract votive or funerary statues of the early first millennium BC; they attributed to Daedalus, if not the discovery of sculpture as a whole, at least this particular style. According to mythology, he was considered the creator at the behest of Minos of Labyrinth, the cavern of the man-eating Minotaur, but also the inventor of the wings that allowed his son, Icarus, to make the flight

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2. See Plato, *Πολιτεία*, 597a et seq.

that cost him his life, because he committed hybris by coming too close to the Sun.

The machine is also presented in the Ancient Greek literature, and in the universal literary tradition that has since then creatively walked in its footsteps, as a trap, especially a female one. In Homer we already find the mechanical bed/machine/trap that the artisan god, Hephaestus, makes (τεύχει) to catch the adulterers Ares and Aphrodite in the act (*Odyssey*) and the robotic maids who serve the same god while he builds the technical and artistic miracle that is Achilles' shield (*Iliad*). Hesiod in his two major works (*Theogony*, *Works and Days*) spoke of the woman/robot, Pandora, who is constructed as a beautiful evil in place of the good («*καλὸν κακὸν ἀντ' ἀγαθοῖο*»)[3] to punish mortals who became fences of the fire, which Prometheus stole from Zeus. Thus, Pandora became the progenitor of the dreaded *(«γυναικῶν θηλυτεράων»)*[4].

By assimilating this tradition, the European literature, theatre and film all refer to it, from Olympia in Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann* (1817) to Wedeckind's *Spirit of the Earth* (1895) and *Pandoras's Box* (1904) to the robotic woman/trap in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), where she captures humans in the gears of a monstrous machine producing exploitation and oppression.

The Technique's Discourse
and the Discourse on Technique
in Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* and Sophocles' *Antigone*

The *discourse of technique* and the *discourse on technique* are reflected in two famous passages of the tragic poets that refer to the question of the machine and the making (τεύξεως), not only as a technological achievement, but also as an element linked to worldview, ethos and political action. Both these passages from *Prometheus Bound* and *Antigone*, the latter of which is probably a critical and creative reference to the former, list man's technological achievements – erection of buildings,

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3. Hesiod, *Θεογονία*, στ. 585.
4. *Op.cit.*, στ. 590.

shipbuilding, trapping of animals, curing of diseases. Indeed, in this list, which is quoted in the first stasimon of *Antigone*, Sophocles also includes law-*making*, rather implying that the technique is legislation but also, in a sense, a *legislator*. In *Prometheus*, these technical feats are presented as the Titan's undoubtedly positive benefits, who is punished by Zeus for his benevolent acts. In a certain sense, we are dealing with a *discourse of technique*, or a first *manifesto in favor of the technique*, with the reservation, however, that the Titan and his words in *Prometheus Bound* express a pride that once touches the tragic *hubris*. On the contrary, in *Antigone* the same list takes on much clearer moral and political dimensions. Man, who is defined by the element of his inventive genius (*μηχανόεν*), can put it in the service of goodness, but also of tyranny and violence; to yoke not animals but his fellow men and –as in the case of Creon and Antigone– to make them prey and lead them to death.

Regarding Technology's Ambivalent Neutrality

Technology is a later word, that had at its basis the reflection about production and the good or bad use of the machine and rarely about the purpose for which it was built. The discourse on the machine can be enthusiastic, downright and emphatically dismissive or critical. The actual war, declared by the Luddites in England at the beginning of the 19th century against the industrial revolution and the machines, whose use led to redundancies, was short-lived. Even nowadays, however, the use of the computer for isolated homeworking is changing to some extent the traditional setting of the factory as the center of production and poses problems for the workers' direct communication and their ability to promote their own goals. The question arises here whether the world of the machine, the world of the *making*, is in itself neutral, and it's up to people to make good or bad use of it. This is the view of intellectuals, including Friedrich Engels, who believe in the *neutrality* of the material-technical infrastructure, which, according to them, nevertheless decides the course of human affairs.

