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'An Avenue that Looks Like Me': Re-presenting the Modern Cityscape

Betty Nigianni

Abstract

This article looks at the representation of an Athenian avenue as it appears in a contemporary Greek short story, in an attempt to trace the profile of the place as an ultimately modern space called into question, however, by transgressions. The story 'I Think That Syngrou Avenue Looks Like Me' by Manos Kontoleon describes the unique relationship developed between the writer and the high-speed avenue that connects the centre of Athens with its coastline: initiated by and experienced via an embodied approach to space, this relationship allows the writer to identify himself with a particular part of the city. The discussion of Kontoleon's portrayal of Syngrou Avenue focuses on the relationship between space and subjective experience, a relationship that has been a subject of investigation in modern European art and architectural theory over the past century. The paper specifically draws on psychoanalytic and phenomenological theories, which reflect this particular sensibility towards modern space, aiming in this way to contribute further to the discussion of European cityscapes and urban mindscapes.

Cities have always represented and projected images and fantasies of bodies, whether individual, collective, or political (Grosz 2001, 49).

Introduction: An avenue and a story about it

Picture 1

This essay is about a modern avenue and a short story written about it: the avenue, named Syngrou Avenue, is one of the main fast links between the centre of Athens and its coast, as well as the first to be constructed, in 1904. The story bears the title ‘I Think That Syngrou Avenue Looks Like Me’¹ and in short deals with the inextricable connection that is developed between the writer and the road, eventually forming a relationship that fuses the borders between space and the subject into an indispensable entity. Following his growing attachment to the place from his childhood years, through his youth and finally to maturity, contemporary Greek writer Manos Kontoleon unfolds an autobiographical narration through memories of the road, verses of poetry inspired by the avenue and descriptions of its contemporary state.² These diverse illustrations of the avenue all reflect, however, a similar attitude towards space that is oriented around the subject: from the beginning of the story, space is approached in an embodied way that becomes a non-visual, almost haptic experience; the writer goes on to investigate the relation between space and eroticism

¹ The story was written in 1999, under the Greek title ‘Nomizo pos he leoforos Syngrou mou moiazei’, and published in the same year in the collection of short stories *Athena, diadromes kai staseis*, edited by Michel Phaïs. All translations into English in the article are my own; I gratefully acknowledge the help of literary translators Iraklis Padopoulos and Katerina Sykioti.

² Kontoleon wrote this short story in response to being asked to write a piece about his experience of his home city, Athens (see Kontoleon 1999, 147).

by retrieving a sensual memory of the avenue; and ends up by portraying the modern avenue as a living body.

Bodies and cities

Picture 2

“‘Cities look like people” my father used to say and I listened to him and I thought I could believe him – my father himself looked like a whole city’ (Kontoleon 1999, 37). In the very first sentence, the writer opens a discussion about what is also mentioned in the title: his idea of a fundamental and essential relationship between urban space and its inhabitants. He goes on to describe his family’s physical features: he writes about his father’s ‘boldly curved eyebrows’ and ‘eyelids that added a sense of mystery to his look’, as well as his grandfather’s ‘fingers which had taken that yellow colour of tobacco’ and the ‘marks of an old illness’ that ‘scarred his nostrils’ (37); then he intermingles these features with the city: ‘Well – I used to wonder –, can a city be sometimes the eyelids that hide a mystery, sometimes the scars an old illness leaves on the nostrils (...)?’ (39)

This idea of an intertwinement between body-space and cityscape has been discussed by Elizabeth Grosz in her essay ‘Bodies-Cities’. For Grosz, there is a ‘constitutive and mutually defining’ relation between the body and the city (1992, 242) that escapes all ‘causal’ or ‘representational’ models: this is neither a purely external relation between the body and the city, nor a simple mirroring of the body in the built environment. Instead, it suggests that space correlates with the subject: rather than

being an empty receptacle, space is closely dependent on its ‘contents’, while the ways in which it is perceived and represented depend on the subject’s relation to those contents. As Kontoleon’s story develops, it becomes clear that this interconnection between spatiality and the embodied subject makes possible a dynamic, even transgressive being-in-space, confirming Grosz’s argument that ‘space makes possible different kinds of relations, but in turn it is transformed according to the subject’s affective and instrumental relations with it’ (Grosz 1995, 92); that is, the body is marked by the city, but the body in turn also shapes the city.

