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Boletsi, M.

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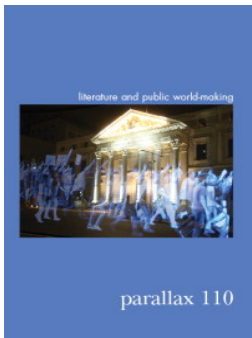
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The Politics of Weird Aesthetics: Fictionality in New Forms of Protest

Maria Boletsi 

Introduction

Discussing Talal Asad's views, Lauren Berlant writes in *Cruel Optimism*:

the civilizational claims of liberal political modernity have enabled people to feel free in everyday life by placing the explicit performance of state violence in occulted zones, namely, specific neighborhoods and prisons on the spatial margins. To the bourgeoisie and the classes organized by being 'respectable', this practice made the police look less like an apparatus of force and more like border collies nudging everyday atmospheres into order. But disciplinary surveillance and its apparatus are no longer located in that offstage and having good manners does not any longer guarantee even the privileged races, genders, and classes a status under the radar.¹

Berlant addresses the current curtailing of public space under regimes of surveillance, in the name of order and security, or owing to the increasing privatisation of public sites. As I write this in April 2024, the excessive police force, expulsion, and mass arrests of university students protesting the Israel–Gaza war in the US but also in Europe has become a striking recent manifestation of the repression of dissenting voices in public in Western societies. Authoritarian measures and securitisation are symptoms of a neoliberal governmentality that has turned crisis from an exception into an 'instrument of rule' that is 'part of normality in any segment of social life'.² This generates an experience of the present that Berlant calls 'crisis ordinariness': an experience of living in and through intersecting crises and traumatic events 'that force people to adapt to an unfolding change' and to embed 'crisis' 'in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming'.³ 'Crisis ordinariness' – as this paradoxical collocation suggests – captures a disjunction between the fantasy of an 'ordinary' or 'good' life and the actual precariousness of the public sphere today that makes the realisation of this fantasy untenable for most people, to different degrees, and especially for 'racialized and marginalized peoples', vulnerable to exclusionary practices and precarity.⁴

Which genre would be best suited to capture this experience of crisis ordinariness? Berlant detects a ‘waning of genre’ and particularly of ‘realist genres whose conventions of relating fantasy to ordinary life and whose depictions of the good life now appear to mark archaic expectations about having and building a life’.⁵ Realism, Henry Ivry argues, has ceased to be a ‘tenable mode of representing the economic, material, ecological, and affective realities’ of a crisis-ridden contemporary.⁶ Today’s landscape of intersecting crises is ‘in excess’ of realist imaginaries.⁷ Even though realism remains the dominant genre in responses to contemporary crises – think, for example, of the prevalence of a photojournalistic type of realism in the so-called ‘migration crisis’⁸ – its limitations when it comes to capturing the contrasting scales and complex experience of intersecting crises today are increasingly under scrutiny.⁹ The crisis of realism is reshaping the literary field too. Kate Marshall notices that in recent years the mainstream literary marketplace, traditionally dominated by realism, is shifting: tropes, figures, and forms from ‘genre fiction’, including science fiction, fantasy, Gothic horror, and weird fiction, ‘flash up’ in realist narratives, as ‘a contemporary signal of the nonhuman’ and of perspectives and scales that exceed realist representation.¹⁰ This ‘genre hybridity’ is pluralising our understanding of realism itself, yielding a host of ‘postmillennial critical realisms’, qualified, for example, as ‘speculative, peripheral, capitalist, lyrical, and weird’.¹¹ Genres beyond realism – or new, hybrid variants of realism – can help us think in ‘experimental and tentative’ ways about how to respond to crisis ordinariness and envision desirable futures.¹²

In this essay, I turn to the genre of the *weird* for alternative responses to a crisis-ridden contemporary. Instead of looking at weird fiction, however, I trace its ‘spillover’ in public space, through forms of activism that mobilise fictional modalities and what I call *weird aesthetics*. As a genre, the weird was popular from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, but was revived in the twenty-first century through authors of ‘New Weird’ fiction and the canonisation of so-called ‘Old Weird’ writers, such as H. P. Lovecraft or Edgar Rice Burroughs.¹³ The weird meshes elements from realism, fantasy, gothic, horror, and science fiction, and uses multiple scales, nonhuman perspectives, and human/nonhuman entanglements in real-world settings to ‘twist’ rationalism and normative constructions of common sense. In recent years, I argue, we can trace a *weird turn*, whereby forms and modalities of weird fiction spill over into other domains, often inflected through posthuman and new materialist theories. In this essay, I trace the weird’s spillover in public space through events of public protest and activism between 2011 and 2023 from the European periphery, and particularly the European South, which engaged in strategies of ‘weirding’ the dimensions, scale, and ontological standing of the *body* in public space: the ‘nano-demonstrations’ with miniature toys in Russia (2011–2012) in response to the perceived falsifying of election results; the ‘hologram protest’ against Spain’s ‘Law of Citizen Security’ that featured holograms protesting in front of the Spanish parliament in Madrid (2015); the ‘silly walk’ of a women’s group that disrupted a

national parade in Athens (2019); the transnational public performance 'Little Amal: The Walk', starring a giant puppet of a migrant girl touring across Europe, America, and Australia (2021–ongoing); the alien-like figures of the massive 'Polytechnic graffiti' that appeared in March 2015 on the building of the historic Athens Polytechnic University; and the intervention of a 'living ball' – a large flesh-coloured ball evoking a heart or other organ – in a traditional public demonstration on 17 November 2023 in Thessaloniki, Greece.

These interventions responded to different crisis-scapes and sought to twist conditions of 'crisis ordinariness' under oppressive, patriarchal, neocolonial, or ethnonationalist forces. They addressed the impossibility of public presence for bodies not acknowledged as citizens or (legitimate) subjects, and the physical risk of presence in public space for certain people, including undocumented migrants, queer people, and dissenting citizens in authoritarian regimes. While I take heed of their particularities and the divergent protest cultures these events evoked, I cannot do full justice to their contextual specificities, as my objective lies elsewhere: in teasing out the ethical, political, epistemological, and ontological implications of studying them together, as a constellation under the heading of the *weird*. Unsettling the boundaries between fictional and real, materiality and immateriality, active and passive, human and nonhuman, these protests forged unexpected human/nonhuman alliances, involving spectral, miniaturised, undisciplined, alien, oversized, monstrous, and fictionalised bodies. Through these alliances, they reintroduced the entanglement and tension between fiction and reality as a condition for critique, democratic politics, and public world-making, without, however, collapsing the distinction between the two.

What are the political affordances of weird aesthetics? How can the weird and fictional be mobilised in critical, emancipatory projects that seek to reclaim public space for inclusive, democratic politics? Can weird protest 'outweird' contemporary contexts marked by intersecting crises, populism, authoritarianism, nativism, austerity politics, or securitisation, and reconfigure public spaces towards alternative directions?

Not all interventions discussed in this essay can be claimed to have been influenced by weird fiction; some evoke weird tropes more than others. The 'Polytechnic graffiti', the women's 'silly walk' in Athens, the 'living ball' in Thessaloniki, or the 'hologram protests' in Madrid, carry more affinities with figures and aesthetics of the weird genre – or with its offshoots in other media, such as in the recent 'weird wave' of Greek cinema – than, for example, the toy-figures in the nano-demonstrations. I use the term 'spillover' to capture both explicit and unintentional or tacit transfers of the weird in other domains that only evoke it slantwise. I am less interested in enumerating the 'weird' features of these events to prove a lineage with weird fiction, and more in teasing out the possibilities that open up when we study them in

relation to each other, under the umbrella of the *weird*. What the events I study here share with the weird genre is an orientation to the nonhuman or to human/nonhuman assemblages, a play with scales, and an investment in rethinking ‘the project of fictionality’ today, ‘as it transforms in changing material conditions’.¹⁴

By mobilising the nonhuman, these events did not eclipse or eliminate the human. On the contrary: their human/nonhuman alliances sought to counter the expulsion of dissenting, minoritarian, non-normative *human* bodies from public space. As they unleashed spectres, toys, puppets, organs, and aliens into public space, they negotiated a more democratic and inclusive public space for and by human and nonhuman bodies alike. At the centre of their weird aesthetics we thus find weirded understandings of the *human*, inflected by spectral, monstrous, alien, or toylike figures, in ways that prompt us to rethink subjectivity and publicness through fiction and genre.

