

Lana Askari Kurdistan is an understudied region that is often only imagined through the media's output of constant war and conflict. I want to counter these stereotypical images of the Middle East by showing through my films that even though precarity is part of life there, people's everyday lives are much more than that. Issues of migration and mobility offer a lens through which we can understand what it means to be human, even in contexts of uncertainty.

# A Season in the Olive Grove

Ektoras Arkomanis

## Notes

- 1 Ghassan Hage, 'Waiting Out the Crisis: On Stuckedness and Governmentality,' in *Waiting*, edited by Ghassan Hage, (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2009), 97-106.
- 2 Andrew Irving, 'Into the Gloaming,' in *Transcultural Montage*, edited by Christian Suhr and Rane Willerslev (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013), 76-95.
- 3 Vincent Crapanzano, *Imaginative horizons: An essay in literary-philosophical anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
- 4 Term by Hage, 2009.
- 5 Christian Suhr, and Rane Willerslev, eds., *Transcultural montage* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013).

## References

- Crapanzano, Vincent. *Imaginative horizons: An essay in literary-philosophical anthropology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.
- Hage, Ghassan. 'Waiting Out the Crisis: On Stuckedness and Governmentality.' *Waiting*, edited by Ghassan Hage, 97-106. Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2009.
- Irving, Andrew. 'Into the Gloaming.' *Transcultural Montage*, edited by Christian Suhr and Rane Willerslev, 76-95. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013.
- Suhr, Christian, and Rane Willerslev, eds. *Transcultural montage*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013.

Athens, 6 July 2014

Dear Zoe,  
In Eleonas I search for the conscience of my race manifest only for a brief moment in the early twentieth century, or perhaps the nineteenth, now un-forged, un-created.

Eleonas is marginal, un-metropolitan, entropic – an area near the centre of Athens, with leftover industries, scavengers' markets, shacks and sheds, informal infrastructures, permanent and transitional populations. *Thousands of years ago thousands of olive trees stood here.*

I first encountered Eleonas in a set of photographs that seemed like telltales but at second glance worked against narrative completeness. They depicted dereliction all around, but also people working in defunct factories; flooded roads without pavements and stray dogs in empty streets at twilight, as well as signs of inhabitation and activity like a parked up caravan with a roughly patched-up roof, dyed leather hung to dry between sheds with broken windows, or a framed picture still hanging on the last remaining wall of a demolished house.



[Take] a gravel road called Ploutonos St. As you make your way, you'll come across Orfeos St. These chthonic names have an ambiguous significance here. Life thrives in this area. And at the same time you get the impression of a landscape that has died: you are in the place where the city banishes all its waste, all that is useless and unwanted.<sup>1</sup>

After the photographs came the official narratives. Two historical images of Eleonas linger on: one from antiquity, when it was the sacred olive grove of Athens (*eleonas* is the Greek word for 'olive grove'), a vast land to the west and southwest of the city, where, according to myth, all the olive trees of Greece are descended from; the other from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as crops gradually replaced the olive trees. Vine fields and cabbage gardens proliferated, along with small businesses like kilns, tile makers and sack makers; these had first appeared in Eleonas in the late 1820s, after the end of Ottoman rule, aiding the reconstruction of Athens and signaling the eventual replacement of sacred nature with agriculture and industry.

More wholesome stories slowly surfaced, as I was filming, and from the book I was reading, by the ethnographer Zoe E. Ropaitou-Tsaparelli, which contained testimonies by the people of Eleonas, from the 1920s onwards. I continued filming and taking notes for some time, not knowing what I was looking for, only that I wanted to bear witness. By the summer of 2015 the filmed material was pointing towards work – occupations, things that people do. There was often a difficulty in capturing that which you had encountered the previous day – a sense of things migrating before you thought to note them down – because this is not the kind of place that takes interest in its own history. The slow migrations – the transferences of services and the use of land – are interwoven

with a long history of migrating populations to Eleonas. None of these migrations have been documented in detail, but their traces are still legible in the urban fabric and in collective memory.

This is a collection of notes about work and migrations, taken as I make the film *A Season in the Olive Grove*, which began in 2014 and is still a work in progress. My film and writing attempt a direct treatment of the place, its people, and the histories contained in its present image. Testimonies, clippings, and excerpts from early twentieth-century literature enter the frame, often distorted, recounted from memory, or filtered through more immediate observations. As people, identities and meaning continue to migrate, as the subject shifts and the ground shifts, two overarching sentiments remain: an uncertainty as to what exactly is preserved or restored by this attentiveness, and the sensation that the stories and images I collect – of things on their way out – more often than not speak of forgetting.

## Work

The last remaining tannery, behind Agiou Polykarpou Street, invokes the image of early industry in Eleonas. If two centuries ago the tanners' work was directed towards the nearby city, now it faces inwards – a condition of labour in a globalised economy. The noise of the machines and tools is constant, and the putrescent smell unrelenting. Daylight enters through chinks in the tin roof and walls, and is bolstered by the neon lamps. The rough floor glistens from the regular hosing, sometimes with flashing rainbows of chemicals. Residents and other local businesses are not sympathetic towards the tanneries because of the drainage of toxic chemicals, so the rest of the

tanneries in the area closed down some time ago, as did the bone grinder's yard that operated nearby.