Exploring the city-box

Picture 5

The author narrates how he was introduced to that vital connection between the embodied subject and space while still very young. The first part of the story is dedicated to a detailed description of an early spatial experience, which involved the blind exploration of a wooden chest, filled with family belongings that were salvaged during the war:³

My mother would open – especially at nights with a full moon – an old wooden chest decorated with thin iron bars.

‘Look, look!’ she’d invite me, and I’d stick my whole face into a wooden tip filled with foxed books, colourful flowers made of starched fabric, hats in strange

³ I refer here to the Greek-Turkish war in Minor Asia in 1912. After the defeat of the Greek army, the Greek population was forced to abandon the area and seek refuge in Greece.

shapes, dresses in bright colours and then I'd stretch out my hands trying to reach the bottom (...)

Gently, softly, my hands were fumbling and trying out touches and shapes, till they'd reach that circular object, the one wrapped up in a cotton cloth (...)
(Kontoleon 1999, 38).

The young child is engaged in a tactile search through the space of the timber box in order to find his way to the special souvenir, a stone from one of the roads of his mother's abandoned home city – an object to which she would refer as 'her country' (Kontoleon 1999, 38). Space is therefore approached through an embodied subjectivity that operates in a twofold way: as a bodily practice, through a partial disabling of vision and the prioritisation of other senses; and as a practice of the imagination, since the chest refers symbolically to the lost city. For Gaston Bachelard, that is actually the only way to approach the 'intimate dimension'. In *The Poetics of Space*, he discusses the experience of intimate places, demonstrating how the feeling of 'intimacy' is related to certain domestic spaces that also function as places to 'hide', to 'shelter' memory, such as the drawer, the chest or the wardrobe.⁴ Most importantly, those spaces can only be experienced through an embodied imagination: 'I alone, in my memories of another century, can open the deep cupboard that still retains for me alone that unique odor, the odor of raisins drying on a wicker tray' (Bachelard 1994, 13). The idea of experiencing space not as architectural, geometrical, but rather as dreamed, imagined or remembered, based however on tactile spatial experience, is interestingly not limited to domestic spaces (see Casey 1997, 291); for Bachelard, any space can be inhabited as 'intimately' as a house: '(...) every inch of secluded space in which we like to hide, or withdraw into ourselves' can

be ‘a symbol of solitude for the imagination (...) the germ of a room, or of a house’ (Bachelard 1994, 136). Accordingly, in our story, the writer will soon discover that his experience of navigating through the space of the city is surprisingly similar to the one of searching through his mother’s wooden box of memorabilia: ‘The city *I* wanted to be like, would have – I imagined – all the small corners where we stash away our toys, all the small terraces from where we can gaze far off towards our dreams, all these hidden alleys that carry the smell of our loved ones’ (Kontoleon 1999, 41). Syngrou Avenue becomes just such a ‘corner’, a shelter for memory and imagination.

Picture 3

After the initial descriptions of his early spatial experiences, the author goes on to recall the eventful discovery of his favourite avenue during one of his investigative journeys out in the city as a young boy:

The day would come then, when I’d discover and love Syngrou Avenue, this long and straight road which headed to the sea. (...).

When was it that I first thought I had the desire – and the ability – to be like it?

It must have been in those years when I would quiver at the sight of a naked female arm and my whole body was convinced that it was carrying inside it a victorious army commander. The boy was becoming a man, and sitting at a table out on the street, surrounded by flowerbeds, little ponds and ducks, the elegant lady was sipping her ice cream soda, leaving on the white straw the mark of her red lips (Kontoleon 1999, 42).