In the following, after a brief outline of the weird genre and its twenty-first-century upsurge, I present the aforementioned protest events and examine how they operated in public space through three interlaced levels of enquiry, that address *epistemology*, *modality*, and *ontology*. On the level of epistemology, I zoom in on the way the fiction/reality boundary was reconfigured, while on the level of modality, I examine the function of *play* in some of these events, and how the distinction between seriousness–non-seriousness affected their reception. On the level of ontology, I scrutinise the twisting of the human through the human/nonhuman assemblages some of these events forged.¹⁵ These levels are multiply entangled: the discussion around fiction and reality, for example, is immersed in both epistemological and ontological questions. The transgression of boundaries among genres, domains, scales, and other systems of classification is, after all, a main marker of the *weird*: an elusive, hybrid ‘genre’ that can be better described as a ‘generic egress’ that creates zones of ‘contact between incommensurable worlds’.¹⁶ The weird accommodates transscalar shifts and epistemological ambiguity (for example, what counts as protest or as *representation* of protest?), and can function as an interface between fiction and reality, virtuality and presence. This study of the weird’s spillover in public protest thus takes as its premise the ‘symbiotic transference of the logics and scales that we can trace in both fiction and other cultural and political spheres’.¹⁷

Finally, I discuss some of the political and ethical pitfalls involved in weird protest. The fictionality and weird aesthetics of these events ran the risk of depoliticising them. As I will show, from the perspective of the authorities or mainstream media, some of these events were brushed aside as ‘fiction’, ‘entertainment’, funny or ‘weird’ occurrences rather than ‘serious’ or ‘real’ political interventions. I thus ask when and by whom these events were received as political or as ‘non-serious’ events, ‘debarred from participation in the construction of truth’, but also when and how their fictionality enhanced their political and world-making force.¹⁸

A Weird Turn?

As a word, concept, and aesthetic category, the *weird* has a broad applicability, especially since its entrance into everyday language in the early twentieth century, yet it is firmly rooted in fiction and largely developed through its literary travels. In its earliest articulations in Old English, it denoted ‘fate or destiny’, as the ‘Wyrd Sisters’ in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* – carriers of prophecies and fate – remind us.¹⁹ Later, as an adjective, it conveyed the ‘unearthly, eerie; unaccountably or uncomfortably strange; queer, uncanny’ and ‘out of the ordinary’, meanings it carried over to late eighteenth-century Romantic poetry.²⁰ In the late nineteenth century, it became a descriptor for a fictional genre, hosted in periodicals and pulp magazines (since 1923, mainly in *Weird Tales*) until the 1940s.²¹ Though often seen as the ‘pulp underside of literary modernism’,²² the genre is intimately tied with modernism, futurism, and the avant-garde.²³ Even though the genre’s popularity waned after 1940, interest in the weird resurged in the twenty-first century, largely owing to writers of the ‘New Weird’ such as Jeff VanderMeer and China Miéville, who also contributed to the theorisation, curation, and popularisation of the genre through anthologies, interviews, and other writings.²⁴ The arrival of the ‘New Weird’ in the literary scene was accompanied by renewed interest in, and critical revisiting of, ‘Old Weird’ writers, such as H. P. Lovecraft.²⁵ New Weird writers took on the challenge of grappling with the racist, sexist, and reactionary aspects of Lovecraft’s fiction, trying to transform and ‘reform’ aspects of his poetics, by, for example, recasting ‘the alien and the monstrous as sites of affirmation and becoming’ rather than ‘horror’.²⁶ New Weird writers have thus tried to integrate the *weird* in queer, feminist, and anti-racist politics.²⁷

The weird genre is notoriously elusive. Marshall calls it a ‘foundationally mixed approach to genre’ in which the ‘fantastic’ or ‘cosmic horror’ are interlaced with ‘realist form’.²⁸ Contrary to other genres of speculative fiction, such as science fiction, fantasy, or utopia, which tend to construct separate worlds, the weird is not an escape from reality or flight to the absurd. It is ‘a particular iteration of the real’²⁹ that ‘places pressure on realism’ without eclipsing it.³⁰ The weird’s ‘expansive’ atmospheres invite ‘strangeness in the world’ and construct a ‘weird version of reality’ ‘within the visible, known, material, physical world’.³¹ Jeff and Ann VanderMeer note that the New Weird uses ‘realistic, complex real-world models as the jumping-off point for creation of settings that may combine elements of both science fiction and fantasy’.³² The weird is thus rooted in our shared world, from which it experiments with multiple (including nonhuman) perspectives, scales, affective states, and epistemologies. This anchoring of the weird in reality, I argue, makes it particularly well-suited as a strategy and aesthetic in forms of activism that resist normalised constructions of the social world. Its function, moreover, as ‘an expression of upheaval and crisis’ can also account for its spill-over in contrarian languages of protest today.³³ The weird appears in times of heightened crises, when radical shifts in social realities require new means of making sense of the present and thinking the future. The experiences of

unease, disorientation, and defamiliarisation it captures signal clashes between old and new realities and conflicting worldviews.³⁴ The weird, Mark Fisher writes, is associated with a ‘sense of wrongness’ and ‘the conviction that this does not belong’: as such, it hints at the obsolescence of previous ‘concepts and frameworks’.³⁵ The ‘sense of wrongness’ it evokes feeds its ability to heighten people’s ‘social reflexivity’ in crisis times.³⁶ In the face of today’s normalised condition of chronic crisis (Berlant’s ‘crisis ordinariness’), the weird points to the wrongness of the way things are but also to the possibility of the *otherwise*: alternative worlds within the one we occupy.

As a hybrid genre, the weird is marked by what Miéville calls ‘genre bleed’, which is ‘critically valuable’ because it ‘provoke[s] questioning of the world rather than retreat from it’.³⁷ This ‘genre bleed’ *within* the weird has recently escaped the genre in the form of a spillover of the weird to other domains, including theory, philosophy, and public culture. This spillover indicates an emerging *weird turn* that can partly be credited to the synergy between weird fiction and theory since the turn of the millennium, when scholars of posthumanism started theorising the agency of objects, landscapes, and nonhuman entities, and experimenting with nonhuman and transscalar perspectives.³⁸ The weird genre has provided theories of posthumanism, new materialisms, speculative realism, and object-oriented ontology with a rich repository of vocabularies, figures, and strategies. Reversely, New Weird fiction is also informed by these theories.

Several recent studies mesh philosophy with speculative fabulation to devise novel modes of conceptualising the world. In the humanities and social sciences, fictional figures – monsters, ghosts, aliens, cyborgs – have provided fruitful conceptual metaphors for articulating alternatives to anthropocentric, rationalist, capitalist epistemic paradigms.³⁹ Donna Haraway’s notion of the ‘Cthulucene’ – which echoes Lovecraft’s well-known monster – as an alternative to the Anthropocene for a world of interconnected multispecies being, is a striking example.⁴⁰ Graham Harman proposed ‘weird realism’ as a ‘new philosophical mythology’ grounded in philosophical concepts inspired by Lovecraft’s weird fiction and its monsters.⁴¹ Literary authors and scholars have adopted the term *weird(ing)* in ecocritical, posthumanist, and queer approaches that ‘disorient normative concepts’ like *human* or *nature*.⁴²

The weird figures we encounter in fiction and, since recently, in theory, have also taken to the streets. As traditional forms of public protest and activism today are not always effective in generating political mobilisation or are rendered impossible (for example, due to bans on protest), new protest cultures emerge, which mobilise fiction-inspired strategies and aesthetics. With the global upsurge in protest movements in the last fifteen years, the aesthetics of protest and activism are attracting increasing scholarly attention.⁴³ Although there is, to my knowledge, no study connecting the *weird genre* to public protest, the weird has been brought to bear on minoritarian languages of resistance to normative discourses. Linking the weird with the queer, for example,

Patricia MacCormack proposes a mobilisation of *weird fiction* in activist tactics by queer and minoritarian groups that seek to ‘challenge authoritarianism and fascism, homogeneity and the dissolution of difference’:

Revolution and revolt and activist tactics could be found when minoritarian folk take ideas and form collectives with the weird of literature and film. Fiction impacts reality just as forcefully as any material entity. Ideology creates force. If the vampires and werewolves and monsters are our kin more than Anthropos, and we are already designated the living dead by the humans, I suggest being living dead may be a queer death form of pique toward thinking and formulating activism together which celebrate the weird as a political and ethical force of resistance to a seemingly perpetual and Sisyphean task of ‘living up’ to counting.⁴⁴

Weird fiction becomes a valuable resource for activist tactics by those who do not have a place in the ‘distribution of the sensible’ and fall outside of normative understandings of what counts as human or citizen.⁴⁵

Weird Protest in Six Episodes

Episode 1. Miniature Bodies: Nano-demonstrations (Russia, 2011–2012)

