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**Title:** The disappearing immigrants: hunger strike and invisible struggles.

**Details:**

**Abstract**

This article invites readers to consider an act of civil resistance as a performative one. A large scale hunger strike conducted by 300 immigrants in central Athens in early 2011 became a catalyst for Greek conversations about civil society. In particular, the strike offered supporters the opportunity to engage more widely with debates on immigration and human rights across Europe, alongside reading the virulent effects of the economic crisis in financial capital terms and resulting neo-liberal backlashes. The authors employ a performative frame; initially the context of Athens is explored as the stage primed for a performance. Secondly, the value of the Law School as site for the hunger strike is considered, with specific reference to Lefebvre's spatial resistance. The hunger strike itself is analysed as a 'performance of resistance', and as a spectacle. The audience is considered a witness to the act, reflecting their moral imperative to react to the 'performance'. Finally, the wider social, political and cultural implications of such a hunger strike are considered. Throughout, we are concerned with the invisible bodies of the hunger strikers, particularly regarding how their struggle is represented or appropriated.

As a whole, the paper offers an analysis of one particularly rich performance of resistance; situated within a wider current milieu of civic resistance in the Middle East and a growing mobilisation of populaces opposing restrictive capitalist systems of governance that erode public confidence.

**Keywords**

Hunger Strike  
Immigration  
Greece  
Resistance  
Performance

**The disappearing immigrants: hunger strike and invisible struggles**

This article follows a dialogic approach in an attempt to build bridges between different academic disciplines and actually existing social performances. A social scientist and an applied theatre practitioner adopt a theory of 'performativity' which explores the productive capacities of performances as *kinesis*, a movement that represents the energies that break political boundaries and trouble social closures. In doing so, we follow Victor Turner's interpretation of cultural performances as

not simple reflectors or expressions of culture or even of changing culture but may themselves be active agencies of change, representing the eye by which culture sees itself and the drawing board on which creative actors sketch out what they believe to be more apt or interesting 'designs for living' (1986: 24).

In other words, the term 'performance' refers to actions that incessantly insinuate, interrupt, interrogate and antagonise powerful master narratives. In this line of thought, the social world becomes the theatrical stage of everyday encounters as cultural performances which transcend social, political and, ultimately, academic boundaries. Primarily, we are concerned with how the strategy of engaging with invisible bodies and performative resistances can unpack hierarchies of representation. The article focuses on a specific resistant act which can be read as a performance; dealing with the narratives that provide the act with its socio-political context, as well as the categories of audience witnessing of the act.

The article analyses a large-scale hunger strike act, performed by 300 immigrants and staged in the Law School building in Athens. In order to unpack the complexities of such a performance, we critically reflect on our own position as occupying overlapping roles as witnesses, audience, researchers, artists and social scientists. We engage with Turner's 'emphatic view of performance as making not faking', and then we move to 'Bhabha's politically urgent view of performance as breaking and remaking' (Conquergood, 1995: 138).

The starting point of our analysis is the socio-political context in Athens which prepares the stage for that performance. We then move to the actual stage of the Law School building in order to critically reflect on the 'academic asylum' state and the multiple meanings of being in a space always already inscribed by powerful social memories. We draw on Henri Lefebvre's work on the social production of space and the power of remapping. To remap means to engage into a compelling negotiation of space, stereotypes, feelings and practices such as inclusion, recognition and openness. Next, we examine hunger strike as a means of practising resistance and as a spectacle. We refer to the importance of the image in our postmodern societies to evoke genuine human reactions, analysing the performance from the audience's perspective (knowingly including several images to underscore this point). Meanwhile we remain critical on issues of participation and representation in grassroots resistance movements. Finally, we discuss what a possible end could be and the wider social, political and cultural implications of such a performance.

### **Preparing the stage: alienation in the Athenian landscape**

The ethnic self in Athens is perceived through a feeling of superiority, which is the result of ancient Greek heritage. The constitution of solid nationalist identities has involved a procedure of homogenisation, namely, the purging of vibrant Eastern elements that were remnant of Ottoman rule which ended in 1834. Modern Greek identity is based on the assumption that 'the Greeks are the distinctive heirs of the ancient Greek civilisation' (Papataxiarhis, 1998: 3). Considering Greece's history of occupation, it may come as no surprise that the main interpretation of national identity has an obvious xenophobic shade and brings forth a rather defensive definition of Greekness, which seeks to 'establish identity not on the affirmation of "us", but on the rejection of the "other", leading to an effort to retain its integrity through isolation and ethnocentrism' (Tsaousis 1998: 19).