The most common tasks are soaking the skin in chemicals, roll-pressing and steam-pressing it, and cutting the edges and loose ends. The soaking is done in huge revolving barrels containing chemicals. Then the skin is inserted into the roll-press, which is operated by foot. The edges of the raw skin are cut manually with long sharp knives. After the skin is pressed each piece is trimmed using scissors. The pressed skins are dyed at another site a couple of blocks away. Most of these tasks are repeated several times, with variations in tools and precision, and there are numerous work surfaces and stations corresponding to the specific stages of treatment – the workers often move along with the production line. On a slow day I counted fifteen men and one woman, all immigrants, but usually there are more.

Between filming trips to Athens I watched Rahul Jain's film *Machines* in a London cinema.<sup>2</sup> Inside a labyrinthine textile sweatshop in Sachin, India, Jain's camera zigzags through corridors, pauses, dwells on machines in vast warehouses, then moves on, discovering tucked-away rooms where people are napping between shifts. Often the camera rests on the colourful, patterned fabrics; this is a spatial as much as temporal punctuation in the film, because these Indian textiles are instantly recognisable from the homes, restaurants, hotels and markets where one finds them, so amid these dull industrial settings they seem imported – brief bursts of colour that re-fragment the interior that the long travelling shots painstakingly assemble.

In the tannery in Eleonas there is no such stark colour contrast, but warm, earthly tones instead: the untreated skin, the aluminum rust, the old unpainted wood and the muddy floors ... when you fix your eyes on a view it begins to resemble an oil painting. The human figures move, slowly, repetitively,



... *the city fades from memory*: Days of filming and forgetting in the last remaining tannery in Eleonas.

and over time the scene rearranges itself as though it were recording an old master-painter's reluctance to settle on a composition. Meanwhile, the city fades from memory. *Days of filming. An itch to record, in order to remember and remind. And in the process forgetting, always forgetting ...*

The filmic language of *Machines* became a counter-reference in other ways too: instead of long moving takes, the filming in the tannery demanded static shots that illustrate the slow passage of time from the perspective of the workers, and occasionally a protracted camera pan for observing simultaneous activities or conveying the setting. Then there was the question of what to leave out of the film. Towards the end of Jain's film the focus shifts towards politics, mainly through interviews about the employment conditions inside the factories, the phenomenon of commuting in India (a mass daily migration), exploitation, the diminished rights of the labourers and the repercussions of strike action, which involve intimidation and in some cases even killings. All these circumstances are aspects of working in these sweatshops, rather than the nature of work, which was my preoccupation at the tannery. For this reason there are no interviews, dialogue or voiceover narration, only machine noise.

#### *Words in silence, lists*

So many things had to be learned, and the rules for getting ahead bled together in her diary. Sixty percent of people do not have a goal. For a look of 'Gorgeous Radiance', blend black, grey, golden yellow, sapphire blue, and bright red eye shadow. ⓐ Can be dry-cleaned; 'A' means any detergent can be used. The exchange of greetings is the catalyst and lubricant of conversation. When you drink soup, don't let the soup spoon

rattle against the plate. People who don't read books will find their speech dull and their appearance repulsive.<sup>3</sup>

I was reading Leslie T. Chang's *Factory Girls: Voices from the Heart of Modern China* at the time, and amid the local realities of work in Chinese factories that the book details, the workers' own diary entries speak most profoundly to the human condition of labour, especially in seemingly trivial moments. Chunming, who is an internal migrant, learns English for personal development, but for those who take up work in foreign countries, learning the language is a necessity. In the tannery and elsewhere in Eleonas I wonder if the workers fill their long silences internally with lists of recently learned Greek words, rehearsing conversations for when their shift is over and they're out in the city buying a snack or bus tickets.

At one point Chunming decided to learn English on her own.

She made a list of vocabulary words –

ABLE

ABILITY

ADD

AGO

ALWAYS

AGREE

AUGUST

BABY

BLACK

BREATH

– but gave up before she got to C.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Machine noise, aria*

There are clues to a world that exists outside the tannery: sometimes you hear the radio when the machines pause, then

the slabs of the press begin to move apart again and the radio voices fade into the released steam; or there are brief moments when workers on their way from the main shed to the steam-press warehouse cross an alley under bright sunlight – such as on most days in this part of Europe – a half-forgotten reality for those working inside and, by now, for the viewer of the film. Another sense of the outside world comes from an aged worker as a fact about trade: some of the leather produced here is exported to Italy, to become Gucci, Dolce & Gabbana, etc. Suddenly this smelly shed on the backstreets of Eleonas is a dot on a map, connected to other dots, fashionable designer outlets elsewhere on the continent.

The old man's remark on skin as a commodity unwittingly disentangles skin from everything else, present or distant: the shed, the workers, the conditions of work, the light, the chemicals, D&G – all these are peripheral, ephemeral, perhaps even incidental, whereas the commodity is a constant. Humankind has traded leather since ancient times. So, in the next sequence everything but the leather gives way. First, the workers – we see the same workstations now empty and quiet. The silent interval continues into the cold room where the skin is stored, stacked up in piles. We hear Donizetti's aria *Una Furtiva Lagrima*, together with another, dissonant track. The surroundings fade too as the camera closes in on piles of sheepskin. As the aria ascends, the other sounds cease – a metaphor for the commodity freeing itself from all that is circumstantial. In the aria's libretto the foolish protagonist spends his last money on a love potion hoping to win his beloved woman's adoration, so the story correlates with the commodification of love, to which leather goods are accessory.