Between 2011 and 2012, the so-called nano-demonstrations took place across Russia, using miniature toys (for example, Lego figurines, toy soldiers, Kinder Surprise toys, and stuffed animals) instead of humans. The protests addressed political corruption, the disputed outcome of the Russian parliamentary elections, and the state repression of protest.⁴⁶ The trend started in the northern town of Apatity in December 2011, where activists placed dozens of toys in the city’s main square, holding banners with slogans such as ‘I am for clean elections’.⁴⁷ In January 2012, the protests moved to the Siberian city of Barnaul (Figure 1), which gained global fame as ‘the capital of nano-demonstrations’, and from there the protests spread across Russia.⁴⁸ The role of social media in spreading the protest led scholars to approach the nano-demonstrations as a ‘media event’ reproduced by imitation in public and virtual spaces (on the internet): this helped the protest to go viral and the organisers to coordinate actions and generate support.⁴⁹

The nano-demonstrations evaded the risk of physical protest while highlighting the vulnerability of protesting bodies in Russia. Their playful involvement of toy-figures in public protest echoed earlier protest practices expressing nonconformism in the Eastern communist bloc, which often mobilised absurdist or carnivalesque aesthetics. One of these was the ‘Orange Alternative’, an anti-communist underground movement in Poland, which involved the spreading of dwarf-figures through graffiti in Polish cities.⁵⁰ The nano-demonstrations also inspired later protests: in the spring of 2022, a comparable trend, the ‘Little Picketers,’ gained traction in Russia. People placed self-made clay figurines in public places, holding banners with the peace sign,



Figure 1. Tiny toy protesters in Barnaul, Russia, 2012. © Photo by Ivan Krupchik, reproduced by permission of the photographer.

the Ukrainian flag, or anti-war messages protesting the invasion in Ukraine. The figures appeared in various sites, 'on fences and pipes, atop tree branches and railings, and in the balconies of the Bolshoi Theatre and the crevices of statues' in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and elsewhere.⁵¹ These protests, too, depended on social media: their dissemination can be largely credited to the 'little Picket' Instagram account on which people uploaded images of figures they placed in public.⁵² Thus, even though passersby usually removed the figures soon after they were placed, the figures' lives continued in virtual spaces, creating networks of solidarity across geographical borders.

Episode 2. Spectral Bodies: The Hologram Protests (Madrid, 2015)

On 10 April 2015, a demonstration was held in front of the Spanish Parliament in Madrid, featuring holograms instead of actual people (Figure 2).⁵³ This first hologram protest in history was organised by the platform No Somos Delito (NSD; 'We Are Not Crime'), which involved over a hundred associations – lawyers, migrant rights groups, environmental and human rights organisations, and groups associated with the 15-M (or *Indignados*) movement in Spain. The holograms protested the new 'Law of Citizen Security' – or 'Gag law' as its critics disparagingly called it – that the ruling party in Spain had passed in March 2015. This law imposed exorbitant fines for people convening outside of government buildings, de facto prohibiting assemblies or demonstrations at such sites without permission, as well as recordings of police responses to protest. Reinforcing the securitisation of public spaces, the law curtailed the spaces where dissent could be voiced. For



Figure 2. Scene from the 'hologram protest' in front of the Spanish Parliament in Madrid, 2015. © Photo by Alberto Escudero (at <<https://www.alberto-escudero.com/>>), reproduced by permission of the photographer.

months prior to the protest, NSD ran the website 'Holograms for Freedom' (hologramasporlalibertad.org), prompting people to upload written or voice-messages or images of their faces, many of which were incorporated in the hologram protest.⁵⁴ The protest was first filmed in a town close to Madrid, and the protesters were projected as holograms in front of the Parliament in April 2015.

The citizens-as-holograms protested processes of dispossession of public space and the restriction of civic freedoms. As liminal figures between presence and absence, these holograms both performed the ostracising of dissenting bodies from public space and creatively countered this expulsion by asserting their presence *as* and *through* absence.

Episode 3. Uncoordinated Bodies: A Women's 'Silly Walk' (Athens, 2019)

The next episode takes us from toy figures and ghosts back to human bodies: this time, the disobedient female bodies disrupting a national military-style parade in Athens on 28 October 2019. This date marks a Greek national holiday commemorating the rejection by the Greek dictator Ioannis Metaxas of the ultimatum issued by Mussolini on 28 October 1940, and the ensuing Greek resistance against the invading Italian forces. On that day, parades take place across the country, with the participation of military, schoolchildren, and many other groups. Ten young women taking part in one of these parades disrupted the synchronised movement of the parading bodies by

performing a ‘silly walk’, which evoked the 1970 Monty Python ‘silly walk’ by John Cleese.

Their intervention caused intense public debate, sparking scathing comments by citizens on social media who saw the women’s act as an affront to the patriotic spirit of the national holiday and those it commemorates. In the manifesto-like statement the women published in a major Greek newspaper on 30 October, they presented their intervention as an act of freedom, which they saw as incompatible with the parade’s militarism. Resisting the ‘homeland of the normal, the predictable, the excellent’ they asserted their belonging to ‘other homelands,’ those of ‘the disposable, the unpredictable, the living’.⁵⁵ By ‘weirding’ the coordinated, straight walk of the parade, their intervention introduced a wayward, queer movement in public space by subjects excluded by dominant ideologies of patriotism, nativism, and patriarchy in Greek society. The site they chose for their intervention – the municipality of Nea Philadelphia/Nea Chalkidona – was purposeful in that respect: according to their statement, they chose a neighbourhood built by refugees, those ‘predominantly disposable people and outcasts of Greek society, then and now’.⁵⁶

Episode 4. Giant Bodies: The Walk (transnational, 2021–ongoing)

Just as the toys in the nano-demonstrations, the next public performance puts a toy – a puppet – centre stage, this time taking us from a minuscule to a giant scale. ‘The Walk’ is a participatory performance – also referred to as a ‘travelling art festival’⁵⁷ or ‘performative journey’⁵⁸ – starring ‘little Amal’, a 3.5-metre-tall puppet of a Syrian refugee girl on tour around the world. This ongoing project was sparked by the migration crisis following the Syrian civil war and seeks to call attention to the rights of migrants and refugees, particularly children. It was initially conceived by artists associated with Good Chance theatre, founded by Joe Robertson and Joe Murphy in 2015 with and for asylum seekers in the migrant camp of Calais.⁵⁹ Starting from Gaziantep at the Syrian–Turkey border, Amal continued her walk and, since July 2021, ‘has travelled to 160 towns and cities in 16 countries and been welcomed by two million people on the street and by tens of millions online’.⁶⁰

Besides Europe, in 2023 Amal toured in Canada, the US, Mexico, and Australia. An ambitious transnational project, it has garnered publicity, awards, and support by individuals, institutions, and multiple partners, including artists, theatres, communities, municipalities, arts and humanitarian organisations, local government, and civic society.⁶¹ Designed by the South African Handspring Puppet Company, Amal has a large touring team behind it, comprising ‘puppeteers, stage managers, producers, technicians and videographers from 15 countries’, under the artistic direction of Palestinian Amir Nizar Zuabi.⁶² Amal’s visits to each site take different forms, adjusted to the communities she meets: parades, public theatre and dance performances, concerts, art installations, visits to places of worship, games with children,

festivals, and other events. These appearances are conceived as ‘acts of welcome’ by local communities and create room for ‘spontaneous, unpredictable audience interactions’.⁶³ Her appearances are documented in an online archive of videos, photographs, and testimonials on the project’s digital platform.

‘The Walk’ was enthusiastically received by the public and the press around the world, although Amal, as we will see, was not welcomed in all places she visited. The publicity it drew is also reflected in the numerous studies devoted to the project, which surpass the scholarly attention all other events in this essay attracted.



Figure 3. Little Amal in Rochdale, 2 November 2021. Part of the performance ‘The Walk’. © Photo by Donald Judge, at <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/donaldjudge/51651275884/>>. Available on Wikimedia Commons, licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic licence.

Episode 5. Alien Bodies: The Polytechnic Graffiti (Athens, 2015)

Abstract, alien-like figures take centre stage in this next intervention, which comprises a massive graffiti that appeared on the building of the historic Athens Polytechnic University in March 2015, at the peak of the Greek debt crisis (2009–2018). The Polytechnic is a neoclassical building that has been a national symbol of resistance to the Greek dictatorship (1967–1974) since the ‘Polytechnic student uprising’ in 1973.⁶⁴ Its exterior walls – almost permanently ‘covered with banners, posters, and graffiti’ – have been sending a ‘consistent message’ of ‘resistance [...] against political oppression’ over several decades.⁶⁵ The 2015 graffiti covered the building’s southern annex

façades, and even spilled over to the sidewalk, nearby street lamps, and bus stops (Figure 4).⁶⁶ The artists created a black background on which they painted shaded white and grey ‘serpent-like’, alien or ‘monstrous’ shapes and figures, at times evoking, as Artemis Leontis writes, ‘Solaris-style aliens, at other times dissolving like salt crystals into chaos’.⁶⁷ Entangled in massive constellations and ‘sweeping dancelike movements’,⁶⁸ these figures had no clear beginning or end and were not recognisable as distinct entities but as an alien assemblage that could have come straight out of weird fiction.