⁴ In the chapter devoted to ‘Drawers, chests and wardrobes’, Bachelard writes: “‘We shall never reach the bottom of the casket’”. The infinite quality of the intimate dimension could not be better expressed’

Spatial apprehension is sketched once more primarily as an experience of the body and of the imagination: the writer's sexual awakening coincides with his introduction to the road. Moreover, a certain incident charged with eroticism will trigger off his feelings of attachment to the place and further initiate his decision to identify with it:

(...) – that same woman led me to the big hall, through huge automobiles, full of shining nickel and perfectly round lights and bumpers.

I asked to know the name of that road in front of the big hall, the one full of cars. A straight, wide road it was, and no matter how much I stretched and stretched, I couldn't see its end.

'Tell me, how's this road called?'

'Syngrou Avenue', the lady with the red lips smiled and bent over me. 'Do you know where it leads to?'

My eyes started their journey at the dimple of her neck, jumped over the shiny obstacle of a little cross and tried to follow the line which seemed to separate her two breasts.

'To the sea!' and her arm stretched out over the beautiful bright blue of a car and pointed to one direction (...). Under her short sleeve, the colour of her armpit peeked through, a timid pink.

'Break Ariadne's thread and look!

The blue body of the mermaid'.

I shivered.

Syngrou Avenue – just like my gaze – started mere steps from where I was standing and disappeared towards some unknown beach.

And so I thought – no, I decided – that *this* was the road I should be like (Kontoleon 1999, 42-43).

The phenomenological privileging of an embodied experience of space also relates to the idea of a particular ability of the body to get us 'back into place' (Casey 1997, 291), to localise us 'in the spaces of our intimacy' that allows further for 'a

(1994, 86).

knowledge of intimacy’ (Bachelard 1994, 9). For Bachelard, that operation turns architectural space itself into a body; the ‘house’ one takes shelter in becomes bodylike: ‘(...) the house’s virtues of protection and resistance are transposed into human virtues. The house acquires the physical and moral energy of a human body. It braces itself to receive the downpour, it girds its loins’ (46). Similarly, to revisit an inhabited room, in reality or in memory, is to return to an organic part of a body: the room “clings” to its inhabitant and becomes the cell of a body with its walls close together’ (46). It is not surprising, then, that Kontoleon’s subjective appropriation of Syngrou Avenue leads to its being experienced as a body.

‘Double’ avenue

The avenue is approached as a body for the rest – and largest part – of the story, which is mainly preoccupied with the tracing of its contemporary profile. The writer describes it as a living organism that has grown along with him: ‘As I was changing, the avenue was changing’ (Kontoleon 1999, 43); and that has ended up incorporating and reflecting its inhabitants’ – and his own – ‘double’ existence: predominantly an office area during the day, Syngrou Avenue is also an entertainment place at night, well-known for its lap-dancing bars and the prostitution that takes place along its side streets:

During the day, the road dons the suit of an entirely respectable business and locks itself up in air-conditioned offices or shines behind squeaky-clean shop-windows.

It exchanges money, sells tickets – the smell of lager but a distant memory for now –, it advertises cars and, as the trees shed a useless shadow, faceless tourists cannot decide on whether or not they should use their cameras. Syngrou Avenue has nothing worth seeing to offer them (...).

Ah, how right I was – I say to myself – on my choice of the road that looks like me. Everything this road does, I do too (...). And I do it eagerly and with conviction.

But alas, the night always returns. And with it, so does my guilt (...).

The avenue is not fond of bright lights. A couple of distant neon lamps along with the headlights of the cars whizzing by are all it needs. Nevertheless, every now and then, the passer-by will come across the big bright billboards of the live-music venues (...) (Kontoleon 1999, 45).