Traditionally a nation of the diaspora and of emigrants, for the first time in the mid-1990s Greece received considerable number of immigrants. For Greece, and for many other European countries, the 90s was undoubtedly a decade of intense alterations caused by the fall of the Berlin Wall, the proliferation of globalisation, the constitutional and institutional deepening of the European Union and, last but not least, the violent burst of Balkan nationalism. From a country of emigration Greece suddenly transformed, experiencing unprecedented immigration, facing a spectacular growth in foreign population. Its geographical position borders the European Union with the Balkans, Asia

and Africa with 92 per cent of the borders coastline, making it extremely difficult to have a secure border control system. These factors made Greece the ideal 'gate of entrance', for some legal but mostly 'illegal' immigrants<sup>1</sup>, into Europe (Papataxiarhis, 1998). It is currently impossible to gather accurate data on immigration, with the next in depth study from the National Statistics Office to be released in 2012. However, estimates by NGOs and migration experts have suggested that immigrant numbers have swelled to 1.5 million. The migration phenomenon in Greece is described as 'statistically invisible' due to the high percentage of undocumented immigrants (Papataxiarhis, 2006: 45).

Countries like Greece which depend on homogeneity and connect citizenship with the broader idea of the nation usually adopt hegemonic models of integration. According to such logic, new citizens should follow the pre-existing cultural performances in order to be accepted as members of the society in question. As a result, the Other is usually experienced as 'culturally inferior' and is, therefore marginalised. The marginalisation is happening on many levels: up until recently on the institutional level the answer to undocumented immigration was the implementation of repressive policies resulting to daily incidents of police violence.

In essence, Greece had no institutional or societal compasses to navigate through the unprecedented influx of migrants of the mid 1990s. A characteristic example is the validity of the same immigration law for more than 60 years.<sup>2</sup> Under pressure from the European Union, immigrant communities and NGOs, Greece recently adopted policies more 'friendly' towards new comers. Yet, it is very difficult to change the existing bureaucratic structures without deep reformation measures. Today, 15 years after the first massive immigration wave, it becomes obvious that there were no coherent, long-term policy plans which would lead to integration and assimilation. On the contrary, there were only spasmodic measures against human trafficking on the borders, arid discussions on the issue of legalisation and degrading conditions of contestation camps (Koromilas, 2009).

Moreover, new legislation policies failed to open up a platform for dialogue and negotiation between newly arrived people and structures of Greek civil society. Immigrants remain invisible as the government shows narrow recognition of difference and perpetuates the 'us' and 'them' dichotomy. At the same time scapegoating immigrants is a common feature in the mass media. The result is that immigrants are ghettoised, isolated and shunned for perpetuating what Greeks perceive as markers of poverty: criminality and urban decay which creates a cycle of desperation, poor communication and lack of visibility. This situation results in complex and insidious violations of human rights. As Dwight Conquergood points out 'subordinate people do not have the privilege of explicitness, the luxury of transparency, the presumptive norm of clear and direct communication, free and open debate on a level playing field that the privileged classes take for granted' (2002:146). Moreover, they experience bureaucracy as an instrument of control and displacement, e.g., visa cards, passports, arrest warrants deportation orders. 'Every power, including the power of law, is written first of all on the backs of its subjects' (de Certeau, 1984:140).

Being 'without papers' translates into narrow job opportunities; or if engaged in employment, workers experience high levels of exploitation; and the growth of black markets. There may also be no access to public hospitals; limited access to

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term 'undocumented immigrants' to describe illegal immigration, since naming a person illegal creates *de facto* negative identification, without making allowance for the multiple reasons people may have come to be in another country without the requisite papers.

<sup>2</sup> The legal status of migrants in Greece was controlled by a conservative law espoused in 1929. It was not until 1991 that the Greek government slightly reformed 2 paragraphs of Act 4310 legislation.

accommodation; and of course, vulnerability to police checks. To this cocktail of exclusion and marginalisation we can add the limited capacity to understand the official language, the daily incidents of xenophobic performances, police brutality, and last but not least, the fact that undocumented immigrants (whom Conquergood calls '*sans papiers*') feel trapped and lost as they are not citizens of any country (2003). They do not legally exist in Greece, yet often they feel unable to go back to their country of origin and of course it is impossible to travel outside Greece. Therefore, they are imprisoned in a state of invisibility, or to use Agamben's term, a 'state of exception' (2005).

A crucial turning point for the formation of contemporary Greek society is the current economic crisis. The growing economic instability which resulted in massive job losses, high taxation and social welfare reform means that there are opportunities to transform the very structures of a failed system. On the societal level there are two main reactions; firstly, the victim approach: to see enemies everywhere, with Greeks cast as victims, and secondly, the resistance approach: demanding wide reformation of policy, social structures, and fiscal management.