The graffiti’s massive scale and darkness, covering a neoclassical building that is a monument of Greece’s political history, struck a chord in Greek society, generating heated debate and making headlines in the Greek media.⁶⁹ Most responses by the media, the public, and politicians – from the right and the left – saw the work as ‘vandalism’ and ‘sacrilege against a monument of Greece’s democracy’.⁷⁰ Some, however, hailed the graffiti as ‘visual sabotage’, a ‘masterpiece’, and a ‘defining event’. An anonymous spokesman of the artists revealed that a small crew, self-identified as Icos&Case, had painted this in the course of three days, dressed as city street employees. The graffiti was short-lived: within six weeks, it was erased and the building’s walls were restored.⁷¹



Figure 4. A portion of the graffiti on the west wall of the Polytechnic university building along Stournari Street, Athens, 2015. © Photo by Grigoria Vryttia, reproduced by permission of the photographer.

Episode 6. Organ without a Body: The 'Living Ball' (Thessaloniki, 2023)

The following episode is connected to the Polytechnic too, although it took place in another Greek city, Thessaloniki. This intervention unfolded during a large-scale public march on 17 November 2023, the day commemorating the victims of the junta's violent invasion into the Polytechnic school, occupied by students, in 1973 (see note 64). The march in 2023 was also accompanied by banners, flags, and chants in solidarity with Palestinian people in the ongoing Israel–Gaza war. During the protest, a large, unevenly shaped, flesh-coloured 'ball' appeared suddenly in front of the demonstrators, rolling along with them and occasionally stopping (Figures 5 and 6). The 'strange "living" ball', as it was referred to in the press, baffled demonstrators and passersby: some watched or filmed it from a distance, others hesitantly touched it, and someone even tried to stick his head in it (Figure 6).⁷² The 'ball' was made by different kinds of fabric stitched together in a strange patchwork, but its undefinable shape, uneven surfaces, sutures, and colours in various shades of red, alluded to flesh: a heart or other organ without a body.⁷³ The intervention turned out to be the work of an artist, a Master's student from the School of Fine Arts.⁷⁴ When interviewed after the event, she refused to give this creature a label that would end its open-ended signifying force.

Fiction, Reality and the Unbearable Lightness of Play

The way these events negotiated the relation between fiction and reality – and by extension, seriousness and non-seriousness, reality and representation, play and politics – is key to understanding the modality of their intervention in the public sphere. A 'living ball' rolling along with demonstrators without any clear intention other than its autotelic movement; lego figurines protesting in a public square; a giant puppet representing refugee children; women walking in uncoordinated movements like broken toy soldiers; holograms haunting public space like ghosts from another realm; and alien figures enveloping a national monument. The fictionality of these events was registered on different levels, in their framing and/or reception as either: (i) mimetic in character (that is, *representations* of protest rather than actual protest); (ii) events with fictional (inanimate, artificial, monstrous, fantastic, plastic) protagonists; (iii) 'non-serious' events that belonged to entertainment rather than politics; or (iv) instances of play. The way the public, the press, and the authorities responded to the events' fictionality – whichever form it took – is revealing of the double-edged power of fiction in the public sphere.

The fictionality and weird aesthetics of many of these events ran the risk of detaching them from the political sphere: they could be brushed aside as 'just fiction', 'play', or entertainment rather than serious protest. In some cases, from the perspective of the authorities, their (assumed) non-seriousness and playful or weird aesthetics presumably hollowed out their political potential. But when serious or 'normal' protests with human participants are restricted or banned, fiction retains its freedom, to use Jacques Derrida's well-known



Figures 5 and 6. Scenes from the intervention of a 'living ball' during a demonstration on 17 November 2023 in Thessaloniki. © Photos by Alexis Alexiadis, reproduced by permission of the copyright holder, GRTimes.gr.

phrasing, to 'say everything' 'in every way' and to 'defy or lift the law'.⁷⁵ Derrida acknowledges that fiction's freedom is double-edged: it can be a 'powerful political weapon but one which might immediately let itself be neutralised as a fiction. This revolutionary power can become very conservative'.⁷⁶ Subversive as a fictional event might be, it can always be dismissed as

inconsequential and barred from participation in the political: 'it's only fiction' after all.

The mobilisation of fictionality in these events was not only a publicity stunt or eccentric strategy for attracting attention; in most of these cases, it was intrinsically motivated by the necessity to bypass state restrictions. In the hologram protest, the reason the authorities granted permission for this event is telling: the protest was only allowed because it was announced as a film shoot by NSD, that is, a *representation* of protest. As an NSD spokesperson stated, 'We were only able to do it because we got a film shoot permit. [...] A protest permit would not have worked.'⁷⁷ The protest could only unfold under the guise of fiction – understood here as (filmic) representation of 'reality'. Similarly, in the nano-demonstrations in Barnaul, the decision to organise a toy protest was sparked by the refusal of the mayor's office to allow people 'to hold *normal* demonstrations in *normal* places (that is, by humans, in central town squares)' [original emphasis].⁷⁸ The impossibility of the 'normal' – here, a human demonstration – drove them to a weird alliance with nonhuman agents: toys.

The question of whether the nano-demonstrations were protests or a *mimesis* of protest in a game was also raised. In her analysis of the nano-demonstrations, Evgenia Nim asks: 'Is a nanodemonstration a form of protest disguised as a game or a game mimicking protest?'⁷⁹ The authorities did not know how to grapple with this intrusion of the fictional into the real. The police had to seek legal advice on whether protests with nonhuman participants qualified as 'non-sanctioned public events' and required authorisation. The prosecutor's office 'advised that they were public events, and that they could not be held without permit'.⁸⁰ Parodying this process, the nano-demonstration organisers in Barnaul filled an application for a demonstration 'to be attended by [...] "toys from Kinder Surprise (one hundred pieces), Lego figurines (one hundred pieces), toy soldiers (twenty pieces), soft toys (fifteen pieces), miniature cars (ten pieces)".'⁸¹ Although their application was rejected, it managed to 'outweird' the stance of the authorities, transferring the joke on them. According to one of the organisers, '[t]he authorities' attempt to limit citizens' rights to express their position has become absurd', so '[w]e wanted to hyperbolise this attempt and show the absurdity and farce of officials' struggle with their own people'.⁸²

The fictional protagonists of the protest confused the authorities: if the latter would deem the nano-demonstrations a joke, game, or mimicry of protest, they would have to allow them to take place, risking further dissemination of their political message. If they would take them seriously as a political event, they could ban them, but at the risk of ridiculing themselves for feeling threatened by a bunch of toys. This double bind underscored the state's vulnerability, making any response to these protests a lose-lose situation. According to the organisers, 'the policemen themselves were embarrassed by their role as a tool for penalizing "Lego-protesters"'.⁸³ The protesters

capitalised on this confusion by projecting their actions as ‘play’. The exchange registered in a video of the event uploaded by activists is telling in that respect: ‘We have come to play and you are in the way’, the activists told the police, to which the head of the police replied, ‘Well, if you’re playing, then play’.⁸⁴ That permission for these protests was denied suggests that they were deemed threatening. The authorities’ attempts to ridicule the protesters backfired, as the authorities could not handle the spillover of fiction and play into a ‘serious’ political domain.

That protest framed as ‘play’ runs the risk of being ridiculed became painfully palpable in the women’s ‘silly walk’ during the Athens national parade (episode 3), but in a way that also affirmed the event’s disruptive force. In their manifesto-statement published in a Greek newspaper, the women who performed the intervention described it in the normative framework of a military-style parade as a game of toy soldiers (thereby unwittingly connecting it with the toy figures of the nano-demonstrations). While the military engages in ‘wars, bombings, interventions’, they presented their ‘artistic intervention’ as ‘something like play’, describing their movements as those of wind-up toy soldiers that start to unwind or malfunction in response to orders whose messages have ceased to be convincing.⁸⁵ Although their statement suggested a distinction between the ‘seriousness’ of a military-style parade and their act as play, both can in fact be seen as different types of play. After all, as Johan Huizinga wrote in his well-known *Homo Ludens*, ‘The rules of warfare, the conventions of noble living were built up on play-patterns.’⁸⁶ The women’s intervention, then, was not a conflict between a serious public performance (national parade) and play, but a performance that disrupted the rules of another game from within, by performing it differently, *weirdly*. The former game requires the players’ submission to strictly regulated movements, which perform the harmonisation with a national (and, in some of its versions, nativist) narrative, grounded in exclusion of non-Greek citizens, but also of disabled, deviant, queer bodies, that cannot or will not walk in a straight line. Their walk was *weird* in the meaning of the word as wayward, queer, that which deviates from a straight path.