However, the view regarding the economic and technical infrastructure's neutrality is not borne out by the facts. There is no need to recall the other ancient meaning of the word *machine* (*μηχανή*), that of a war machine, destined to play a leading role in the subjugation of cities –siege tower, catapult (*ἑλέπολις, καταπέλτης*)– and the enemy's mass destruction (Archimedes' machine gun). The machine (like those designed later during the Renaissance by Leonardo da Vinci) has inscribed in it, from the moment of its conception, the intention of its creator and his employers. From the Renaissance onwards, and even more decisively from the Industrial Revolution and the chain production introduced by Henry Ford and denounced by Chaplin in his movie *Modern Times*, the design, creation and use of machines is linked to both empowerment and profit; at the same time, it not only becomes a defining component of societies but also tends to substitute the whole of the material and spiritual social structure. In his dystopian prophetic work, *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley tells us of a society where everything, from love to behavior and entertainment, is biologically programmed and mechanized, and where the ultimate all-seeing and creator is someone called Ford. Emblematically representing a tendency of the postmodern state and abolishing as obsolete the descent into Hades and the Resurrection, Donna Harraway, in her sarcastic manifesto, promises the worldly immortality by technical means. Cyborg, the unborn post-being that was spawned by her writing, is a hybrid between the organic and the mechanical, and constitutes a fluid post gender "ethereal cyberspace identity". Although it is a product of patriarchy and racism, as she writes, one can hope for the good use of its infidelity.

The New and the Specter of the New

We could explain the onset of technology and the values, sciences and practices with which it is combined, if we take into account two factors that are present in the art world: the *specter of the new*, which may be the antipode of the new, culminates with modernity, but survives in the

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postmodern era. The origin of the mythology of the new and the specter of the new is lost in the depths of the millennia. Customs and events that are still associated today with the end of the previous calendar year and the arrival of the next one, attributing to the former the negative elements of decay and death and to the latter the positive elements of prosperity and life, exist among other things in present-day Western societies and seem to reproduce, like many other modern phenomena, elements of prehistoric beliefs and rituals.

The feeling that in the concept of the new are embedded self-evidently positive values prevails today in many areas that are central to modern life. In the world of advertising and promotion of consumer products, the adjective *new* dominates, whether it is about clothing models, cars, kitchen utensils, or detergents. In the field of the arts, a new style, a new movement, a new way of interpreting things tends automatically to mean something original and revolutionary – therefore better than the, boring and trite, traditional. The adjective *new* does not only wraps an artistic work into a certain aura; from the moment that it is also a work/commodity, it helps to make it, like consumer products as such, marketable. Still, the field where the new is rampant and uncontrolled is that of politics. Since the beginning of the 20th century in particular, throughout much of the world but especially in the West, a long line of political formations and parties, often with radically different ideologies and practices, have appropriated the notion of the *new* as part of their title and as a tool of their rhetoric. Public opinion in Greece and elsewhere is easily convinced that the new politician is self-evidently incorruptible, sinless, bold and effective, and party staffs engage in a relentless search to identify electorally exploitable young men and women. The computers we have in our homes or businesses, as well as a whole other range of machines, from mobile phones to all sorts of cameras and so on, are in a constant race of renewal that their users, especially the older ones, are wheezing to follow, while non-users –especially the elderly– feel alienated in a society increasingly dependent on such "state of the art" products; thus, the generation gap is widening instead of narrowing. Modern social inequalities are due not only to economic differences but also to ever-increasing differences in technological knowledge. These

phenomena of aggressive exploitation of the new extend across a wide range of human activities, including language, values, communication and codes. The question is therefore twofold: To what extent a thing or an object that is presented as new is actually a new one, and not simply a manifestation of the desire for *novitas*, of which the German philosopher Theodor Adorno has spoken, a facade and a repetition of much older and "outdated" elements? And how much more is the *new* («*νέον*»), to which the ancient verb «*νεωτερίζω*» –innovate, usually by using violence or forcible measures– is straightaway identified with something that is good («*ἀγαθόν*»), as those who use it to their advantage want it to be at every step?