It is the initial response which lingers most prevalently in daily life: now, rather than embracing diverse cultural communities, unemployed Greeks complain about immigrants 'taking their jobs'. As crime increases as a result of job losses, immigrant communities are demonised once again, and as confidence in the government dwindles, politicians lose seats to right wing parties in local elections. Furthermore, the inability of the government to react effectively to immigration on a policy level has meant that social deprivation worsens even as the numbers of immigrants without access to papers increases daily. It is a wide-scale problem with far-reaching consequences. On the other hand, supporters of reform continue to indicate their solidarity with immigrant workers, using the opportunity to protest against the marginalisation of every excluded group.

Over the last several years, a new right wing inclination has appeared in Europe. Right wing speech proved to be extremely flexible following the current conditions: under the pressure of the increasing economic instability in Europe; the 'war on terrorism' and; the growing Islamophobia, migrants were an easy target. In the European elections of 2009, right wing parties increased seats by more than 5% in 13 out of 27 European Countries (Holland, Belgium, Denmark, Hungary, Austria, Bulgaria, Italy, Finland, Romania, Greece, France, United Kingdom and Slovakia, see Koromilas, 2009).

Right wing thought in Europe has adopted a new face in order to distance itself from past crimes; at the same time it adopts an anti-Islamic aura in order to have more followers. We are witnessing an attempt from a new generation of right wing politicians (for example Le Pen in France, newly elected Soini in Finland and Karatzaferis in Greece) to differentiate themselves from the parochial fascist rhetoric of anti-Semitism; instead they focus on an ethnocentric rhetoric which corresponds to current problems in European societies.

The threat of possible bankruptcy and the help provided by the European Union in 2010 (Stability and Growth Pack) had a huge impact on Greek public opinion which, at this point more than ever, aims for 'Europeanisation'. Symbols of the 'old world' are under attack in an attempt to define national identity not through historical memories, but in terms of participation in the production of today's culture. The fact that people in central Athens form communities and declare their rights out on the streets demonstrates an awareness of a common future that generates feelings of empathy and solidarity. Such awareness comes with the realisation that viewing Greek identity (or any other kind of identity) through oppositions puts emphasis on boundaries and does not encourage a collective declaration of a 'better future' and a 'better Athens', which includes Greeks and immigrants.

Since immigration constitutes a meeting point of 'us' and 'them', meaningful alterations are derived from those meetings: new classifications of the Self and the Other are established, while old ones need re-definition. The stage of this performance exists in a gap created by the reconstitution of national identity reflecting upon the re-evaluation of the 'ethnic self', reflecting also on the re-definition of the 'other'.

### **Stage: asylum space and redefined symbols**

January 25, 2011 and in the Athenian Law School, almost 300 students were in the amphitheatre listening to a lecture on human rights. The following quote is on the first page of their course book: 'Human rights constellations are based on the simple fact that we are all humans without reference to bounded forms, such as nationality and race' (Dimitropoulos, 1998:1). A few hours after that, a different performance was taking place elsewhere in the University building: 300 immigrants began the largest hunger strike in Greece declaring their right to be treated like humans. The immigrants' symbolic choice of space in which to begin the strike comes as no surprise considering the regime of 'academic asylum' applied in Greek universities. More specifically, 'academic asylum' legitimises and protect academic freedom and the right to knowledge, learning and research of every member of the academic community and everyone working in that space. The state of asylum covers all learning and research spaces.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the law aims to protect the circulation of ideas and academic thought against every form of censorship and falsification, such that university spaces would be the last polyvocal resorts in repressive times.

In modern Greek history, academic asylum is connected with the 1973 student uprising against the junta. The image of military tanks of the ruling junta ramming the gates of the university, resulting in the death of 34 students has become the symbol of a generation fighting against totalitarianism (see Papataxiarhis 2006). Thus, the law protecting academic asylum is a highly sensitive liberty connected with democratic values and the right to free speech. Under these circumstances, the asylum space as a moral symbol has capital, as it translates into a space where authority is not practiced as oppression. Rather it is a space constructed against hegemonic structures where learning and research would take place without censorship. The fusion starts when we move from theory to practice. What kinds of practices are eligible to be protected and claim the right to freedom under the asylum law? What happens when, under this unusual performance of hunger strike, a new lecture on 'human rights theory in action' occurs?