It was this weird movement that connected their act not only to the Monty Python ‘silly walk’,⁸⁷ but also to the aesthetics of the so-called ‘weird wave’ in Greek cinema, which emerged around the time of Greece’s financial crisis.⁸⁸ Specifically – in an act of ‘life imitating art’ – their walk and the animal-like movements and bird-sounds some of them made,⁸⁹ evoked the walk of the female protagonists in Athina Rachel-Tsangari’s film *Attenberg* (2010), in which two friends, Marina and Bella, march together in weird semi-coordinated movements, mimicking animal moves and sounds. The excessive physical performance of Marina and Bella in the film – a mimicry of the animal movements Marina watches in nature documentaries, but also ‘a mockery of “accepted” types of movement (a mockery of a walk, of a dance, of a parade)’ – suggests bodies awkwardly trying to ‘dislocate’ norms they have interiorised.⁹⁰ Their wayward movements can be seen, Marios Psaras argues, as an ‘unapologetic mockery [...] of the act of alignment’⁹¹ that generates what Sara Ahmed calls

‘queer orientations’: ‘those that don’t line up, which by seeing the world “slantwise” allow other objects to come into view’.⁹² The similar walk by women in real life, during an actual parade in Athens, was an even more blatant disruption of the normative space of the nation, which drew attention to the exclusions that constitute the national space by causing its ‘wind-up soldiers’ to momentarily malfunction.

The unbearable lightness of this playful act was met with indignant reactions by officials and others on social media, many of whom dismissed it as non-sensical and absurd: an offensive children’s game that unsettled the adult business of a national parade. Accordingly, the act’s agents were infantilised: the mayor of the municipality in which the disrupted parade took place described the women as ‘pathetic’, ‘ridiculous’ individuals.⁹³

The double-edged potential of fiction as either a revolutionary political tool or a conservative, non-serious force can indeed be traced in the divergent reception of some of the events under discussion. The domestic reception of the nano-demonstrations in Russia, for instance, ranged from enthusiasm (‘elegant’, ‘witty’, ‘creative’) to dismissal and ridicule (‘a circus’) by those who found that ‘toy protests might be of value to the arts, but politics require real mass actions’ and that ‘[s]uch events [...] create a cheap sensation and appear exotic [but they] discredit any civic movement’.⁹⁴ Responses to the nano-demonstrations in the international press also testify to fiction’s double-edged function in the public realm. On the one hand, the Western press was sympathetic to the protests. Readers referred to the protests as ‘subversive’, ‘genius’, ‘brilliant’, ‘inventive and funny’, or ‘a fantastically imaginative way to draw the authorities into lampooning themselves’.⁹⁵ On the other hand, many mainstream Western media, Nim argues, framed the protests as ‘infotainment’ rather than serious interventions, somewhat neutralising the events as funny rather than politically transformative.⁹⁶

The reception of the hologram protest in Madrid by local and international media is also telling in that respect. In the Spanish media the event did not attract political attention and was reduced ‘into a minor entertainment anecdote’ without much attention for its political content.⁹⁷ By contrast, international media covered it extensively as a serious *political* event: it was in fact the demonstration’s coverage by international media that sparked wide international criticism of Spain’s ‘gag law’.⁹⁸

In the case of ‘The Walk’ (episode 4), the reception of Amal’s appearances as a *political* event rather than a cultural festival was affirmed not only by the positive publicity it elicited but also negatively, by the backlash it caused in certain places. The presence of a ‘harmless’ puppet did not only spark scenes of welcome but also fierce protest from far-right and religious groups. In Calais, where the refugee camps served as a source of inspiration for the project itself, the mayor refused to grant the organisers a permit when Amal arrived on its beaches.⁹⁹ In Greece, Rosaria Ruffini writes, ‘the body of Amal

became a political battleground' in debates on migration in a polarised country that had been one of the main entry points of reception for refugees since 2015.¹⁰⁰ Her presence, some felt, would encourage more refugees to come.¹⁰¹ In the city of Larisa, far-right protesters threw things at her, while her planned meeting with children in Meteora – a rock formation on which a complex of Greek Orthodox monasteries is built – was prohibited by local councillors, as, in their perception, the presence of a 'Muslim' doll in this religious site threatened to contaminate its sanctity.¹⁰² Her planned appearance in Athens sparked a riot between far-right protesters, 'anti-authoritarian counter-protesters', and the police, leading the organisers to cancel parts of her appearance.¹⁰³ As in the nano-demonstrations, the push and pull between fiction and reality, play and politics, serious and non-serious, was registered on social media. 'It appears that Greek rightwing extremists are scared of a doll', someone wrote under the Facebook post about the cancellation of Amal's event in Athens.¹⁰⁴

As we have seen, the fictionality of some of the above-discussed events allowed their initiators to circumvent the state's restrictions to public expression (hologram protests, nano-demonstrations). Despite attempts to neutralise their political force by relegating them to the 'trivial' space of play and fiction, fiction came back as a revenant to haunt state discourse and 'outweird' its anti-democratic logic.¹⁰⁵ But on what terms did these events negotiate the relation between fiction and reality? I argue that the muddling of the fiction/reality boundary, as we see it from the responses they elicited, did not entail its erasure. Their force, in fact, emerged from highlighting the *conflict* between fiction and reality – even as they entwined the two – as a condition for critique of current social realities and for the imagination of alternative worlds.

The entwinement *and* conflict between fiction and reality is constitutive of the weird as a genre too. The weird, as explained above, is not an escape to a fantasy, but uses realist settings, twisted by the intrusion of weird elements, nonhuman agents, shifting scales, alien perspectives, and glimpses of other worlds. If the 'willing suspension of disbelief' generally marks the attitude of readers of fiction, and aesthetic experience at large, this willing immersion into a fictional world that we know is unreal or impossible works differently in the weird genre compared with genres like fantasy or fairy tales. In *fantasy*, the suspension of disbelief is complete: we are offered a fully-fledged alternative world and we submit to the illusion that it is real in order to lose ourselves in the experience. In the realm of the *weird*, the suspension of disbelief can never be complete: the illusion to which we submit is always punctured by the pressure of conflicting worlds, scales or perspectives, and the tension between the real and those elements that do not belong, generating what Fisher calls 'a sense of wrongness'.¹⁰⁶

The suspension of disbelief also marks the modality of *play*. Play is also 'make-believe', but, as in the weird, the separation from 'reality' during play is not complete. In his ontology of play, Eugen Fink questions the dichotomy

between play and seriousness or play and reality, arguing that play is part of reality.¹⁰⁷ Play, Frissen and others argue, differs from 'sheer fantasy' in 'that the player is simultaneously in the ordinary world and in the play-world' and is 'aware of being in both worlds simultaneously'.¹⁰⁸ While being immersed in play, we are aware of the interference between the two worlds. Sometimes this interference is even a prerequisite: in the women's 'silly walk', for instance, the disruptive effect of their performance hinged on the interference of their 'play' with the parade's 'seriousness'.

The protest events under discussion invited fiction into reality while breaking with the suspension of disbelief. The protesting holograms in Madrid and the toys on Russian squares did not collapse the distinction between the fictional (or virtual) and the real by creating the illusion that holograms or toys are real. Rather, they used fiction to draw attention to a reality that should not be normalised: a public space marked by the *expulsion* of real (dissenting) bodies. The sense of wrongness that emerged from the fiction/reality clash had a demystifying function. The presence of holograms and toys in public pierced through the neoliberal fantasy of 'crisis ordinariness' to reintroduce *crisis* in public space as conflict, dissent, critique. Instead of making people forget the 'real', the spectres and toys highlighted their missing human counterparts. At the same time, by the grace of fiction, they intimated an alternative public space and possible world within the 'real' that disrupted what is perhaps the most pervasive suspension of disbelief today: the immersion in the narrative that 'there is no alternative' which marks the global totality Fisher famously called 'capitalist realism' since the fall of Eastern bloc communism.¹⁰⁹ In the protests, the reality that people are asked to accept as a new normal, re-emerged as weird, in need of an *otherwise*.

In 'The Walk', the use of a giant puppet also ruptured the willing suspension of disbelief, but only to reconstruct it again, to a different end: as I will show in the next section, although the puppet's artificiality and scale pronounced its fictionality, the public affectively responded to the puppet as if she were *human*, projecting emotions and thoughts onto her. 'The Walk' created a human/nonhuman assemblage that issued an alternative form of (collective) agency in public, disengaged from the Western notion of the autonomous sovereign subject. To unpack the ethico-political implications of such weird assemblages, in the next section, I scrutinise Amal's aesthetic and ontological make-up alongside those of the Polytechnic graffiti (episode 5) and the 'living ball' (episode 6), which straddled the line between animate and inanimate, human and nonhuman.