'Have you seen tanneries abroad?', the worker asks me. 'They are mansion halls. Not like this one. Spotless. Museums.'

### *What you depart from*

Athens, 16 April 2015

Dear Zoe,  
From the signs in Eleonas I come to know  
the ecumene –  
Karpenisi, Atalanti, Amfikleia,  
Krestena, Zacharo, Gastouni, Vartholomio,  
Andravida, Lechaina, Varda,  
Almyros,  
Itea, Skydra, Aridaea,  
Magoula, Mandra,  
Megalo Peyko.

More map dots: everywhere in Eleonas the signs of cargo transport companies list their destinations – an exercise in domestic geography. Like in Whitman's poem-lists, some names half-obscure their own origin, but not enough to put you off imagining the features they recall: a fruitful island, a salty place, a great oak. These are but the linguistic residues of the discipline of geography in an area that has become its own map, mile to mile.

Cargo transport businesses proliferate in Eleonas because they only need a storehouse and a loading pier. Their shutters are down most of the time; opening hours are whenever jobs come along. We set up the camera across the street from a loading pier, outside a car repair garage – another improvised shed – where two old mechanics are playing cards. 'Eleonas is the centre of the world,' one of them tells me without lifting his eyes from the game, as though this were self-evident. We film the loading and then the lorry departing, then another loading and another departure. *Engine off, a brief exchange, silent loading, boxes with unseen contents, signing dockets and getting dockets signed...* The stations and stops – the dots – are a way of reading

the network, making sense of it, but are also misleading because the long lines that connect the dots represent the true nature of the job. *For hours straight, days on end, the road: motorways, rest stops, gas stations and parking lots, random encounters, checking mileage and delivery schedules, the motorway again, radio on, sat nav, vanishing points and voices.*

Watching departures can have a hypnotic effect; it is comforting to condense the meaning of work into one digestible image of a lorry driving off. Samuel Stevens's film, *Passage*, omits the journeys altogether and instead focuses on cargo ships observed from the shore of the Marmara Sea, and then on lorries at Kapikule, an overland crossing point, from Turkey to Bulgaria, part of a route into and also out of Europe that has existed for centuries.<sup>5</sup> Who is on these ships and who drives these lorries? Ships looking still in the distance, 16-millimetre black-and-white film. Parked lorries, low-contrast black-and-white digital video. This stillness is deliberate because it is necessary. We need these journeys to come to a halt – infinite number of frames per second – and for someone to explain them, even with just one word. The title 'passage' remains on the screen throughout – how else to make sense of this mobile infrastructure and the lives it nourishes, unexamined, on the move but not nomadic?

#### *Precious stone et cetera*

Just off the open-air market on Agiou Polykarpou Street, a row of warehouses leads to a mound animated by loaders and excavators purging earth of litter so it can be reused in construction. In Eleonas you grow so used to waste and all sorts of daily contamination that you don't expect to come across preservation of any kind, let alone instances of purification. But about a mile to the east, in Kerameikos, the ancient cemetery of Athens and

now a threshold between the city centre and Eleonas, archaeologists and conservators take on cleaning the old stones of the Themistocleian Wall and the ruins of its ancient residential adjuncts. We film close-ups of the repair tool and the restorer's hand. This is a universe of slow frictions: the wearing of stone, moss, shaded recessions and darkened, polluted edges, visible moisture, the tools and toothbrushes that scratch and scrape for months, the glue and the fallen trimmings being fitted back in. With a slow upward pan the camera leaves behind the repairing hand and travels over stone, up the wall. As it looks over the wall, the scene opens up and reveals more walls and ruins, stone on stone, amid more stone, two acres of stone awaiting the same quiet settling of hands on it, a slow and precise endeavour against greater, indiscriminate forces. *Stone turns to sugar.*

Cut to a different kind of preservation, in the scavengers' markets of Eleonas, which stretch for several blocks and feature millions of items, some utterly worthless. Or maybe useless, not worthless, because here the common presumption is that anything can be sold; a 90s Nokia phone charger with its cable cut in half, loose pigeon feathers, an unwashed milk carton – all stubborn refusals to accept that certain things cannot possibly be of value or interest anymore.

Athens, 6 June 2015

Dear Zoe,

One could write an encyclopedia of the rubbish sold in the markets of Eleonas, with tomes like 'Old new technology' or 'Toys', and entries like 'Mutilated *Dora the Explorer* doll'. This book – the encyclopedia that contains the whole market – perhaps exists already and is on sale here, somewhere in the market, but impossible to locate.



Types of preservation: restoration of ancient stone at Kerameikos / re-collected and resold debris of the present at the scavengers' market in Eleonas.

Once I've taken in the variety of merchandise and its degrees of uselessness, the waste at the end of the day strikes me as a paradox. I wonder what sorting criteria are at work here – why sun-melted batteries are discarded, for example, whereas contaminated food containers are deemed fit to sell. Walking around the market I find books from the 1970s with titles such as *World History* or *The History of Mankind: The 20th Century*. Second-hand histories, scavenged, recycled. My mind travels back to Kerameikos and to a treasured ancient artefact found there, the amphora of Dipylon. No one knows for certain what it contained – a void history.