The Progress and the Specter of Progress

Nowadays, a flat (para)theology is extremely widespread – that of the inevitable and unidirectional progress guaranteed by the *reason of history*, i.e. the view of the guaranteed course and its happy ending, as conceived by various –even contradictory– philosophical and ideological currents since Hegel. Let us recall that the word «*πρό-οδος*» (*progress*) literally means only advancing on a path that can lead to either the best or the worst. The concept of progress does not always explicitly relate to whether one accepts or rejects the divine. A believer can argue that a higher power can definitely ensures the course of the world from good to better, but so can an atheist who believes that human history is driven by inescapable laws –e.g., the law of gravity–, guaranteeing that, regardless of its responsibilities and choices and/or chance, humanity marches towards the best. Something which, let us add, is not the view of either Plato in his dialogue the *Statesman*, the Christians thinkers or Marx, who, unlike some of his followers, had stressed that humanity might progress towards socialism or fall back into barbarism.

The term *flat (para)theology* is neither exclusive nor a sine qua non feature of a single religion or ideology. I use the term *flat*, not because those who refer to it do not philosophically admit a world other than the earthly one, but because the behavior and practice of a significant

part of its adherents, beyond their rhetorical declarations, is based on what amounts to the recognition of the matter's primacy in a one-dimensional form, vilifying any search for the hereafter, unless it can serve as a political showcase, an economic argument, a propaganda tool, or as an empty advertising effect. I also use the term *(para)theology* because at the same time its adherents demand a faith so blind and a renunciation of any criticism so absolute, such as those we meet in the most authoritarian regimes surrounded by a pseudo-metaphysical aura. The characterization of artistic currents and technological developments as progressive does not necessarily imply a connection with any essential spiritual interests. The point is that the *flat (para)theology* of progress can be either associated with a tendency that is essentially arrogant, of some people prevailing over all the others, additionally armed with the distorted technological argument, or complemented with a tendency to subjugate others to lies and violence.

The Image and the Specter of the Image

It is said that the image leaves its traces in the human soul even before the speech. Often, in a dream, a flurry of images often emerges that man finds it difficult to translate into words and ascribe meaning to them. Civilization "writes" with images of stones, carved or painted on rocks before writing – if we recall the first stone tools and figures in caves. The image tells what is seen and what is not seen. It is always a *speculation*, not only in the sense of a representation but also aa a possibility or a hypothesis. Christianity's commitment to the representation of the divine after the end of Iconoclasm preserved not only the face of God but also the face of man. If the tradition of the icon had not existed, if the iconography of churches had not continued and the church as a building had not existed in Greece and other places conquered by Islam, the aniconic element would probably have prevailed in the centuries of slavery. Apart that, after the Greek Independence, our relationship with the great painting of the West would have been problematic.

Firstly, photography and chrono-photography, and cinema afterwards, with the realism of faithful representation in time, have been developed

in parallel with the Industrial Revolution: the operation of the factory as a "total work of technique", with a central reference to the measurable time of the clock –a profane, so to speak, version of the bell that regulated the time of the monastery– the transformation of the city with the influx of labor force, electrification, the speed of transport and communication, the contempt for nature, the omnipotence of the manifold. Walter Benjamin, in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproduction*, raises a series of issues arising from the mass production of the work of art, which loses the "aura" of its uniqueness, thus sealing in one sense the passage to modernism and multiplicity.

Painting's response to multiplicity and realism was immediate: without changing the tools of its technique, art introduced time by adopting the instantaneous mode of representation, creating series of "unique" works, depicting the same motif at different moments, as in Claude Monet's *Cathedrals*. Shortly afterwards, in the early 20th century, with the Futurist movement, this –supposedly– most immovable of the arts celebrated and depicted movement in an impressive manner. Around the same time, it distanced itself from representation; it refused to be an art of the retina, as Duchamp said, and adopted abstraction in various ways. As the examples of Kandinsky and Klee have shown, it tried to discern the invisible behind the visible. It proposed with Malevich the enigmatic "black square", a weaving "screen", which was also interpreted as a "black hole" or a symbol of hagiography in a search for spirituality. He used with Duchamp –ironically or not– the "readymade", the industrial, multiple object which the artist-creator withdraws from serial production and makes prominent, elevating it to a work of art. He took, as Warhol did with photography and processed it as "readymade", to multiply the unique through the profane trade, which always searches for the "new".