Weirding (Human) Protest; Or, When Puppets, Organs and Aliens Take to the Streets

In The Walk (episode 4), Amal's torso comprises a transparent rib-like structure, within which a puppeteer directs her movements, in collaboration with two puppeteers standing next to her to control her arm movements (Figure

3). Amal is mute but the puppeteer can move her enormous eyes so that she can watch the people she encounters, facing them ‘with the enigmatic serenity of a mystical epic statue’.¹¹⁰ In a Brechtian manner, Amal projects her fictional status, provoking disidentification.¹¹¹ Her artificial, nonhuman status is also foregrounded by her makers, Basil Jones and Adrian Kohler. In an online interview, Kohler stated that Amal ‘is not real’ but ‘an artificial performer’.¹¹² Instead of hiding the puppet’s internal mechanism to construct the illusion that she moves autonomously, its makers made sure the public sees ‘how the illusion works’ by making its ‘interior apparatus’ visible.¹¹³ We are thus made aware ‘that the puppet as an autonomous being is a fictional construct’.¹¹⁴ This ‘continuous and deliberate denial of fiction’,¹¹⁵ Ruffini argues, activates the spectator’s gaze, inviting the audience ‘to recreate her in their own imagination’.¹¹⁶

If the giant puppet was meant to ‘represent’ refugee children and raise empathy and hope (‘Amal’ is Arabic for ‘hope’), its estranging aesthetics deviate from a realist regime of representation: instead of a real-to-life child, we have a nonhuman entity, whose colossal size and carnivalesque, if not somewhat grotesque, appearance may at first glance counteract the claim to empathy and identification – *if* one assumes that empathy would be more easily achieved through a relatable, human-sized doll. Indeed, critics have pointed out the paradox of an inanimate object prompting us to ‘recognise the humanity in the bodies of refugees and migrants’.¹¹⁷ The visible controlling of her movements by three puppeteers symbolically counteracts the agency her performance claims for refugees. The puppet’s aesthetics breaks with the photojournalistic type of realism that dominates representations of the migrant crisis. How does Amal’s weird, nonhuman aesthetics intervene in this regime of representation?

Documented interactions of people with Amal suggest that she is treated as a living being that can move people profoundly.¹¹⁸ According to Jones, there is a desire ‘for her to be a living being’ which is why many people talk to her directly when they meet her even though they ‘can see that she is being manipulated by somebody’; ‘their desire for her to be alive adds to her life and amplifies her life as experience by them’. In other words, she acts as a projection screen for people who ‘give her reality’.¹¹⁹

Amal’s ontological status shifts through the ways people respond to her. She has been seen as a projection screen, a symbol, a quasi-religious figure in a procession, a moving or ‘mystical epic statue’, and a ghost, mediating between the living and the millions of dead or disappeared migrant children.¹²⁰ David Gurnham sees Amal as a returning ghost: in her ‘reappearances in different cities’, she becomes ‘a sign that such a journey was made by innumerable others’, making sure that the dead retain agency by haunting us in the present.¹²¹ Amal’s makers had previously declared to have been inspired by the belief ‘in the life and agency of all things, including the dead’, which is part of many religions in Africa.¹²² The use of an

inanimate puppet as a figure for migrants also draws attention to the status of undocumented migrants as 'living dead', condemned to social invisibility.¹²³ Yet this migrant-puppet has grown in scale, becoming hyper-visible, or, according to Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson, 'too big to ignore'.¹²⁴

Her scale and transnational movement connect her to the spectre of another child, who also powerfully entered the public sphere through fiction, back in 1994, when Nelson Mandela opened his inaugural presidential address to the first democratically elected South African Parliament with Ingrid Jonker's poem 'The child who was shot dead by soldiers in Nyanga' ('Die kind wat dood geskiet is deur soldate by Nyanga', 1963).¹²⁵ In that poem, a South African child murdered in real life by soldiers assumes an afterlife in poetry, in which, just like Amal, it gradually grows into a giant, roaming a world without borders and passports, as we read in the final lines:

the child who became a giant travels through the whole world
Without a pass.¹²⁶

While Amal's aesthetics accommodate these intertextual associations across spatiotemporal orders and across fiction and social reality, her ontological make-up is best described as an *assemblage*. Her perception as alive issues from a synergy between puppet, puppeteers, and spectators/participants. The puppeteers have to coordinate their movements as if they were one body – what Jones and Kohler call 'groupmind'.¹²⁷ Spectators become participants in the 'acts of welcome' organised around Amal and are the ones who bring her to life, as it were, by projecting emotions and experiences onto her. Amal is not only a product of *human* interdependence, but a human/nonhuman assemblage that generates a form of collective agency through the interdependence of humans, nonhuman beings, and objects in a fragile world.

As 'The Walk' turns public space into a transnational, moving theatre – though not without obstacles – Amal functions less as a performer and more as the stage itself for other people to 'perform'. Therein lies perhaps the efficacy of her nonhuman form, her transparent structure, even her silence: Amal's weird aesthetics disengage her from the ethical imperative of an accurate, realistic representation of migrants in a humanitarian representational regime – in journalism, politics, art, literature – dominated by the trope of (agentless) victimhood.¹²⁸ Amal, Ruffini aptly notes, 'prompts the audience to critically consider the positionality and the perspective of their gaze', turning this performance into 'an unspoken counter-narrative about migration shaped by the reactions and imaginaries of its multiple publics'.¹²⁹ Her nonhuman scale symbolically counteracts the 'minor' status of refugee children and prevents spectators from appropriating her as a victim or someone in need of *their* patronage, protection, saving. From an object of people's gaze, the refugee child turns into a subject casting her gaze back at those

who look at her, shaping the viewers by confronting them with their own pre-conceptions, expectations, and hopes.

Through her uncanniness, fictionality, and resistance to familiar, realist frameworks, Amal forges an alternative form of agency in public space, in a liminal zone between the animate and inanimate, the fictional and real, and activity and passivity. Amal is neither omnipotent (she is inanimate, dependent on others) nor passive and powerless (she has an intense effect on people), but a weirdly resonant entity, in the way Hartmut Rosa understands *resonance*: as an uncontrollable and potentially transformative encounter that starts ‘with an active receptivity’¹³⁰ and suggests ‘a form of *being-in-the-world*’ whereby subjects appear as ‘neither omnipotent nor powerless, but rather *as semi-empowered*’ [original emphasis].¹³¹ The agency ‘The Walk’ puts forward transcends the perpetrator/victim and powerful/powerless binaries and moves away from an autonomous, sovereign subjectivity: it is grounded in relationality, interdependence, and vulnerability, forging a space where dispossessed people are not solely framed as either victims or threatening agents.

In ‘The Walk’, the ‘as if’ that marks the puppet’s perception as a real girl does not generate a complete illusion (as in fantasy) but a sense of wonder. This wonder does not so much amount to a religious experience (as some have argued) but, I contend, comes close to what Sara Ahmed has called ‘critical wonder’, that is, a sense of wonder that emerges through the awareness of the constructedness of ‘reality’.¹³² Many spectators respond to the puppet ‘as if’ it were alive, without, however, being allowed to forget her fictional status (we see the puppeteer inside). Amal’s weird aesthetics keeps underlining the distinction between reality and fiction, even as she walks in a zone forged by their entwinement.

Amal was multiply constructed – ghost, moving statue, quasi-religious figure, human, enemy – by different publics who projected their experiences, emotions, and associations onto her. By contrast, the ‘Polytechnic graffiti’ in Athens (episode 5) and the ‘living ball’ (episode 6) during the Polytechnic demonstration in Thessaloniki blocked such semantic transactions. The alien aesthetics of both interventions precluded their inclusion in familiar representational regimes. The Polytechnic graffiti’s aesthetics, comprising black-and-white, fluid shapes and lacking any linguistic framing, was perplexing. It could be linked to various artistic traditions, including expressionism and ‘destruction art’,¹³³ and integrated (post)modern, classical, punk, sci-fi, post-apocalyptic, and graphic novel aesthetics.¹³⁴ The *weird* may be the most apt descriptor for its hybrid visual language. Massive in scale, both horrific and mesmerising, the graffiti echoed weird fiction’s spillage of ‘awe and horror from “beyond” back into the everyday’.¹³⁵ Its tentacular figures enveloped the building’s walls and parts of the sidewalk and nearby street lamps, as if an alien force had taken over a site overdetermined by human (national, political) history. Scholars have approached it as an ‘emblematic public work of

the crisis period¹³⁶ and it has even been called an ‘Athenian Guernica’, with its dark aesthetics seen as reflective of the disastrous effects of the crisis and austerity politics on the Greek educational system.¹³⁷ Its framing through the crisis captures part of its reception but does not make its intervention in the crisis-ridden Athenian public space less enigmatic: its objective and message remain opaque.