The following day, we film a lone man dressed in rags, inspecting a now empty lot at the scavengers' market site. He is looking for scraps that have escaped all other scavengers and the cleaners. He is the last in the refuse chain, *homo oeconomicus*, holding on to the undignified cetera and feeding them back into this system, which is neither cultural nor natural, but rational in its self-organisation.

### The forgetting of work

If you don't know the names, the knowledge of things perishes also.<sup>6</sup> Carolus Linnaeus, *Philosophia Botanica*, 1751, §210

Athens, 30 June 2015

Dear Zoe,

I finished your book this morning. So many words that I didn't know ... tools, materials, products, lines of work that no longer exist – lost economies. Ethnography that I prefer to read as though it were the natural history of a vanished ecosystem. The botanist keeps arriving at places where the genera have already disappeared and finds only their names instead.



Soon they too will be forgotten unless she records them.

*Footprints. Philosophia Botanica in reverse. Half-stories on wet soil. Maybe a name is what gives in last.*

Work passes into memory when the world becomes indifferent to its offering. At this point in the film, abandoned factories parade across the screen. Here the format had to differ, to signify that the subject is not the factory but something less tangible: the memory of work. Having thought of postcards, the obvious impulse was to freeze the images, and yet I liked the idea of postcards not staying still. At times the camera glides along the street, or there is a shake of the lens because of the wind on an exposed location – a kind of non-textual annotation. In another universe the filmic postcards would become synchronous with their subject, recording the wear of the factories and the change of seasons, and perpetually renewing the film. In this world, their short stretch – a few seconds on film – is followed by a notional expansion once the idea has taken root in the viewer's mind.

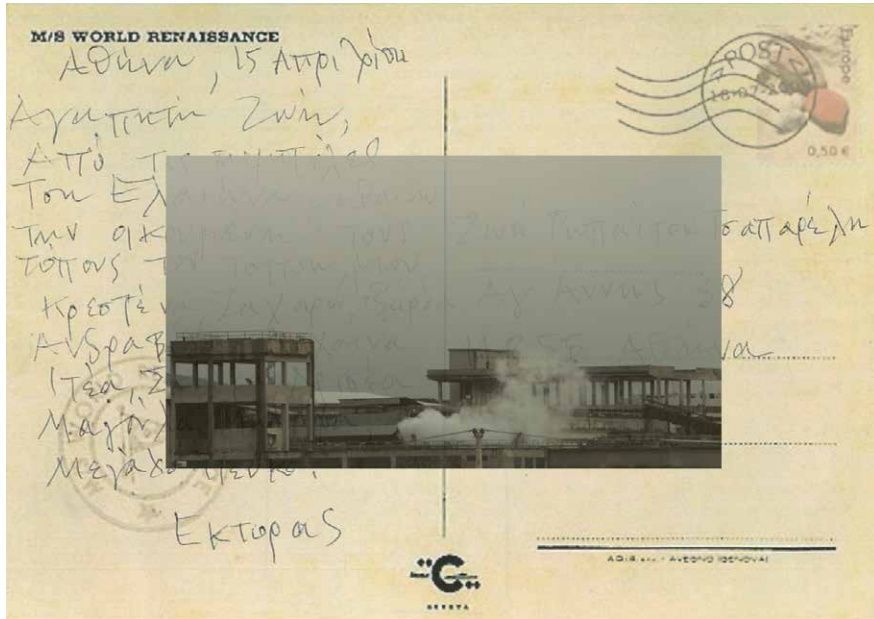
#### *Invented memories*

In the film, the memory of work is a constructed one; neither the filmmaker nor the audience had been inside the factories while they were still operational. My actual memories have formed from advertisements of these companies on TV and on billboards ranging along the motorway we drove through every summer to get out of Athens. To a child, those advertisements made the companies ubiquitous – Petalouda made the threads and needles of the world. Now, looking at their empty factories I realise it's not nostalgia that I'm experiencing but a collapse of temporalities – reading outdated warnings about the fate of these companies *after* it has arrived.

The Athenian Paper Company (Athinaiki Hartopoieia) was founded in the 1930s, and at its peak employed two-and-a-half thousand workers. By 2014, when I began filming, it had already experienced several misfortunes and had shrunk to half that number of employees. We drove between the tall wall of its empty warehouse on one side of the street and a burned compound with a series of units and yards on the other. Half-way through, an overhead transporter bridge joins the two buildings, as if tracing the history of disasters from fire, over the street, to bankruptcy. It felt strange that there was still work amid these ruins. The street sign reads Paperworkers' Street – a lexical remnant amid the material ones from a time when work thrived here, a reminder of a collective future that was once discernible, for a brief time almost tangible.

There was yet another fire around that time, and then, in 2016, the company finally succumbed to its fate. I was filming elsewhere in Eleonas when I read about this, and instead of a moment of clarity when the end of a story lets you make sense of it, there was the sensation that the film itself was becoming a ruin. With the last workers now gone, these factories, whittled away by calamities and preserved in their desolate state by an unravelled national economy, became legible, perhaps on the whole poignant, but up-close meaningless.

The postcard shots were then separated by blackout screens – a further ruination of the film – and machine noise, which implies that work ceased only recently in most of these factories. This involves two discontinuities, one temporal and one spatial: we see the exteriors of the buildings but we hear sounds from the *inside*, and *from another time*, presumably not long ago. The effect is illusory, a kind of filmic seashell resonance: the machine noise was recorded elsewhere and artificially overlaid, to complete the invented memory. Does this make the film complicit in the forgetting of work?