Picture 6

The avenue is represented as a commercialised, banal modern space, where nothing is worth seeing and photographing. Nevertheless, it has another hidden side related to the body and its pleasures: a repressed spatial ‘other’, an ‘unconscious’ part, not quite visible during the day, but inseparable from and dependent on the morning routine. Dominant discourses on modern space have relied on the notion of the separation of the mind from the body (see Longhurst 1995, 97-98).⁵ Psychoanalysis has constituted an exception to these discourses, playing a major role in conceiving and representing space as inseparable from the embodied subject (see Grosz 1995, 85).⁶ Freud’s

⁵ In her essay ‘The Body and Geography’, Robyn Longhurst notes that social sciences were developed in the nineteenth century according to the dominant conception of the separation of the mind from the body. About the science of geography in particular, Kristin Ross has further argued: ‘Its object of study is “landscape”, which is constituted under “natural”, non-historical conditions that bear nothing of the social and economic contradictions that contribute to the formation of space’ (Ross 1993, 360).

⁶ By considering the sexual drives and erotogenic zones of the body as ‘instrumental in the formation of the ego and the positioning of the subject in the structure of society and the family as a whole’, psychoanalysis recognised the body as a spatio-temporal being (Grosz 1995, 85).

investigation of the role of the body in the formation of the ego⁷ and his understanding of the psyche as having a spatial dimension⁸ have been very influential in this respect. Bachelard's suggestion of a 'topoanalysis' in accordance with psychoanalysis draws on a conception of place as 'psychic': as not only and necessarily physical, but as a 'surface' on which images with a localising quality appear.⁹ Topoanalysis, therefore, would look for the 'placial properties' of certain images (Casey 1997, 288) – such as the house – and their role in our inhabiting the world: objective and subjective reality merge to create a spatiality of 'intimacy'.¹⁰

Modern Greek literature has demonstrated a particular sensibility towards the relation between urban space and subjectivity,¹¹ which has often been translated into the image of the modern city as body. Athens is persistently represented as 'a living organism, an erotic body', which interacts with the sensibilities of its writers (Papageorgiou 2000, 525). Kontoleon refers to that tradition by repeatedly quoting the poet George Seferis in his story about Syngrou Avenue. Seferis belonged to the so-called literary 'generation of the 30s', largely influenced by symbolism, surrealism and psychoanalysis,¹² and has referred to the avenue as a place with a latent eroticism on a number of occasions. In 'A Word for Summer', he describes the avenue as an

⁷ Freud argued in 1923 that 'the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego', adding four years later that 'the ego is ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly those springing from the surface of the body. It may thus be regarded as a mental projection of the surface of the body' (Grosz 1995, 85).

⁸ In 1938, Freud wrote as a note: 'Space may be the projection of the extension of the psychical apparatus. No other derivation is probable. Instead of Kant's *a priori* determinants of our psychical apparatus, psyche is extended; knows nothing about it' (2001, 300). In the posthumously published *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, Freud further adopts 'the hypothesis (...) of a psychical apparatus extended in space, expediently put together, developed by the exigencies of life' (2001, 196).

⁹ Located in a philosophical tradition that draws on Aristotle's concept of place as 'surface', Bachelard's definition however moves away from the Aristotelian sense-bound notion of place (as a container and as sensible). Instead, Bachelard draws on Freud and Jung to suggest that the soul is a place or set of places, in this way also opposing Descartes, who recognised no psychic spatiality (see Casey 1997, 287-88).

¹⁰ Bachelard calls topoanalysis 'the systematic psychological study of the localities of our intimate lives' (1994, 8).

¹¹ Greek literary production from the 1920s on – after the early writings influenced by romanticism and neo-realism – has been largely inspired by the phenomenon of urbanism, which was represented

escape from the urban labyrinth to the sea, symbolically associated with sexual pleasure (see Koliva 1985, 198): ‘And yet I used to love Syngrou Avenue/ the double rise and fall of the great road/bringing us out miraculously to the sea/the eternal sea, to cleanse us of our sins’ (Seferis 1995, 89). Similarly in ‘Syngrou Avenue, 1930’, ‘when you let your heart and your thought become/one/with the blackish river that stretches, stiffens and/goes away:/Break Ariadne’s thread and look!/The blue body of the mermaid’ (Seferis 1995, 41).¹³