In a city filled with graffiti, why did this particular intervention cause such shock and awe, sparking intense public debate? According to Leontis, the graffiti was an act of ‘overwriting’, amounting to ‘a visual sabotage of the thing it covered over’. This ‘thing’ was not just the Polytechnic building’s walls, which are permanently covered with political posters and wall writings, but also its historical symbolism. ‘Was the giant black-and-white graffiti an overwriting of the [...] artless graffiti and national ceremony that were hanging on the building, in an artistic effort to recover a rawer sense of the original youth-led mobilization [of 1973]?’ Leontis asks, ‘[o]r was it an overwriting of the [building as] memorial, in an attempt to wipe out the significance of the student occupation forty-two years before?’¹³⁸

What shocked people particularly was the darkness of the black paint on the whitish surface of a neoclassical building: an architectural style that evokes Greece’s classical past, inflected through its appropriation by (Western) Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and its reintroduction in nineteenth-century Greece (after its independence from the Ottomans) by its Bavarian King, Otto.¹³⁹ ‘Smearing’ a neoclassical building arouses the national anxiety of the contamination of Greece’s classical past, which has largely determined the self-identity of the modern Greek nation. On the building’s neoclassical exterior, the graffiti imposed a disturbing alien aesthetics that struck a discordant note in Greek national narratives and ‘transformed’, Leontis argues, ‘the social and political topography of Hellenism’.¹⁴⁰ The work confronted classicist aesthetics and its connotation of civilisational capital with a weird language that turned a political and national monument into a cipher of an open future, written in a language that is *weird* because it is, to quote Timothy Morton, ‘beyond concept’, as if it holds a message from a future ‘different from the present’.¹⁴¹ The graffiti’s political intervention in a crisis-ridden country ravaged by neoliberal austerity politics lay, perhaps, in this opening up of the past to alternative future visions, beyond the monologic austerity narrative of the present.

A similar opaqueness marked the ‘living ball’ that rolled along with demonstrators in Thessaloniki in 2023 (episode 6). Faced with persistent questions by journalists from TV-crews directly after her intervention – such as, ‘What does it symbolise?’; ‘Does it have to do with Palestine?’; ‘Does it refer to the blood-soaked stones of Palestine?’ – the artist refused to assign an allegorical, symbolic meaning or authorial intention to it.¹⁴² She did not confirm it was depicting a heart, but referred to it as a ‘being’ or ‘creature’ ‘without human

features' that nevertheless 'participates in the commons' and 'becomes socialized' by going to the demonstration.¹⁴³

Its organ-like appearance metonymically connects it to a body – human or not – yet it does not function as a *pars pro toto*: rather than 'standing for' a human body, it constituted an entity and an event without clear origin, purpose or frame of reference. The baffling aesthetics of this nonhuman, genderless creature along with the artist's refusal to signify it, may account for its tagging in news reports as 'weird/strange' ('περίεργη') or 'mysterious'. Contesting representationalism¹⁴⁴ and 'the excessive power granted to language to determine what is real',¹⁴⁵ the 'living ball' (a description I, too, need to place in quotation marks) resisted its subsumption into the symbolic order, garnering only catachrestic descriptions. The quotation marks that accompanied its descriptions in news reports recall the bafflement of humans when confronted with the unconventional, indescribable monsters of weird fiction. Deviating from the traditional Western teratology of werewolves, vampires, or ghosts, as Miéville writes, weird monsters are carriers of 'unrepresentable Reals', uncontainable 'in our inadequate symbolic system'.¹⁴⁶ The confusion the creature caused to protesters and the authorities at the demonstration was registered in media accounts – 'The heart that [...] confused the police', we read in the title of a news item about the event.¹⁴⁷ The occasional laughter it triggered marked people's unease from their perplexing affective encounter with the creature.

How does an organ-like creature, to quote its creator, 'participate in the commons'? This was, like Amal, a human/nonhuman assemblage, rolling thanks to the movements of the artist inside it. Although it seemed to act autonomously, without transparent intentionality – was it a separate protest act, or was it part of, and in solidarity with, the demonstration that was unfolding? – its performativity in public space took shape in the 'intra-action' of the ball and the protesting human bodies it accompanied. Following what Karen Barad calls a 'relational ontology', the human and nonhuman components in this intervention should not be distinguished in terms of subject (artist), object (ball), and observer (people at the demonstration) but can ontologically be understood as 'agentially intra-acting "components"'.¹⁴⁸ This relational ontology generates a 'posthumanist performativity', which involves human and nonhuman forms of agency, questioning the 'differential categories of "human" and "nonhuman"'.¹⁴⁹ The ball's resistance to being identified, categorised, or granted political partisanship, reintroduced 'eventness' – an incalculable irruption of otherness – in a public demonstration marked by predictable iterability as part of the Polytechnic uprising's annual commemoration.

The creature's otherness in an all-too-familiar scene – considering that demonstrations are a common sight in Greek public space – unsettled what Jacques Rancière calls the given 'distribution of the sensible'. An entity that could have come out of the pages of a weird story, and was not recognisable

as a political subject, claimed a part in the commons by joining a demonstration, without, however, being appropriated by it. It thereby gestured at those excluded 'from participation in what is common to the community' and have no part in it as citizens, human or not.¹⁵⁰ Although it did not contest the demonstration's message – if anything, it was perceived as an unexpected ally – it disrupted the lines of (political) identification in a traditional demonstration. Its weird spillover in public space introduced 'lines of fracture and disincorporation into imaginary collective bodies',¹⁵¹ suggesting that, to speak with Rancière, the 'channels for political subjectivization are not those of imaginary identification but those of "literary" disincorporation'.¹⁵²

Conclusion

The interventions I have discussed mobilised fiction and weird aesthetics to repoliticise public space as an arena of democratic conflict that accommodates the imagination of the *otherwise*. By injecting contemporary contexts of 'crisis ordinariness' – in its varied forms – with weird figures and human/non-human assemblages, they straddled the line between fiction and reality without erasing it: instead of effectuating a full suspension of disbelief by seeking to immerse the public in a fantasy, these world-making interventions mobilised fiction to draw attention to competing or different versions of the present and the future.

Evoking figures and aesthetics of the weird, these events transgressed human scales, confounded ontological and epistemological boundaries, twisted normative human bodies or sought human/nonhuman alliances to address the shifting place of the human in public space. The cohabitation of fiction and reality in these interventions highlighted the weirdness of a dystopian 'new normal' shaped by the monologic narrative of capitalist realism, but also intimated the possibility of inhabiting multiple spatiotemporal orders, ontological states, and worlds: worlds in which what seems impossible in our realities becomes temporarily possible with the help of fiction and nonhuman agents. Thus, the weird/queer/non-/trans-human forms that they mobilised became carriers of political hope for alternative futures, against the bleak odds of the present.

The weird aesthetics of these events served different functions: (i) to highlight *and* counter the expulsion of the human from public space – especially versions of the 'human' that do not meet the criteria for legitimate public presence (for example, political dissidents, undocumented migrants, queer, non-normative bodies); (ii) to reimagine public space as a more inclusive, playful arena for democratic politics; and (iii) to energise fiction and aesthetics as political forces in public space, able to challenge a given distribution of the sensible and forge alternative forms of agency. Specifically, they turned a public space that was restricted by authoritarian forces into an arena for 'serious', disruptive play (nano-demonstrations); they 'weirded' the regulated movements of parading bodies by leading them into a queer, uncoordinated

choreography of waywardness by and for those excluded by ethnonationalist narratives ('silly walk'); they reintroduced dissenting bodies banned from public space as holographic 'revenants' (hologram protests); they challenged European (and global) borders through the transnational, decolonial movement of a giant puppet that broke with the realist regime in the 'migration crisis' ('The Walk'); and they reintroduced an incalculable event into the frame of a traditional demonstration through an undefinable creature that claimed a part in the commons ('living ball').

In the landscape shaped by the universalisation of neoliberal capitalism and its 'politics without an alternative',¹⁵³ speculative fabulation becomes a crucial ingredient for pluralising the public sphere. Fictionality and the weird, in Marshall's words, have 'a major role to play in the conceptual work of the present'.¹⁵⁴ The mobilisation of fiction and weird aesthetics in protest should not be idealised: this is by no means a 'recipe' for democratising public space. It involves several risks, including the risk of activist practices not being taken seriously and being brushed aside as entertaining, funny, vague, or shallow publicity stunts. Another danger lies in the co-optation of weird aesthetics by populist, far-right, and fascist interventions in public, promoting exclusionary, racist worldviews and forms of dehumanisation – let us not forget that the weird genre's early articulations in Lovecraft's fiction were imbued with racist and sexist ideologies. As the valence of the weird in public culture increases, one should also reckon with the frequent co-optation and commodification of weird aesthetics as fashionable, spectacular, sexy, which may also infiltrate the logic of activist practices. Aylin Kuryel and Begum Firat aptly address this danger in their critique of the reification of creativity in activist practices, which sometimes 'becomes a goal in itself'.¹⁵⁵ Although the events discussed in this essay involved some of these risks, their weird aesthetics, I argue, did not serve a desire for creativity for creativity's sake: their use of this aesthetics was motivated by political conditions that demanded a rethinking of the forms and aesthetics of protest in today's public space.