The road to *Les Immateriaux*, the exhibition organized in Paris by Jean-François Lyotard in 1985, was paved by the conceptual approach to art when the Cold War and the first hot wars in Korea and Vietnam began after the end of World War II. Urban artists adopted the conceptual primacy of the work as a tangible object, leading to its de-materialization. The concept of the *intangible* used by Lyotard –according to him, the concept of progress lacks legitimacy since humanity did not manage to emancipate itself, as the Enlightenment once had hoped–, is not

something that is simply immaterial. In the exhibition there is a brief reason for ignoring or summarizing the picture – something between a haiku and an inverted propaganda slogan. A residue, perhaps, of a de-materialization process that feels nostalgia about the exhausted matter and a ritual in search of its god?

The use of NFT by some artists, whose initials stand for Non-Fungible Token, is on the way to the coupling of art and technology. These are cryptographic assets in a chain of digital transactions with unique identification codes and metadata that distinguish them from each other. Unlike cryptocurrencies, they are not tradable or exchangeable with a corresponding parity. However, their use does not imply their de-commoditization.

Performance – An Artistic Meeting and Conflict Point between Sacred and Profane, Art and Technology

Why Performance? Not because we consider it more important than other forms of visual and performing arts, but because in some of its versions it attempts a synthesis between the sacred and the profane and helps us to acknowledge their encounter and confrontation, as well as that between ritual and technology, body and psyche, art and life. Looking back at the art history of the early 20th century, we realize that not only there have been examples of performance art from the Italian and Russian Futurists, Artaud, Theophilos, and others, but that they were consciously or/and unconsciously exploited by younger artists. I am referring here to the period from the mid-20th century onwards, because it was then that the genre started to spread internationally and its basic characteristics were consolidated.

The search for a lost ceremony or rite, an unfinished mourning (if we think of the victims of World War II), inhabited the sites of the emerging 1950-60 performance, with Viennese Axionism being one of its most characteristic manifestations. Places, memorials of other places or even uncharted ones, with the body defending its materiality immediately after the war against its desecration in the gas chambers

and its vaporization by the atomic bomb. The body's physical, tangible presence stood against the rising intangible empire of technology, which continued to build clever war machines. However, this "battle" of the body against the specter of progress did, suffer some losses in the symbolic realm.

The word *performance* refers to forms of contemporary art that, from various paths, are sometimes explicitly or implicitly in dialogue with initiation rites and the sacred, and with the real or imaginary figure of the primordial artist. Undoubtedly, what we call Contemporary Art encompasses a wide range of styles, media, objectives, etc. However, the *performance* genre, which is increasingly widespread internationally and in Greece, has some special characteristics. An ancient gravestone at the Kerameikos Cemetery, a fresco by Manuel Panselinos in the Protaton of Mount Athos, Michelangelo's Pieta are in dialogue with the sacred. Nevertheless, even works that do not explicitly declare their relationship to it – e.g., paintings by Gauguin, Malevich, Christos Bokoros, can be equally awesome. In a sense, the way in which the performance seeks to generate awe continues this line; at the same time, it differs in its rhetoric, means, objectives and the social conditions within which it emerged[5].