Seferis’ depictions of the road as an indifferent modern space with a sexual quality becomes more significant when viewed in the broader framework of the modernisation of Athens that took place between the 1930s and the 1950s¹⁴ and was welcomed in the literary production of that period (see Papageorgiou 2000, 517-19). Literature is consequently filled with references to the ultimate modern space, the avenue. Philologist Vasiliki Koliva comments: ‘The avenues play a major role in the novels of that period’, and ‘they indicate passage, transition, wanderings related to a psychological trial’, as well as ‘a wish to escape’ (Koliva 1985, 198). In that context, Syngrou Avenue is celebrated as the embodiment of modernity: the ‘straight road, direct and unswerving’ (Kontoleon 1999, 46) becomes a powerful poetic image, symbol of the modern pleasures of the car and of speed;¹⁵ its heading towards the sea

through subjective narratives following the technique of the ‘stream of consciousness’ (as employed by James Joyce and Virginia Woolf) (see Vitti 1978, 387-89).

¹² Along with poets Andreas Empeirikos and Odysseus Elytis; for more on this see Vitti 1978, 393-411.

¹³ Both these poems are quoted by Kontoleon in his story.

¹⁴ This was a period of most intense urbanisation in Greece, after a number of world-shaking historical events had taken place (the Balkan Wars, the Asia Minor expedition and disaster, World War I), with a subsequent influx of refugees to the country. There was also a parallel increase in the number of internal immigrants heading to the capital. From then on it became obvious that Athens would never be the city-symbol that the neo-romantics of the nineteenth century dreamt of; instead, it is fast growing into a modern fragmented city, expanding chaotically in all directions (see Papageorgiou 2000, 517-19).

¹⁵ Celebrating the ‘concept of the modern element of culture’, novelist George Theotokas wrote about Syngrou Avenue: ‘Day and night Syngrou Avenue flows toward the coast of Phalero, carrying along the newborn and as yet unexpressed rhythms of a strong lyricism looking for strong poets’; Seferis would later on subtitle his own poem about the avenue ‘To George Theotokas, who discovered it’ (in Papageorgiou 2000, 519-21).

only comes to reinforce the associations with masculinity and sexuality that these pleasures have:

So, out of a whole city, I chose one road. The straightest, the longest, the dullest, least remarkable one. But nonetheless favoured by the stunning cars; one bold enough to fall into the sea's embrace! Into the blue body of a mermaid! I chose a man's road (...) (Kontoleon 1999, 43).

Henri Lefebvre's critique of modern space as 'abstract' and 'phallogentric' also draws repeatedly on a psychoanalytical framework.¹⁶ In 'The Production of Space', Lefebvre employs Lacan's theory of the mirror-stage – which deals with how corporeality and spatiality are related to the formation of identity¹⁷ – in order to describe the formation of modern space through processes of visualisation and decorporealisation (see Gregory 1997, 220). Lefebvre discusses modern space as a collective Lacanian mirror, a space not unlike Lewis Carroll's 'looking-glass', through which the subject, deprived of its traditional conjunction with the body, 'passes (...) and becomes a lived abstraction' (1991, 313-14): a mere 'sign', its mirror reflection.¹⁸ For Lefebvre, the 'abstract' space of modernity takes the form of a homogeneous, controlling entity that works by relegating the body, more specifically the sexual body, and celebrates in its place the 'phallus', the abstract symbol of power

¹⁶ Lefebvre actually uses the term 'psychoanalysis of space' (1991, 99).

¹⁷ As presented in Lacan's famous essay '*Le Stade du Miroir*' (translated into English as 'The mirror stage', included in *Écrits: a Selection*). Michel de Certeau describes the Lacanian mirror-stage as 'the "joyful activity" of the child who, standing before a mirror, sees itself as *one* (...) but *another*, what counts is the process of this "spatial captation" that inscribes the passage toward the other as the law of being and the law of place' (1984, 109-10).