Postcards from Eleonas: screen postcard with a moving image inlay that shows smoke coming out of the Athenian Paper Company's factory, a few months before its final closure.

In the last shot of a factory, smoke comes out of its chimney. The filmed circumstance is real, so the image can be read as a triumphant regaining of function. But I prefer to see it as the last stage of delusion, when reality is stored away as false memory.

*Labours of the months and years*

A cluster of abandoned buildings that once was a cement sales company is now a series of concrete frames in dusty hues, outlined against the sky and surrounded by pools of undrained water. *Empty streets and piazzas, 15th-century ideal cities, after the celebrations, after the rain. Pittura metafisica. Antonioni.* A little rise, which curves around the cluster of buildings, terminates at an unplanned viewing platform. From up here a rift



'Anthills': Abandoned site of a cement sales company – an example of the type of views in Eleonas that become internalised.

between the foreground and background opens up, in bird's eye view, like in a Bruegel painting, so I begin to mentally populate the scene with hundreds of characters – perhaps from the nearby markets – labouring away in uncomfortable positions, remaining indifferent to one another's activities and concerns as days go by, seasons change and nature gradually reclaims the site. *Babel. Children's Games. Anthills.*

### *Like a Prayer / Contempt*

In the front yard of a sculptor-potter's workshop we find hundreds of clay replicas of ancient statues. I'm drawn to the ones that come in groups; some Pans and a dozen caryatids lined up as small armies – unintended visions of subdued individuality. The artist tells us that he once received an order (which was later cancelled) for more than a hundred statuettes for the parapets of a villa that Madonna, the pop star, wanted to build on a Greek island. The purported intention was that the whole villa would rotate throughout the day to otherworldly lighting effect, a.k.a. Ciccone dazzle. In the workshop's front yard there are also statues of ancient gods, as you'd expect, and filmed against the ash-blue sky their eyes look even more vacant than usual – which is perhaps the contrast that gave Godard the idea to airbrush them with light blue or ceramic-red hues in one of the rare instances of scrutiny that ancient Greek artefacts have endured on film.<sup>7</sup>

Athens, 14 March 2016

Dear Zoe,

When antiquity departed from Eleonas it left behind small clusters of fake jewels, cheap souvenirs scattered amid the sweatshops and the ruins.

Perhaps this is the legacy of the statues' empty stare: the story of a nation that, consumed by its ancient history, forgot its more recent past. There are many signs and symbols in Eleonas that point to antiquity: Iera Odos (The Sacred Way), to begin with, which in classical times connected Athens to the town of Eleusis in the west, and was the trail of the Eleusinian Mysteries, the preeminent rite in the ancient Greek world. Today it's a modern avenue that runs an almost identical course with its ancestor: it begins from Kerameikos, cuts through Eleonas and leads to the western suburbs. One night I notice a few miniature trains that take tourists on amusement rides around the Acropolis; they are being refueled here, at a gas station on Iera Odos – nowadays more infrastructure than venerable site – and then parked up at the back, where they reside.

Across the road, in a little recess edged with stone, stands Plato's Olive Tree (no recorded connection to Plato, though the tree is at least as old). Or *stood*, rather, up until the mid-1970s, when a bus drove right into it. The tree survived that impact too, and was transferred a few hundred metres down the road to the agriculture university for first aid and a second, sheltered life, while another olive tree was transplanted on the spot as a stand-in.

After the double of Plato's Olive Tree and some more 'Iera Odos' road signs, we find a façade of a packaging products manufacturer, with pediments on the three entrances, duly accessorised with volutes in gaudy colours, while the rest of the building is carried out in plain factory vernacular. Over time, I have developed some affection for these kitch jewels because they suit the present entropy of Eleonas. They are casually embedded in the landscape and speak to the constant migration of meanings, which is the broader narrative of my film and this essay.

### *Memories of land and swimming, labour and fruits*

Searching for the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we find an imposing two-storey farmhouse, set back from Orfeos Street and hidden from view by a surrounding wall. It dates back to that time when the olive trees in Eleonas gave way to vine crops, cabbage gardens and vineyards. We climb over the wall to look at the old ruin and imagine how it was to have land worked by others. *Muscat vineyards, sorrow-less life.*<sup>8</sup> There are no crops left now; a wild field covered in July-platinum hay surrounds the ruin. *Faenum. The land forgets too.* At the edge of the field someone has tied three horses. *If my neighbour is idle, incapable of cultivating his land, then I'm not sinning if I trespass on it.*<sup>9</sup> Nearby there is an empty trough, the size of a small room, built of large plinths. 'There were troughs in the crop fields, countless troughs, and windlass wells. In the troughs we learned how to swim, wearing trunks that our mothers made for us from sugar sacks.'<sup>10</sup>



Remains of a two-storey farmhouse that dates back to the early-twentieth or late-nineteenth century, when agriculture thrived in the area.