Drawing on Carlson's work on the haunted stage (2003), I propose that the setting of the migrants' hunger strike in the Law Building of the University of Athens evokes the ghosts of all previous struggles against the domination of the junta until the early 1970s; and of students and radicals against the police since that time. The notion of university as 'sanctuary' is reversed and not questioned until immigrants 'appear' there and demand that they are seen. Sophie Nield (2010) refers to the simultaneous need for immigrants to 'appear' and have 'presence': to be both physically present and to be constituted by the documentation that legitimizes their presence. 'Appearance', then, is being used here to indicate a particularly theatrical practice. 'It is the mode by which things, objects, people inhabit that strange dual space – there but not there, here but not here – of the theatre. To appear is to become visible or manifest – to be spectated' (2010: 80). This means that legitimacy lies with those that can affirm the presence of the subjects as bodies; but what happens when the bodies refuse to be legitimized or 'read' by the system? What does it mean when they call into question the discourses of power and

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<sup>3</sup> (Law 3549/2007, art.3, par.2, Act: 'Reformation of institutional frame for migration, otherness and reception institutions').

subjection that inscribe them? What questions are thrown up by the desire to be marked as 'legal', while resisting the definition of humans being 'illegal'? And what is the result of the bodies' refusal to be witnessed?

The choice of the Law School as the central stage for their performance is a deeply symbolic act. Not only do these immigrants link their struggle with earlier acts of resistance evoking feelings of empathy and solidarity; they also question the essence of a juridical system which refuses to recognise them as human beings and visible citizens. By juxtaposing their bodies with the statue of Themis—the goddess of justice—they engage in an informal trial. Who is guilty and what should the punishment be? If undocumented immigrants are guilty for their non-legal state, then they are sentenced to an invisible life. Their decision to start the hunger strike decodes their will to, at least, die visible. On the other hand, if Themis and the juridical system are guilty of myopia, the punishment translates to direct and immediate reformation of the system and especially the law on immigration.

Themis is depicted blind with a bandage over her eyes. The image of blind justice has a metaphorical sense, echoing the ancient theory that the notion of the law is above human prejudices, the law is objective. As the symbolic witness to this particular act, Justice must remain blind and neutral; she cannot observe the skin colour, ethnic facial characteristics, or cultural practices of the individual who stands before her. Or perhaps Justice is blind in the sense that she cannot find a way to pull the social curtain of exclusion and marginality. Therefore, she remains blind because she cannot see the unrepresented, the invisible undocumented immigrants.

### **Space for resistance**

To illustrate the hunger strikers' actions, we are concerned with how their act is staged. The location of their resistance became almost more significant than the act itself. And, we argue, this resulted in a more efficacious performance, since the act was stage managed by those that may have predicted the audience's response.

I construct this notion of space, drawing on Sophie Nield's performative 'border work', and from the theorist Henri Lefebvre. As Lefebvre has indicated, the site for resistance emerges out of two simultaneous spaces; one constituted by power, and the other - constructed in opposition to such power - materialized in moments of rupture (such as protest, riot, etc). Nield goes on to say:

The crucial identification here – of space as a material and tangible product, and not a mere container for events – allows the circumvention of some of the assumed limitations of protest activity – its temporary nature, and the Foucauldian paradigm of a permanent power and a permanent resistance locked in mutually sustaining opposition... these spatial insights allow the disruption of the binary imposed on demonstrative actions – that they cease to be 'representational' (symbolic 'theatres' of activity and hence acceptable as legible protest) as soon as they have any actual effect, becoming instead riots, terrorism and so on (2006: 56).

Examining the act of hunger striking in Athens, it becomes clear that such a protest is not intended to be 'momentary'. In other words, the limitations of momentary action and oppositionality mentioned by Nield do not frame the act of self-immolation.<sup>4</sup> Rather, the inevitability of death or 'failure' frames the act with the moral imperative on behalf of the

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<sup>4</sup> Self-immolation is most often used to describe those who protest by setting fire to themselves. However, an act of self destruction (such as the sewing of lips together), and, I argue, hunger strikes, may also be considered to be self-immolation.

witnesses. Thus, the moral and ethical space carved by the act of the hunger strikers demands a responsive audience. In other words, their martyrdom (willingness to die for a cause) is only efficacious if it is witnessed by those who recognize (or legitimate) either the cause itself, or esteem the fervour of the belief (i.e.: if legalization is that important, then it ought to be granted). Therefore, the space becomes one of ethical capital; an exchange: if the martyrs are 'effective' in their bargaining performance, then the result will be 'legalization for all'. These martyrs are bargaining not against a system, but for inclusion within it.

We should not fall into the trap of romanticising the immigrants' struggle, as they have already accomplished one of their goals. By becoming visible, they opened a space for dialogue within Greece about liberty, justice and plurality within the juridical as well as the social frames. They are challenging the current ethnocentric model through a 'radical perspective of revolution and democracy that speaks not *for*, but *of* a myriad of excluded experiences' (Burbach, 2001: 130). They are fighting for a world where many worlds fit; where presence of gaps and contradictions is not necessarily a sign of failure. Bhabha describes this space of critical exchange as a 'Third Space' which holds the promise for an alternative society. In his words:

... a willingness to descend into that alien territory...may reveal that the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualise an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's *hybridity*...And by exploring this Third Space we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as others of our selves (1994:38).