¹⁸ Lefebvre writes: 'So what escape can there be from a space thus shattered into images, into signs, into connected-yet-disconnected data directed at a "subject" itself doomed to abstraction? For space offers itself like a mirror to the thinking "subject", but, after the manner of Lewis Carroll, the "subject" passes through the looking glass and becomes a lived abstraction' (1991, 313-14).

and masculinity.¹⁹ Phallogentrism is present in various qualities of modern space, for example in the dominance of vertical spatialisation or in the constant expansion of the scale of things that reinforces the visualisation of space. However, Lefebvre is particularly interested in its controlling operation through the use of ‘walls, enclosures, and façades’ in order to ‘define both a *scene* (where something takes place) and an *obscene* area to which everything that cannot or may not happen on the scene is relegated’ (39). On the level of the city then, ‘duplicity’ becomes a fundamental characteristic of modern urban space that, by embracing some things and excluding others, creates an ‘underground life’ in the city, a kind of inseparable ‘unconscious’ that comes back to haunt it.²⁰ In Kontoleon’s own words:

Its bustling activity in the morning creates the conditions that will, come the night, create the need to live it up and revel till dawn.

In other words – at night the road gives back all the dirt the day has thrown at it (Kontoleon 1999, 45).

Picture 7

An avenue that looks like me

The city’s spatial ‘double’ is, however, controlled and placed under surveillance in modern urban planning through the practice of ‘zoning’, the drawing of absolute boundaries between apparently contrasting uses (e.g. work-related and residential

¹⁹ Lefebvre argues that although abstract space presents desire ‘with a ‘transparency’ which encourages it to surge forth’, in the homogenising space of abstraction ‘desire encounters no object, nothing desirable, and no work results from its action’ (1991, 97). The void is filled by the ‘phallus’ and its heavy load of myth, rendering abstract space apart from a ‘representation of space (geometric homogeneity)’, a ‘representational space (the phallic)’, as well, apart from ‘an arena of practical action’, also ‘an ensemble of images, signs and symbols’ (288).

activities, or cultural and commercial activities). In this way, ‘stratified’ places are produced: particular places are specially designated for pleasure and sexuality, like holiday resorts or villages devoted to leisure (Lefebvre 1991, 310). As Lefebvre writes, the ‘phallus’ is isolated, ‘projected into a realm outside the body then (...) fixed in (...) space and brought (...) under the surveillance of the eye’ (310). Kontoleon recognises this phenomenon when he writes:

Squares signal freedom.

Avenues aim at success.

Commercial streets offer comfort.

Some neighbourhoods cover the need for love. Others lead you to the heights of social success (Kontoleon 1999, 41).

Syngrou Avenue appears to have many ‘faces’, however: ‘Besides, Syngrou Avenue always knows how to change faces. It taught me to do the same’, Kontoleon writes (44), and later:

But, before revealing to me the secret sins of love, it rewarded me with the sight of a church built of brown stone, and of three or four small houses snugly perched amid those cliffs that had been – as if by mistake – planted in the middle of the valley, rather than on a beach, and left to keep company, not to sea-gulls and fishing boats, but to sparrows and green buses (44).

The avenue is therefore represented as if transcending all the rules of abstraction: in the story, we watch the apparently ‘masculine’, abstract environment of high-rise office buildings and high-speed cars of the day coexist with the sensory-sensual space of the night in an almost organic entity; moreover, it is a multi-layered environment that

²⁰ ‘Every society and particularly the city, has an underground and repressed life, and hence an

allows for the interpenetrating of different uses, in this way escaping ‘zoning’. From a readable environment as the ‘straight and very wide’ road that was designed to channel traffic from the city to its port and coastline (Biris 1999, 189), subject to the survey of the planner’s eye – and to the writer’s male gaze of his childhood – the avenue becomes a truly permeable environment that allows its ‘juxtapositions’, its ‘proximities’ and ‘emotional distances and limits’ (Lefebvre 1991, 288) to show through.