In the current so-called Postmodern era, the social conditions have changed. What is called *virtual body* or *post-body*, with recourse to

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5. The proximity and the difference between the terms performance («ἐπιτέλεση») and ritual («τελετουργία») in the Greek language are, from this point of view, revealing. They indicate or suggest a link with traditional forms of initiation and their artistic expressions, while at the same time expressing the intention to modernize them – sometimes radically altering their aims, their language, and their function. Traditional initiation and traditional art possess a fundamental bodily character. The body and the language of the body, breath –which is not coincidentally related to spirit– voice, the nervous system, the dietary code, and a range of other aspects constitute the foundation upon which almost every initiatory process is based. And every such process, despite the undeniable and significant differences from case to case, is grounded in the belief that the material body has potentials unknown to the uninitiated – potentials that lead to that something else, or rather that something more, though not something foreign to the material body. It is precisely this something that allows the initiate to see the invisible, so as also to perceive, within their often elusive material reality, the visible.

technological means and arguments, which are offered to facilitate such a process, can, by their substitution and distortion, invalidate its experience. The question that arises in relation to performance is the following: which elements of technology can be accepted and which can be rejected by the artist. This is a crucial and intractable question, insofar as the performer actually seeks an authentic dialogue with the world of initiation. Ritual initiation in the context of a community is something important and difficult. In one sense, it is a matter of life and death. During their initiation rites, the Athenian and Spartan ephebes, as well as the contemporary adolescents who belong to societies such as the Aborigines of Australia, who are misused to be called primitive, are struggling with fear and the real threat of death; it is a struggle through which the process of their maturation begins. To what extent artists today can manage their fear of death and the rejection and failure that are often experienced as death by resorting to the use of technology during a performance? Furthermore, how can a performer through his/her action invite his/her audience to a journey of self-discovery? Can "miraculous" technology lead to an expansion of consciousness and not to a disincarnated world, completely alienated from the sacred element?

The Technological "Facilitation" beyond the Performance

In a wide spectrum of artistic genres –theatre, cinema, the visual arts including performance–, lurks an uncritical recourse to technological facilitation, which can lead not to synthesis but to fragmentation and misleading substitutes. The stereotypical thought can substitute experience. Again, the experience inscribed exclusively in the nerves, can remain blind, deprived of its meaning. In "religious" films that dramatize episodes of the Old and/or New Testament, such as the crossing of the Red Sea by the Jews or the miracles and Passion of Christ, "reverent" sensationalism with special effects is sought. Thus, with the assistance of the relevant technology, such approaches negate Jesus's response to the Temptation. The expensive, virtual "miracles" proposed with the tool of technology seem like a transformed Temptation: disembodied

body, earthly happiness without happiness, pleasure as an imitation of pleasure.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Father Pavel Florensky, speaking of the "total work" that is the Divine Liturgy, showed that Tragedy was a precursor in terms of its form and substance. This view, inscribed in the spiritual, spatial-temporal search for a total experience, was parallel, albeit from a different path, to that of the Wagnerian opera, but also of various artistic Avant-garde movements, like the Russian one and the Bauhaus – an uninterrupted process up to the present day. Thus, a path was opened for the interpretation of Tragedy in the modern world –first and foremost in Greece– in dialogue with what is truly sacred. Eva Palmer and Angelos Sikelianos would not have started the Delphic Festivals and the performances in the ancient Greek theatre in 1929 without the thought and forms bequeathed by Byzantium and the synthesis of antiquity and Christianity. Sikelinanos struggled with the Delphic project to prevent the coming World War. Artists who today resort to performance art also do so to react to a profane, violent, murderous world that makes us suffocate when it doesn't kill us.

Still, I do not believe that we should attempt an unrealistic break and exit from the technological world. The *making* («$\tau\varepsilon\bar{\upsilon}\xi\iota\varsigma$»), the *artefact* («$\tau\acute{\varepsilon}\chi\nu\eta\mu\alpha$»), have always been a part of the arts, but it has never bore fruit alienated from the undivided thing that is the body/soul. Where will those who as artists seek a dialogue with the sacred find this psychosomatic unity? Perhaps where we stubbornly refuse to see it –within ourselves– but also in what we despise – just next to us. For even the distant things, the traditional wisdom of Asia and North and South America cannot enlighten us unless we see it through the eyes of our own cultural memory, of which the sacred is an integral part.