### **Act: Hunger strike as spectacle**

300 immigrants from all over Greece gathered in Athens in order to declare their right to have a 'visible life'. Their demand: 'legalisation of all migrant men and women now'. Or to use their arguments:

We, the 300 hundred migrant workers who are on hunger strike in Athens have been living and working in Greece for years. However, we are deprived of basic rights; we have no right to free movement, to decent terms of employment, to health insurance, and, ultimately, to personal dignity...we don't have another way to make our voices heard, to make you learn about our rights...we risk our lives, as, one way or another, this is no life for people with dignity. We prefer to die here rather than our children to suffer what we have been through (Assembly of migrant hunger strikers, Jan. 2011).

George Sweeney has claimed that, 'as a form of self-sacrifice, the hungerstrike (sic) is the weapon of last resort for those nurtured in a tradition of exploitation, colonization and cultural destruction' (1993:10). He specifically characterizes the martyrdom of those that decide to self-sacrifice as intrinsically bound up with religious (or quasi-religious political) idealism. His argument contends that 'the cult of self-sacrifice makes a virtue of a necessity', which becomes a potent political weapon. In other words, the fact that morality is so indistinguishable from the act itself means that the form of protest bears weight. According to Sweeney, the notion of self-sacrifice can 'demonstrate the legitimacy of a cause, the truth of which can be established through self-immolation. The demonstration of legitimacy is important for the propagation of any cause' (1993:13).

The troubling nub of the act, then, is to what sense of morality the hunger strike appeals? If we consider the 300 immigrants as a small percentage of the actual number of immigrants in the city that are undocumented, and therefore 'invisible', then why is the same level of moral outrage and audience empathy not evident when Greeks encounter these invisible numbers? Is it not also all other immigrants' intention to be legal or legitimate, and not only those on hunger strike?

If we consider Baz Kershaw's notion of efficacious performance one which has engaged with an ideological intention in order to effect change, then a reading of the hunger strike of 300 immigrants as a performance would only be considered efficacious if they were successful in achieving their intended aim; 'instant legalization for all'. Simultaneously, since the correlative act alongside the intention is starvation, if the strikers 'fail' to complete the strike, then their intention is also called into question. Finally, we must question what efficacy might mean in this instance: to 'succeed' is to be granted their demands; equally though, the performance must be completed, and thus another way of 'succeeding' is to starve to death.

We turn now to the need for spectacle as the most compelling argument for such a cause, and thus to the inherent paradox of the invisible immigrants willing themselves to 'appear' by diminishing their existence by growing ever thinner, and closer to death. Kershaw has referred to this as spectacle's paradox:

... it deals with the human in inhuman ways. And there are others: it multiplies power through excessive waste; it plays on the visceral mainly through the visual; it can attract and repel in the same instant...how might we best understand what it is to be commonly human in a world that now constitutes the subject through such powerful paradoxes? (2003: 594).

A key element of the mediated frame around the strike has been the proliferation of images and blog posts about (and by) the strikers. Kershaw highlights several hypotheses, two of which are useful to this argument: spectacles of resistance, spectacles of contradiction (into which he places new types of power such as hunger strikes, saturnalia and terrorist attacks – broadly called festivals of division (2003: 595)). Such attention to the act of martyrdom is key to its success: if 300 people were to die in a room then it would be relatively easy to ignore. However, if self-immolation engages an audience who witness the destruction of self for a wider cause, then spectacle becomes the moral turning point.



(Photo credits: Sunday Immigrant's School/ Kyriakatiko Sxoleio Metanaston, reproduced with permission).

The strikers refuse to say where they come from. They have a common answer 'we are all immigrants'. Under the label of 'immigrant' they can be united. Countries and borders are what they fight against and they refuse to reproduce those structures in their 'performance' of hunger strike.

## 6. Audience as witnesses

Carlson suggests that 'audience and performer alike operate in a world of double consciousness' (1996: 54), using the term of 'binocular vision' to further develop the notion of being involved in a complex relationship between the mimetic and the real. If we turn then to the complicit audience witnessing the hunger strike of these immigrants, we can observe the complex interplay of gaze and subject/object binaries. As Rustom Bharucha has considered, writing about women protesting in India, the subjects have themselves decided how they wish to be seen in the eyes of the law, which would rather not 'see them' in this state (2001: 3768). By engaging in this act of self-immolation, the strikers are attempting to create the burden of responsibility on the viewers. Bharucha asks

What happens when you are not a victim yourself, but you become a spectator of someone else's pain? How do you deal with it? How do you resist the obvious possibilities of voyeurism, or the mere consumption of other peoples' suffering? How do you sensitise yourself politically to the histories of others, which might not have impacted on your own? (2001: 3769).