### *12 Knossos Street (Unsung, unmourned)*

Knossos Street doesn't look ancient, let alone Minoan; it is just another narrow, winding street in Eleonas that heavy-duty lorries regularly pass through. A couple of sheds with kilns for smelting batteries were built here in the 1970s, but never came to function, not as intended anyway. An old metallurgist who was brought in at the time to supervise the project now uses the site to smelt metals that he'd rather not name, because it's an illegal activity. He holds the last specialist degree of its kind from the national polytechnic university. He recounts laws banning the burning of various metals over the last half-century, and claims that these laws have always corresponded to the demands or oversaturation of the market, rather than to environmental sensibilities. He limps a bit but is eager to demonstrate how he pours the liquefied metal. He doesn't want to be filmed doing the real thing, so he just goes through the motions, shovelling air from an empty bucket and pouring it into an empty tray. No fiery matter, no names – everything is missing from this image.

Athens, 18 March 2016

Dear Zoe,

I saw Hephaestus today, at Knossos St. *Onto one flame, another.* He limps ever since his father tossed him from the sky and he crashed onto the island of Limnos. I peaked into his furnace – it has gone cold. *Onto one sorrow, another.*

We return a year later, and he's limping badly, he can no longer work by himself and is waiting for 'the kid' that helps him. Maybe the kid will show up later today; if not, then tomorrow. Another year goes by and we never see him again; whenever we happen by, the gate is locked and his car not there. I often

wonder what became of him, the last artificer to leave this land, whose face I once glanced at here, in Eleonas.

### The perpetual migration

The history of displacements of functions and services, the shifts in the identity of the place and the perennial deferrals of meaning would not follow the same course or have the same poignancy were it not for the migrations of people to Eleonas that have occurred over the past century.

The refugee camp in Eleonas is a grid of prefabricated human containers and the aisles or passageways between them – a spatial order laid over the temporal uncertainty in the life of its inhabitants. Looking down the aisles offers a respite from human traffic and visual information, and so the various



Typical passage between containers in the Eleonas refugee camp. The variation in these homogenous spaces is owed to the human element and to signs of inhabitation (the protruding hand of a man smoking out of the window, a washing line, discarded items, etc.).

histories of immigrants in Eleonas revisit me all at once, legible on everyday items like pushchairs, buckets and brooms, old suitcases, cheap boxes and shoes, which come into relief against the whiteness of the containers.

### *Exchangeables*

In the early 1920s a million-and-a-half Greeks fled from Turkey following the mutual atrocities between the two states, which culminated in a population exchange in 1923. Around 300,000 of refugees arrived in Athens and settled mostly on the western fringes of the city in places like Eleonas, uninhabited or severely underdeveloped. They became known as ‘the exchangeables,’ a name used by press and populace alike as debates over ‘what to do’ with them, where to accommodate them, etc. dominated the headlines in the following years and turned this into the most divisive socio-political issue of the time. Two dilapidated adobe-brick houses at either end of Orfeos Street recall that mass migration, which saw Eleonas demoted from an outskirt to a fringe where the city banishes the people and things it would rather not see.

‘I am a Turk,’ Mr Yiannis says to introduce himself. His native language is Greek; he’s in his late sixties and works in a warehouse overseeing lorry arrivals, loadings and departures. During the interwar period the dourest antipathy was directed towards Muslim Greeks who had been chased out of Turkey because of their Greek nationality, and were looked down upon in Greece because of their Muslim faith. They were referred to simply as ‘Turks,’ an identity label which they gradually adopted themselves, realising they would forever be outcasts in this society too. Mr Yiannis tells us that they organise their kin’s weddings in abandoned sheds in Eleonas – the last one took place two nights ago. They lay out tables and benches

brought from their homes and workplaces, eat and dance until late, then clean up and leave the place as they found it, even if it belongs to them and no one else is likely to set foot there.

Over the last three decades a steady migration of Kurdish people has taken place mainly from Iraq and, to a lesser extent, from Turkey. Kurds are today one of the most accepted minorities in Greek society, but this was not the case early on. Back in the 1980s only a small number sought asylum while most thought it safer to remain as unseen as possible.

We live here, ten Kurdish families. Thirty people. We are Muslims. We don't have water or electricity. Our children don't go to school. We're always afraid because we don't have permits. Some are scavengers, others work in construction sites, another works in a petrol station, some don't have work. We have good relationships with people, we have no complaints. We have Greek names too, to make things easier."

In the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s more than half a million Albanian economic migrants arrived in Greece, and smaller numbers from Romania, Bulgaria, Russia, Ukraine, Armenia and Georgia. These immigrants and their descendants are the workforce of the sweatshops, markets and transportation companies in Eleonas. The long-term exclusion of Eleonas from the official city plan has meant that the industrialisation of the area from the 1960s onwards went hand in hand with all kinds of self-licensing by business proprietors, and with the rampant exploitation of unregistered immigrants in particular.

A few hundred metres to the south of the refugee camp there's an enclave closed off on most sides, hidden from the streets around it and accessible only through a small path between buildings off Orfeos St. Here, a Roma community of

about four hundred members, half of them children, had lived for some time within half an acre of land, without water or electricity. Most of them were from Albania and were drawn to Eleonas because they could find work in the markets and scrapyards around and keep a low profile. Ironically, the headquarters of the Attica Foreigners Division, where immigrants have to register and get their papers, is just down the road, forming a geographical triangle with the refugee camp and the Roma camp. Even though a lot of the Roma kids give school a try, they usually drop out very early, either because they're needed for work by their families, or out of shame for not having clean clothes like the rest of the kids.