Syngrou Avenue appears therefore to possess a certain ‘permeability’, which first embraces, and then transgresses, modern ‘duplicity’, transforming the place into a layered environment of dislocated objects. ‘Permeability’ as a condition of the modern city has been discussed extensively. Within the framework of psychoanalysis, Freud was the first to compare the layered structure of the psyche with the reality of a city. Using Rome as an example, he argued that just as the traces of ancient Rome lying under the ground of the contemporary city are also to be found on the surface of the city, so too childhood experiences are never eradicated, but instead regularly erupt in the present (see Pile 1996, 241). Postmodern urban theory has drawn on the analogy between the spaces of the urban and the spaces of the mind. Its description of the city as ‘permeable’ reflects a political awareness of the mechanisms of the ever-competing ‘conscious, preconscious, unconscious; with shifting, positioning and fighting between them in a struggle for control and expression’ (Pile 1996, 243), and a view of history as a ‘palimpsest’, in sociologist Michel de Certeau’s sense²¹:

“unconscious” of its own’ (Lefebvre 1991, 36).

²¹ De Certeau, historian and member of the Freudian school of Paris, writes about place: ‘The village, the neighbourhood, the block are moreover not the only things that make the fragments of heterogeneous strata function together (...). It would be more appropriate to appeal to the oneiric (but theoretical because it articulates practice) model evoked by Freud in discussing the city of Rome, whose epochs all survive in the same place, intact and mutually interacting’ (1984, 202).

This place, on its surface, seems to be a collage. In reality, in its depth it is ubiquitous. A piling up of heterogeneous places. Each one, like a deteriorating page of a book, refers to a different mode of territorial unity, of socio-economic distribution, of political conflicts and of identifying symbolism (de Certeau 1984, 201-02).

The artist and cultural theorist Victor Burgin takes the discussion further by comparing the city's spatial order to a biological organism. Commenting on Lefebvre, Burgin has argued that “the panoptical-instrumental space of colonialist capitalist modernity” has always been fissured and called into question by transgressions’ (in Gregory 1997, 228); that happens because space is endowed with a certain ‘porous’ quality, similar to that of the structure of a living organism ‘punctured by pores and orifices’.²² Therefore any attempt to draw ‘closures’, to delimit and isolate space, is destined to fail (see Burgin 1996, 147). The political implications are significant: ‘porosity’ allows for the existence of ‘interruptions’ and ‘dislocations’ that display the superimposition of past spatial formations on modern space, and thus reconstitute it as a discursive production.

A further point of interest is that ‘porosity’ extends from the macro-level of the built environment to the micro-level of the body. As described in Kontoleon’s short story, the body is reconstituted in space through the identification of the subject with the avenue: going through the ‘looking-glass’, the author does not merely find the sign of himself or of his favourite place, but an intertwinement between a palpable sexual space

²² A term borrowed from Walter Benjamin, who used it in order to describe precapitalist Naples (see Benjamin 1986). Burgin discusses Benjamin’s ‘porosity’, paying particular attention to the Lefebvrian discussion of space as an extension of the body; he writes, quoting Lefebvre, that ‘space is “first of all my body, and then it is my body counterpart or ‘other’, its mirror-image or shadow: it is the shifting intersection between that which touches, penetrates, threatens or benefits my body on the one hand, and all other bodies on the other”’ (Burgin 1996, 151).

and his own body rhythms. In reality, Syngrou Avenue is famous for the transvestite prostitution that has gradually come to dominate one side of it and the area closest to the coast.²³ That transgression of the ‘phallus’, which happens simultaneously on the intimate level of the body and on the wider socio-political level of the city, is revealing. Firstly, it demonstrates the fluidity between cities and bodies and the two-way interaction between them: it exemplifies, in Grosz’s terms, the notion that ‘neither the body nor its environment can be assumed to form an organically unified ecosystem’, but ‘rather produce each other as forms of the hyperreal’ (Grosz 1992, 242). Secondly, it identifies that condition with a subversive being-in-space: Syngrou Avenue interacts with the erotic body, as depicted in the story, not only to produce desire, but also to generate bodies, which, in architectural historian Iain Borden’s words, ‘have a dynamic operation in the city’ in terms of the ‘production of meanings, subjects, relations, uses and desires’ (Borden 2001, 12). The body-space relation, then, is restored through transgressions of the non-sensual space of abstraction, only to become a site for more transgressions on the social and political terrain.