In introducing the nature of witnessing, and the moral positioning of such witnesses, we reflect the positions of two renowned intellectuals who lent their support to the cause of the immigrants from afar. Slavoj Žižek commented:

'My full solidarity with you – you are fighting for much more than just your rights. You are fighting for what Europe will become. Those who ignore or oppose you are a real threat to the European legacy of universal emancipation. In our times of nationalist xenophobia, movements like yours offer a hope that emancipation is not a dead word'. (Assembly of migrant hunger strikers, 2011).

While Noam Chomsky said: '...their struggle is an important part of the struggle for migrant justice and human rights all over the world' (Assembly of migrant hunger strikers, 2011).<sup>5</sup> Finally Negri and Mezzadra added their support to the strike, saying:

... Against the violence of neo-liberalism, financial capital and racism, particularly virulent in the crisis, you are embodying the power of freedom and equality. While amazing uprisings are challenging and subverting corrupted regimes in Maghreb and the Middle East you are bringing to Europe the wind of revolution and the challenge of democratic constituent power. While the European Union is politically paralyzed and militarizes its "external frontiers" against migration, you show to everybody the concrete possibility of a new and different Europe, where movements and struggles of migration play a constitutive role.

They suggest that such struggle is not located on the margins, but springs from the centre of a new common Europe (2011).<sup>6</sup>

As with every civil protest that begins at the grassroots, there is an important role for communication and representation. In other words, since the hunger strike is being conducted privately, in a sealed off building, there must be a platform to communicate the struggles and demands. This protest has done so on a wide scale, through blogspots, social networking and via mobile telephones. In an attempt to engage with the audience of this protest, we engaged with the official correspondence, but also visited the site several times to engage with 'audiences' of the protest. (Initially we had hoped to interview the hunger strikers but it became clear that this was not a viable option; not only did they need to conserve energy, they were also advised on who 'valuable' interviewers might be, in terms of garnering maximum publicity for their cause). Using Bharucha's questions, we approached witnesses and supporters to better understand the complex and evolving responses of the audience to suffering.

I don't want them to be invisible and I suffer with their suffering; but I don't really want to be a witness. I can understand they had a tough journey and it makes me sad, but why do I need to face it in front of my house everyday? I know that they are victims of bad politics but what can I do? I'm not responsible for their situation, why do I need to

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<sup>5</sup> These expressions of support appear on the website dedicated to the Assembly of Migrant Hunger Strikers available at <<http://hungerstrike300.espivblogs.net/2011/02/18/slavoj-zizek-douzinaz>>. (Feb 2011)

<sup>6</sup> These expressions of support appear on the website dedicated to the Assembly of Migrant Hunger Strikers available at <<http://hungerstrike300.espivblogs.net/2011/02/19/toni-negri-sandro-mezzandra/>>. (Feb 2011).

face this everyday? Isn't that a violation of my rights? Racism is a dangerous disease and I'm trying to fight against that in every way I can, but please not outside my house. Do not force me to be a witness. They come from every corner of the world to suffer in front of my doorstep and I wish them all the best. I wish them to be protected by their God, to find what they were dreaming. But please, I cannot feel guilty about your misfortune everyday. I don't want to be a witness, but it's beyond my powers; everyday I feel I have to come for a while and bring them water and support them with a smile (Mairi C.) (Anonymous, Feb 2011).<sup>7</sup>

As Mairi C. outlines, the moral imperative of the unwilling witness thus bears the weight of the act itself as well as the context of the act. She reflects on her own position because of the act of the strikers. Her questions ultimately highlight the discomfort of bearing the weight of another's struggle, and make space for contradictions. While the act of witnessing has exposed 'dangerous' side effects of the insidious discourses of race and xenophobia, she also engages with the strikers as invisible objects of the system. Her position is challenged by their act, and the resulting erasure of her freedoms mean that she would prefer the suffering to be invisible. Her comments make allowance for a neoliberal stance on inclusion, but the strikers' attempts to make visible such struggles is unwelcome. In a similar vein, a student said:

I cannot be inside the building, not because I don't support the strikers but it's very hard for me. Every time they go to the toilets or stand up wandering around, I don't see fighters, I see ghosts carrying on with their invisible lives...what actually separates me from those guys in there is less than what unites us (Marios X.)(Anonymous, Feb 2011).<sup>8</sup>

This witness engages with the embodied struggle; taking the striker's weakness as a metonymic sample of his own resistance. We began to wonder whether his evocation of ghosts might not also reflect the nostalgic clinging to solidarity that many neo-liberal Greek people embody. The discomfort here is to what extent the disembodied struggle becomes translated into meaningful action. If, for example, supporters are merely supporting the idea of the struggle because the populace is otherwise primed for resistant action, then to what extent does this act metonymically interpolate the Athenian resistance against corrupt governance?