Over the last decade there had been many complaints by the residents and businesses of Eleonas about the Roma stripping cables from utility poles and then burning them to extract metal – a highly polluting activity. The owners of some local scrap yards were not only perpetuating this by buying the metal



A caravan parked up on an empty lot in spring 2014. A year later the Eleonas refugee camp was set up on the site, and some of the immigrants that lived there had to move elsewhere.

from the Roma and selling it on, but also often initiating it, by stripping and supplying the cables themselves and supplying them to the Roma. In the mid-2010s the government and local authorities ordered the evacuation of the site; some of its inhabitants were relocated to other camps to the east, others dispersed into the neighbouring areas.

### *Bare life*

The history of migration in Eleonas reaches the present with the current movement from Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East, via Turkey, to Aegean islands like Samos and Limnos. Some refugees are transported to Athens and end up in the Eleonas camp. From here they venture out into the city and then continue north to the rest of the continent. An inhabitant of the camp tells me that it took him ten attempts and two years to get here. He begins the story mid-journey, somewhere along the coast of Turkey:

They sent us to an olive grove near the sea and asked us to stay there until the morning. At six they brought the boat and told us to get in. We were seventy people, we had twenty-five or thirty children on the boat. After ten or fifteen minutes you can't see anything else – sky and water. The sea and the sky, nothing else.<sup>12</sup>

Such are the stories from the refugee camp. They begin in remote places where sovereign law and power cannot be exercised, and yet their consequences are strongly felt. They speak to Giorgio Agamben's concept of 'bare life' – biological life exposed to peril as a result of the politics of modern nation-states. Agamben's *Homo sacer* – a person included in the nation-state but only in the form of an exception – is embodied

by the modern refugee as inhabitant of the camp, a spatially defined zone.<sup>13</sup> The refugees in the Eleonas camp are, however, free to come and go at will; they remain here until they feel ready to continue their journey.

### *Merry Christmas Mr Agamben*

Every now and then someone comes out of a container; a man hangs out the laundry to dry, another one repairs a bike. Some do their morning exercise – often for lack of other pasttime activities, you sense. A few months later, while editing, I notice three boys who appear several times in the footage: early morning, roaming around the camp before anyone else is up, with an air of ownership, as if they're inspecting the place, looking to see what has changed, who has moved out, etc.; later, gathering at a corner and briefly conferring, as if exchanging reports on the last few hours, then dispersing again; in the afternoon, running down the aisles, visible in the distance for only a few seconds, before disappearing again behind the containers.

The lessons taking place in the camp school – a covered outdoor space that resembles a canteen, with painted walls and music always playing – are brief and perhaps less oppressive than in state school. Kids enjoy a certain freedom in the camp, but as in most places, this more often applies to boys than girls. A girl comes out of a container carrying a bucket, heading somewhere to fill it up. There is a poem by Pasolini in which adversity cannot subdue the sacred laughter of girls. Coincidentally, the poem is about Athens but, like when you walk through the refugee camp, Athens quickly becomes other places.

In the time of Athens  
the girls would laugh in the doorways of squat little houses  
all the same

(as in the poor quarters of Rio)  
houses along avenues filled, at the time,  
with the fragrance (you couldn't remember the name) of  
lindens.  
...  
It's wartime; and if the girls laugh, it's because they are holy.<sup>14</sup>

A red-hooded girl, five or six years old, wanders around purposelessly, hands in pockets; she looks into the camera for a few seconds, with unchanging expression, then dawdles on. It is Christmas Eve, and witnessing first-hand the everydayness in the refugee camp softens whatever thoughts I have after reading Agamben. There is calm and a sense of precious life being slowly reconstituted. Perhaps the camp is a live essay on the primordial instinct to systematise life so as to protect it, as events in the world outside become harder to influence or predict. The spatial arrangement does not narrate anything else in particular, and so its formal order does not obscure the inhabitants' tales of peril and perseverance. Still, these tales would remain fragments – a testimony from the Syrian guy in container xx, the story of the family living in xy, etc. – with no connection to one another if not for the kids, whose wanderings through the camp thread together people, spaces and events. Meanwhile, the kids' presence alone speaks to the hereditary problem of assimilation, and to our attitudes towards the marginal and the marginalised.<sup>15</sup>

### Epilogue: Easter in Eleonas

*Athens, 14 April 2017 (Good Friday)*

From the rooftop of an abandoned building the camera pans across tin roofs, antennas, cables and utility poles, factory shells

and construction yards – there are no olive trees left in Eleonas. A voice from a hundred years ago narrates:

Observe in the olive grove, which your position reveals as a big thicket; wherever there's a clearing, discern the olive trees, one by one. Each tree of Attica is of distinguished countenance.<sup>16</sup>

*Athens, 15 April 2017 (Holy Saturday)*

She came from the sunbaked end of the street, a woman in her fifties, carrying blocks of wood, chortling – 'And then they tell you that the man provides for the family.' She stayed for a while and talked to us about her son. The mothers of Eleonas are Balkan, Roma, Middle-Eastern, North African, Indian, Somali, Armenian, Eritrean, Kurdish, Anatolian. The mothers of Eleonas are Mediterranean, with dark hair and big dark eyes, descended from mountain villages, nurtured by islands,



One of the few remaining olive trees in Eleonas. Metal cutters' and some other small workshops were operating in this dead-end neighbourhood until recently, but they were eventually abandoned after repeated looting.



mothers of all the Athens past, mothers of this here Athens. There are cities lost inside them, waiting to be born.