Among the Ruins, the Sacred

About three decades ago, at the time when the regimes of the so-called "real" socialism in Europe were collapsing, I happened to travel to one of the countries in its phase of transition. Some friends, who lived

there, decided to include in their tour of their historic city a visit to a place whose memory remains unforgettable to me. It was an orthodox church of moderate size, which from its courtyard showed signs of abandonment. The impression inside was much worse. On the damaged walls, from which some of the lime had fallen, traces of the frescoes were barely preserved. On the floor the situation was worse. Rubble, pieces of wood and, if I remember correctly, straw, gave the impression that the temple must have been used as a warehouse or stable. Yet, the most striking thing was something else.

At the sanctuary, which was not protected by an iconostasis, there was what at first seemed to me as a modern metallic statue – something unexpected for a country that in the artistic field had been following the dictates of socialist realism. But the friends who showed me around insisted that I should take a closer look. It was not a statue, but a robot, which seemed to be the image of an atheist deity that had been erected there to replace the traditional religious icons. They didn't make any comment on what they showed me. They were people who loved their country and its great culture, and so I suppose they wanted to show me the evil done by the bigotry that so often goes hand in hand with bad taste. All I was told was that, when the place stopped functioning as a church, it was turned into a permanent exhibition of technological achievements, which had also ceased to function some years ago. Perhaps this information reinforced the lingering feeling in my memory: the decay and abandonment that the whole place was showing, had struck the religious and visual imprint of the distant past, as well as that of a technology that claimed to be able to replace it. It must have been left rusting there, for no authority dared to suggest its withdrawal. In any case, I was faced the three points to which I come back: the faith in the form of the desecrated church, the art of images, in the form of faded hagiographies, and the technology of the malfunctioning robot, which promised to assimilate or substitute faith and art with the doctrine of the coming of the mechanical paradise.

A scene from another religious place, which we visited on the same trip, created a different impression on me. This time, the place was a small church in a historic female monastery in the same city. It was the

funeral of two women. Their bodies were placed in two poor coffins of rough white plank, covered with blue crepe paper. About fifty women attended the funeral service, chanting with the priest, a tall young man with long blond hair and a long beard, about thirty years old, so thin that his simple black robe creased with his every move. As his hands moved, they gave me the sensation of wings under which the congregation of women crouched for protection. The awe, lacking in the other abandoned temple, dominated this poor mystagogy.

Could one hastily conclude that, like others at the same time, in this and other similar countries, I was also witnessing a return of the repressed sacred element – a return, which, in the case of the funeral in the monastery, was a synthesis of austere form and authentic emotion, and which was consistent with the bankruptcy of the one-sided fixation on technology, as symbolized by the abandoned robot?

Modern technology endures and advances because it is adaptable, flexible and agile. Propagandist rhetoric wraps it with a philanthropic and hyper-progressive halo, obscuring intentions and side effects, defeating resistance and discrediting criticisms as an expression of an outdated reactionary mentality. The return of the profane wearing the mask of the sanctuary has today taken forms incomparably more barbaric and murderous than the one depicted in the installation of the robot in the sanctuary of the desecrated church. At the same time, the successful or unsuccessful recourse to the concept of the sacred is also evident in the field of art[6].

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6. In the case of the arts, as well as that of technology, primeval or primitive elements survive, despite significant historical changes. The role, at once sacred, healing and artistic, of the primitive shaman, magician, physician and performer –a dominating presence in the community– reappears with variations in later times. On the opposite side of this, we have the outcast, the cursed artist, who in some respects resembles the scapegoat of the Jews or the φαρμαχόν (pharmakon) of the Greeks. However, some contemporary artists deliberately and artificially assume the role of the fallen angel and the cursed creator in order to gain recognition and wealth. In the behavior of artists and in the way that the latter are being treated by different societies and epochs, we see elements repeating themselves whose origins is lost in the depth of millennia. It is actually a repetition that in various ways is related to ritual, initiation rites, the sacred and the profane; nevertheless, in the present condition of the dominant spread of

And now What?