### **Scriptwriter: issues of participation and representation**

Richard Rorty's conception of the representation of difference in society is 'the consensual overlapping of final vocabularies that allow imaginative identification with the other as long as certain words – kindness, decency, dignity – are held in common' (cited in Bhabha, 1994: 275). It presupposes the changing of our patterns of interpretation, communication and representation. It is the way we see, the way we countenance others that we make our presence felt by refusing to reproduce the cultural hegemony. As such, it is an ongoing process of self transformation driven by an inner need to engage and to create communities based on mutual respect and recognition. Some of the questions that are thrown into relief by this performance have been:

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<sup>7</sup> Anonymous (2011) 'Personal collection of leaflets, fliers, interviews and communiqués from the Assembly of Migrant Hunger Strikers', translated by M. Tsilimpounidi, Jan – Feb 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Anonymous (2011) 'Personal collection of leaflets, fliers, interviews and communiqués from the Assembly of Migrant Hunger Strikers', translated by M. Tsilimpounidi, Jan – Feb 2011.

Why 300 and not more? Or fewer? One might imagine the number is chosen specifically to make parallels with the disenfranchised set against those who hold power, as put forward by Scanlan, Stoll & Lumm (2008). Perhaps we might see the 300 immigrants symbolically against 300 politicians in the parliament. In this way solidarity organisations and communities can make a banal claim 'choose your side. Either you are 'with' the 300 strikers and the fight of human dignity against capitalism or with the 300 politicians and the corrupt media that have lost public faith in recent times. Symbolically the figure 300 bears weight for Greek collective consciousness, reminiscent of Leonidas and the 300 Spartans, the performance of the defenders at the battle of Thermopylae, used as a symbol of courage against overwhelming odds. Secondly, why this 300? All of them have a story of injustice and bad working conditions. None has criminal record. The fact that Greek emigrants had suffered from poverty and xenophobic prejudice, just as the incumbents to Greece do nowadays, creates a feeling of empathy and people become more sensitised to the tragic living and working conditions of undocumented immigrants.

The immigrant strikers, despite having engaged willingly in this act of self-immolation, unwittingly perhaps, become doubly marginalised in their attempt to be seen and heard. There have been numerous posters, fliers and blog posts about the immigrants' agency and determinacy in engaging in the hunger strike. Simultaneously, there has also been a buffering community of supporters printing, translating, documenting, and applying for appeals. Since access to the 300 immigrants is highly constructed and gatekeepers are in place to manage maximum coverage in the press, the strikers are doubly invisible. In other words, what does it mean not to be able to represent themselves even now in their final act? How does that reinforce domination and reduce agency?

Foucault writes of the subject of visibility as becoming 'the principle of his own subjection' (1977, 203), and Peggy Phelan posits the need for 'exposing the blind spots' within the discourses used to examine the 'unmarked' subjects (1993, 1 – 2). She foregrounds the contradiction inherent within the 'accent on visibility' (1993, 6) as the crutch of identity politics, and the mistrust of visibility as the source of unity, or identity. Following this mistrust then, we are not only uneasy at the re-inscription of invisibility, but at the notion that this act will inevitably result in disappearance. In other words, the troubling question is the inevitability of death or failure.

### **Curtain: death as inevitable.**

On Day 1, the strikers were asking for 'the legalisation of all migrant men and women...for equal political and social rights'. Since 'we don't have another way to make our voices heard, we risk our lives, to make you learn about our rights, we will not stop until we succeed' (Anonymous, Jan. 2011).<sup>9</sup> Day 31, and the demand has shifted: 'For us, legalisation is neither a generic nor an abstract slogan. We don't want proposals to be heard without us. For us legalisation means many and very specific things. Between those, first and foremost: The issuing – since we are entitled to it – of a proper residence and labour permit to us, the 300 hunger strikers, who demand what should be a given for everyone by putting our lives on the line' (Anonymous, Feb 2011). It is a power game: the state would not make all the immigrants legal, not even under this symbolic pressure. So the immigrants are facing death as the inevitable end of their performance. Yet, this is a double loss for them: they are losing their lives and they lose the ideological battle with the state. So, they make a more 'logical' claim - just make these 300 immigrants legal - which is itself a loss. Scanlan *et al* mention that such action inevitably

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<sup>9</sup> Anonymous (2011) 'Personal collection of leaflets, fliers, interviews and communiqués from the Assembly of Migrant Hunger Strikers', translated by M. Tsilimpounidi, Jan – Feb 2011. The strikers' demands have also been posted on a dedicated website: 'Hunger Strike 300 Website', available at <<http://hungerstrike300.espivblogs.net/2011/>>

occurs when there is a perceived lack of a viable alternative means of precipitating change (2008). Yet, policies should not be based on such acts of blackmailing; citing the demands: 'unless everyone is made legal the state will face a humanitarian catastrophe'. The symbolism of this act only serves to remind the state that such suffering is occurring for countless others in the same situation. Yet, the interesting element of the hunger strike in Athens is that it made visible the suffering and the deprivation of the immigrants resulting in outward displays of empathy and solidarity amongst a wider public.