It's Holy Saturday, and from the loudspeakers of the Agios Polykarpos Church the Vespers resound through the neighbourhoods of Eleonas – through the church's vineyard, the agricultural university and the Sacred Way to the north, the refugee camp and the valley with the dumped metals to the west. The land around the farmhouse has turned a lush green with scatters of poppies, daisies and chamomiles, and the horses have run loose ... we come across them at a traffic light nearby. A few cars and passers-by have come to a standstill and look on, wondering where these horses came from.

Dear Zoe,

We took a wrong turn and discovered another hidden neighbourhood, at a dead end behind the farmhouse field, with metal cutters' workshops and bamboos. And we saw olive trees for the first time, after three years in Eleonas.

*Olea Europaea sylvestris,*

*Bambusoideae,*

*Papaver rhoeas*

*Anthemis maritima* – FF

If the wrong turn brought us here, why should we always strive to stay on the right path?

*Athens, 16 April 2017 (Easter Sunday)*

In Eleonas there's a contiguity of human elements with nature, on sites that remind you of the urban peripheries in Pasolini's films: dusty streets in mid-afternoon, back yards with flower pots in supermarket trolleys, rooftops with climbers growing around satellite dishes, a small patch of land cordoned off with cassette tape that glints as it sways, perfect for a moment. The scenes you witness lend themselves to the kind of poetry

that sees the eternal in the gritty. It is evening, and immigrant children play football in an alley, next to orange trees and piled up rubbish that together give off that recognisable Mediterranean scent, both sacred and profane. At times these scenes take up writing the film themselves, away from my intentions, narrating how we live in a world that just is.

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#### Notes

- 1 Zoe E. Ropaitou-Tsapareli, *Ο Ελαιώνας της Αθήνας: Ο Χώρος και οι Ανθρωποι στο Πέρασμα του Χρόνου*. [Eleonas of Athens: The Space and the People with the Passage of Time.] (Athens: Philipotis, 2006), 136. Original excerpt from: Rania Kloutsinioti, 'Ο Ελαιώνας να γίνει ανάσα ζωής' [Make Eleonas a breath of life], *ANTI*, no. 377 (July 1988), 27–41. Author's translation.
- 2 Rahul Jain, *Machines* (India, Germany, Finland: Jann Pictures, Pallas Film, IV Films, 2016).
- 3 Leslie T. Chang, *Factory Girls: Voices from the Heart of Modern China* (London: Picador, 2009), 61.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Samuel Stevens, *Passage* (2007), accessed 21 November, 2019,

[www.samuelstevens.co.uk/films.html](http://www.samuelstevens.co.uk/films.html).

- 6 'Nomina si nescis, perit et cognitio rerum'. Karine Chemla, Renaud Chorlay and David Rabouin, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Generality in Mathematics and the Sciences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 264.
- 7 Jean-Luc Godard, *Le Mépris* [Contempt] (France/Italy: Rome Paris Films, Les Films Concordia, Compagnia Cinematografica Champion, 1963).
- 8 Alexandros Papadiamantis, *Αμαρτίας φάντασμα* [Ghost of sin] (1900) Εταιρεία Παπαδιαμαντικών Σπουδών [Papadiamantis Studies Organisation], accessed November 21, 2019, <http://papadiamantis.net>. Author's translation.
- 9 Ibid. Author's translation.
- 10 Ropaitou-Tsapareli, 210. Testimony by Pavlos Baltzoglou, resident of Eleonas. Author's translation.

- 11 Ibid., 322. Veli Rabi Asari, resident of Eleonas, c. 2006 (the precise date of the interview is unknown). Author's translation.
- 12 Unnamed informant in the Eleonas refugee camp, interview by author, Athens, 24 December, 2017.
- 13 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 4–8, 76–80.
- 14 Pier Paolo Pasolini, James Ivory and Stephen Sartarelli, *The Selected Poetry of Pier Paolo Pasolini. A Bilingual Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 392–4. From the poem 'Atene' [Athens] (1971).
- 15 Ektoras Arkomanis, 'Passage Variations: an elliptical History of Migration in Eleonas,' *Architecture and Culture* 7, no. 1 (2019), 109.
- 16 Periklis Giannopoulos, 'Ελληνική Γραμμή [Greek Line] (1900), accessed November 21, 2019, <https://pheidias.antibaro.gr/Giannopoulos/book-gramme.html>. Author's translation.

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# From Exile to Entropy: Notes on Protagonists and the Posthistorical

Sasha Litvintseva

1989 was the year history ended, allegedly. The notion of the posthistorical condition was proposed in the aftermath of the world political events of 1989, and perhaps we can indeed think of that year as a symbolic end, but not in the victory-of-capitalism sense that Francis Fukuyama intended it.<sup>1</sup> In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Bruno Latour points to the double significance of the year 1989: on the one hand it saw the fall of the Berlin Wall, and as such the beginning of the end of socialism; on the other hand it saw the first conferences on the global state of the planet, climate and environment, and as such the beginning of our awareness of the limits of progress.<sup>2</sup> 'The perfect symmetry between the dismantling of the wall of shame and the end of limitless Nature is invisible only to the rich Western democracies,' which, unlike the socialist states that 'destroyed both their peoples and their ecosystems,' have 'been able to save their peoples and some of their countrysides by destroying the rest of the world.'<sup>3</sup> History ended in 1989 in a geologically inspired sense, through which Robert Smithson