Bachelard’s ‘topoanalysis’ also recognises a certain fluidity between ‘in’ and ‘out’, ‘an osmosis between intimate and undetermined space’ (Bachelard 1994, 230). That ‘osmosis’ is revealed when ‘inside and outside are not abandoned to their geometrical opposition’ (230), which is something only topoanalysts and poets would do. Bachelard’s ‘intimate’ space, in the sense of inhabited, dwelled-in space, is necessarily space ‘read’: ‘It therefore makes sense (...) to say that we “write a room”, “read a room”, or “read a house”’ (14). Echoing Bachelard, de Certeau condemns the ‘logic of techno-structures’ that attempt to deprive urban spaces of the stories and legends that haunt them; since the city is truly ‘habitable’ when appropriated through

²³ For more on transvestitism and Syngrou Avenue, see Kostas Taktis’ autobiographical book *To Fovero Vima*.

subjective narratives, when it is ‘marked by a memory or a story, signed by something or someone (...)’, the annihilation of narrativisation only turns the city into a ‘suspended symbolic order’ (de Certeau 1984, 106), a total abstraction. In the case of Syngrou Avenue, Kontoleon’s representation of urban space marked by a personal story annuls the planners’ dehumanised cityscapes. The writer fulfills Bachelard’s wish for poetry ‘to give us back the situations of our dreams’ and to provide us with ‘resting-place(s) for daydreaming’ (Bachelard 1994, 15); he re-presents the modern cityscape as a Bachelardian place for daydreaming, revealing in this way within the planned city another ‘metaphorical’ city, like the one Kandinsky had imagined: ‘a great city built according to all the rules of architecture and then suddenly shaken by a force that defies all calculation’ (de Certeau 1984, 110).²⁴

Conclusion

Lefebvre saw the spatial restoration of the body and its sexuality as the only way out of the violence of abstraction and towards the reestablishment of modern space as social space. He dreamt of a ‘diversification of space’ that would create ‘fixed, semi-fixed, movable or vacant’ appropriated places, which would not obey the functional distinctions of abstract space, and in which the body and its pleasures would be restored making room for a ‘mobilisation of “private” life’ (Lefebvre 1991, 363). In this article, I have attempted to show that psychoanalytic theories, which deal with the relation between the subject’s internal world and the external world of ‘objects’, may have a lot

²⁴ Quoted from Kandinsky’s book *Du Spirituel dans l’Art* (published in French in 1969), in which he traces all spatial experience back to a primordial childhood experience of space conceived mainly in psychoanalytic terms.

to contribute to the subject of how these ‘places’ could be produced;²⁵ furthermore, that literary narratives can also play an active role in this production. From that perspective, I would like to suggest that Kontoleon’s representation of Syngrou Avenue comes close to the Lefebvrian dream as it reconstructs the place through the narration of an erotic event in which any distinctions between the body and the city dissolve. In the short story ‘I think that Syngrou Avenue looks like me’, the reader is presented with a space that uncannily ‘is like me. And it is like you too’ (Kontoleon 1999, 46), and so (re-)presented with a transgressive space where anything is possible:

I did very well – I congratulate myself – to decide to identify with Syngrou Avenue. An avenue that digests everything and can be blamed for nothing. An avenue like that doesn’t need to prove its identity. It is what it is: self-sufficient and alone – a road with very few side-streets (...). Syngrou is a road that accepts things as they are. And it contains all sorts of things (46).

Picture 4

²⁵ I mainly refer here to theories of incorporation and identification, as discussed first by Freud (in *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, he writes: ‘A portion of the external world has, at least partially, been abandoned as an object and has instead by identification, been taken into the ego and thus become an integral part of the internal world’ (Freud 2001, 205)); and then later by Lacan. Burgin has observed that ‘insofar as they apply to considerations of space, they are as yet little developed within the field of psychoanalysis itself’ (1996, 151), but Pile has further suggested their application to urban politics, in order to describe ‘the power-laden “dialectics” which graduate the subject, the spatial and the social’ (1996, 243-44).

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