A truly revolutionary act changes the structures of our behavioural mode; as the recent civil uprisings in Egypt, Libya and Bahrain have demonstrated, and continue to do so. The existing order is a condition - a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of behaviour – revolts can destroy it by contracting other relationships, by large groups electing to behave differently. Occasionally the change called for necessitates working outside of the rule of law. Giorgio Agamben calls this a 'state of exception'. He writes how such a state is one of imbalance between 'public law and political fact',

that is situated – like civil war, insurrection and resistance – in an ambiguous, uncertain, borderline fringe, at the intersection of the legal and political (2005, 1).

Further, he says the state of exception 'appears as a threshold of indeterminacy between democracy and absolutism' (2005, 3). In situating their act of resistance in the Law building of the university, the strikers drew on its asylum status – itself a 'state of exception'. Through their choice to engage in a performance of martyrdom in the face of cynical civil society and an insidious economic crisis that has eroded public confidence, the 300 hunger strikers straddle another 'state of exception'. Their act becomes an inevitable metaphor for extant suffering of all citizens. Since it is not framed in the context of an institution which is accountable (such as hunger strikes conducted within prisons), the moral imperative to react falls to the general populace. And as this paper has shown, the public have solidarity, but are also fatigued by their ongoing struggles. However, the act of the strikers has opened up a 'third space'. Policy makers are engaged in dialogue about the hunger strikers, and locals are engaged in acts of support. What remains to play out, however, is what potential change might be rendered as a result of this mass resistant action.

### **Beyond the curtain: Democracy in action? Resistance in action? Impacts and change.**

When we imagine the erosion of boundaries and the creation of new territories of dialogue, we should be able to remap our indigenous landscapes in order to include those who remained invisible and marginalised because they could not fit the cognitive, moral or aesthetic map of the dominant world. 'Postmodern racism', as such, is no longer based upon biological theories of superior and inferior races; instead, what emerged is a racism based upon cultural differences, upon misrepresentations and incompatibilities between different cultures. To paraphrase Bauman (1997), the 'chance of human togetherness' depends on the rights of the marginalised, not on the question of who is entitled to decide who the marginalised are.

Particularly in this turning point of Greek<sup>10</sup> and European<sup>11</sup> history, where there is a shared dissatisfaction with the progress of the multicultural approach, there is an urgent need for redefinition. That is Europe's and Greece's way out of crisis; an attempt to re-evaluate and recompose the fixed polarities: self/other; inside/outside; order/chaos. In a world that constantly changes there is the urgent need for change in the practices associated with the research of social reality. The hunger strike performance opens a dialogical door on these issues.

In conclusion, we might return to Nield's call for resistance to carve space for intervention and dialogue; in particular, the need for resistant acts and radical spaces to expose weaknesses and contradictions of hegemonic spaces (2006). As Bhabha says:

The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent in-between space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living (1994: 10).

These 300 immigrants do not seek to seize state power, or argue that they hold a blueprint for a future world order. Rather, they are calling for a democratic transformation directed by civil society, or to use their own words: 'a civil society [where] people are actors rather than subjects' (Anonymous, 2011). They fight for their right to have rights, or what Lefebvre describes as 'the right to the city' which is 'far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is the right to change ourselves by changing the city' (Mendieta, 2010: 443). The strength of these immigrants has not come from the barrel of a gun, but from their ability to capture the hearts and minds of Greek society. In other words, 'the right to the city' is the ability to transform the self and imagine the city to come. The immigrants' fight is bigger than the fight for 300 visas; it is a fight for a future formation of Greece and the EU, which Žižek alludes to in his statement of support. However, as the hunger strike grows into a symbolic action, we must be concerned with how radical resistant acts brush up against and trouble theories of emancipation when embodied in performances of destruction.

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<sup>10</sup> Greek Prime Minister Georgios Papandreou, in a speech for the International Migrants Day, on 18<sup>th</sup> December 2010, claimed that 'multiculturalism is not working for Greece... There is a greater need for new approaches and political reforms' (transcribed Tsilimpounidi, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> In a speech to young members of her party the German chancellor Angela Merkel was explicit 'This multicultural approach, saying that we simply live side-by-side and live happily with each other has failed. Utterly failed' (Hewitt, 2010).

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