The image persists even when it is destroyed. Sometimes, the image, even via the profane, seeks the sacred. How are they defined today? What is the relationship with matter and the world of the senses? Certain art forms followed the de-materialization path to counteract the commodification of matter; still, another one, that of the NFT, uses crypto-currencies with material stock exchange terms. Other art forms refuse to relinquish their materiality, inviting to the territory of the elemental forms of life, to wandering in interior and exterior landscapes, creating common places of coexistence.

Technology is invading artistic works with a new momentum. The 3D environment and the new achievements, in terms of the sensation and illusion caused by virtual reality, involves new and especially old works that move when they were still, and stay still for hours when they were moving. The non-physical environment is more preferable and nature is constructed.

In a world where the person is persecuted in his uniqueness, is forged and exterminated, the notion of "*in the image and likeness*" becomes urgent. Panselinos, Rublev, Theotokopoulos were able to both paint the Pantocrator [God Almighty] and the completely ordinary, most familiar people, because their realism converses with Heaven. What is defined as abstract art, when it searches for pure shapes and emanates from the depths of the soul, is yet another part of the world; it does not oppose or abolish the body and the person but complements them. To recall Paul Klee, portraiture is also a "physiognomic" landscape. What makes us worthy is the light that exists in our soul when we do not resist it.

If uncritically exploited, contemporary developments may further encourage the monopoly of an atheistic religion that annihilates man,

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technology, it takes on new and not necessarily auspicious dimensions. Profit and power, which remain the dominant targets in life and generators of death, use technology to consolidate and impose their unquestionable domination. If the arts want to retain the right to renew the world with drastic critiques and proposals, they are once again obliged to invent a way to accomplish this feat. In the face of the virtual man, the post-human or the violent disappearance of humanness, a creative return to man and to what makes life sacred is also called for through artistic means.

shutters the uniqueness of personhood, criples bodies and strips life of any substance.

Where else could we look for an answer but in love? Two things come to my mind when I speak of it. The words about love in Paul's *1 Corinthians* and the words of Sophocles' Antigone, when she tells Creon that she was born to unite not with hatred but with love («*Οὔτοι συνέχθειν, ἀλλὰ συμφιλεῖν ἔφυν*»)[7]. Words like these are worthy of study and creative interpretation; they do not fly over a fleshless firmament, but they relive each moment, as for example in the works of Ingmar Bergman. When St. Paul, speaking of love, refers to forbearance and honesty, he illuminates something that we are constantly seeking in our everyday relationships and in the works of art: the *positive energy* that seeks to support man, not to tear him down. I could not find a better way to illustrate it but to quote a phrase from Alexandros Papadiamantis's short story *The Fallen Dervish*: "Christ's gentle, sweet yes" – that is, love, which can be tolerant, not poisoned by empathy, that can embrace and comfort; that is honest, not out of fear but out of a deep faith, an affirmation of what is right and just, true and beautiful, because it knows that falsehood and injustice go hand in hand with ugliness.

St. Paul's words are a guide for those who wish to become creators. If love is not jealous, then the creator will recognize every worthwhile work as his own. Love, the Apostle continues, does not envy, does not boast, it is not proud. How much the powers boasting that they can rule the world, full of arrogance caused by the weapons' technological power can listen to his words? To what extend they can put an end to the ugliness and failures that threaten to annihilate the planet? A selfless love is not lost. It is a love capable of caressing the hand of Papadiamantis's *Fallen Dervish*, of the wounded children in every part of the world.

I understand the skepticism of some who will say that these are words that will remain words, as long as those who believe them do not own powerful banks, docile mass media, mercenary armies, atomic bombs. Perhaps the answer is that hope collapses when we admit to ourselves that the little we love, we are able to, is of no consequence.

7. Sophocles, *Ἀντιγόνη*, στ. 523.