One of the main desiderata of weird fiction and the 'weird turn' in posthumanist theories is the imagination of *nonhuman* perspectives and scales.¹⁵⁶ The weird figures in the protest events I have discussed carried, I argue, a somewhat different logic: they mobilised the nonhuman to introduce a different notion of the human, antagonising a humanist tradition grounded in sovereign subjectivity and (colonial) mastery. They projected the human as relational, in interaction (or intra-action) with nonhuman agents, often in weird assemblages. Additionally, the nonhuman figures in these events became markers of dehumanisation, oppression, systemic racism, and authoritarianism. Paradoxically, then, these human/nonhuman alliances worked to rehumanise public space by rethinking the human *through* the nonhuman. And despite the risks involved, the weird aesthetics of these events invite us to approach public space in the 'subjunctive mode', 'as if it were other than it is', reminding us of the 'irreplaceable potentiality of fiction', as Amitav Ghosh writes, to make 'possible the imagining of possibilities'.¹⁵⁷

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Notes

¹ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011), p. 239.

² Giorgio Agamben, 'The Endless Crisis As an Instrument of Power: In Conversation with Giorgio Agamben', Verso Blog, 4 June 2013.

³ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 10.

⁴ Henry Ivy, *Transscalar Critique: Climate, Blackness, Crisis* (Edinburgh University Press, 2023), p. 9.

⁵ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 6.

⁶ Ivy, *Transscalar Critique*, pp. 8–9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁸ Anthi Argyriou, 'From Governmentality to Solidarity: George Drivas' *Laboratory of Dilemmas*', *Journal of Greek Media & Culture*, 7.1 (2021), pp. 49–68 (p. 52).

⁹ Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (Verso, 2013).

¹⁰ Kate Marshall, *Novels by Aliens: Weird Tales and the Twenty-First Century* (University of Chicago Press, 2023), p. 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 79.

¹² Ivy, *Transscalar Critique*, p. 34.

¹³ Marshall, *Novels*, p. 27.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁵ In this special issue, the agency of human/nonhuman assemblages in political resistance and emancipatory struggles also takes centre stage in Laura Bieger's essay 'The Underground Railroad and the Promise of Infrastructure', in a very different context. Bieger scrutinises the 'Underground Railroad' – a structure African Americans used in order to escape from bondage – and its literary and artistic 'mutations' that turned it into a platform of political resistance to 'anti-Black racism' in the twenty-first century as an *infrastructure* comprising 'human and nonhuman actors', including 'fugitives, helpers, hiding places, blankets, garments, vehicles, secret routes and coded messages'.

¹⁶ Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (Repeater Books, 2016), pp. 26, 39.

¹⁷ Ivy, *Transscalar Critique*, p. 33.

¹⁸ Simon Ferdinand, Irene Villaescusa-Illán, and Esther Peeren, 'Introduction: Other Globes: Past and Peripheral Imaginations of Globalization', in *Other Globes: Past and Peripheral Imaginations of Globalization*, ed. by Simon Ferdinand, Irene Villaescusa-Illán, and Esther Peeren (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 1–40 (p. 13).

¹⁹ Sali Tagliamonte and Julian Brooke, 'A Weird (LANGUAGE) Tale: Variation and Change in the Adjectives of Strangeness', *American Speech*, 89.1 (2014), pp. 4–41 (p. 12).

²⁰ *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, qtd. in Emily Alder, *Weird Fiction and Science at the Fin de Siècle* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 8.

²¹ Benjamin Noys and Timothy Murphy, 'Introduction: Old and New Weird', *Genre*, 49.2 (2016), pp. 117–34 (p. 118); Roger Luckhurst, 'The Weird: A Dis/orientation', *Textual Practice*, 31.6 (2017), pp. 1041–61; Emily Alder, *Weird Fiction*, pp. 8–9.

²² Marshall, *Novels*, p. 31.

²³ Noys and Murphy, 'Introduction', pp. 117–34 (pp. 120–21).

²⁴ China Miéville, 'M. R. James and the Quantum Vampire: Weird; Hauntological; Versus and/or and and/or or?', *Collapse: Philosophical Research and Development*, 4 (2008), pp. 105–28; China Miéville, 'Weird Fiction', in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. by M. Bould and others (Routledge, 2009), pp. 510–15; *The New Weird*, ed. by Ann VanderMeer and Jeff VanderMeer (Tachyon Publications, 2008).

²⁵ Luckhurst, 'The Weird', pp. 1041–61 (p. 1041).

²⁶ Timothy Jarvis, 'The Weird, the Posthuman, and the Abjected World-in-Itself: Fidelity to the "Lovecraft Event" in the Work of Caitlín R. Kiernan and Laird Barron', *Textual Practice*, 31.6 (2017), pp. 1133–48 (pp. 1134, 1145); Noys and Murphy, 'Introduction', pp. 117–34 (p. 125).

²⁷ Jordan Carroll and Alison Sperling, 'Weird Temporalities', *Studies in the Fantastic*,

- 9.20 (2020), pp. 1–22 (pp. 3–5); *The New Weird*, ed. by VanderMeer and VanderMeer; Alison Sperling, ‘Acknowledgment Is Not Enough: Coming to Terms with Lovecraft’s Horrors’, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 4 March 2017; Patricia MacCormack, ‘Queering the Weird’, in *Spaces and Fictions of the Weird and the Fantastic*, ed. by Julius Greve and Florian Zappe (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 57–72.
- ²⁸ Marshall, *Novels*, p. 11.
- ²⁹ Selmin Kara and Cydney Langill, ‘Weirding Climate Realism in *Sunshine and Ex Machina*’, *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*, 7.2–3 (2020), pp. 60–80 (pp. 59–60).
- ³⁰ Ivry, *Transscalar Critique*, p. 101; Fisher, *The Weird*; Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (Columbia University Press, 2016).
- ³¹ Alder, *Weird Fiction*, pp. 13, 31.
- ³² *The New Weird*, ed. by VanderMeer and VanderMeer, p. xvi.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 513.
- ³⁴ Lauren Lipski, ‘The Weird: Aesthetic Effect and Power’, *Midwest Journal of Undergraduate Studies*, 8 (2017), pp. 59–80.
- ³⁵ Fisher, *The Weird*, p. 13.
- ³⁶ Henrik Vigh, ‘Crisis and Chronicity: Anthropological Perspectives on Continuous Conflict and Decline’, *Ethnos*, 73.1 (2008), pp. 5–24 (p. 19).
- ³⁷ Miéville presented in Alder, *Weird Fiction*, p. 11.
- ³⁸ Marshall, *Novels*, p. 2; Ivry, *Transscalar Critique*; Arturo Escobar, ‘Thinking-Feeling with the Earth: Territorial Struggles and the Ontological Dimension of the Epistemologies of the South’, *Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana*, 11.1 (2015), pp. 11–32; Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press, 2007).
- ³⁹ *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, ed. by Maria Del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren (Bloomsbury, 2013); Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. by Ray Brassier (Continuum, 2008); Peter Szendy, *Kant in the Land of Extraterrestrials: Cosmopolitical Philosophifictions* (Fordham University Press, 2013).
- ⁴⁰ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016).
- ⁴¹ Graham Harman, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (Zero Books, 2012).
- ⁴² Morton, *Dark Ecology*, p. 159; Gerry Canavan and Andrew Hageman, ‘Introduction: Global Weirding’, *Paradoxa*, 28 (2016), pp. 7–14; *Spaces and Fictions of the Weird and Fantastic: Ecologies, Geographies, Oddities*, ed. by Julius Greve and Florian Zappe (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).
- ⁴³ *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. by Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (Duke University Press, 2016); *Cultural Activism: Practices, Dilemmas, and Possibilities*, ed. by Begum Özden Firat and Aylin Kuryel (Rodopi, 2011); *The Aesthetics of Global Protest: Visual Culture and Communication*, ed. by Aidan McGarry and others (Amsterdam University Press, 2019); *Global Cultures of Contestation: Mobility, Sustainability, Aesthetics, and Connectivity*, ed. by Esther Peeren and others (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); *The Political Aesthetics of Global Protest: The Arab Spring and Beyond*, ed. by Pnina Werbner, Martin Webb, and Kathryn Spellman-Poots (Edinburgh University Press, 2014). See also the numerous studies of the aesthetics in the Gezi protests in Istanbul and the Tahrir square revolution, e.g., Seçil Dağtas, ‘The Politics of Humor and Humor As Politics during Turkey’s Gezi Park Protests’, *Cultural Anthropology*, 13 October 2013; Cansu Soyupak, ‘Barbarians in Istanbul: Different Approaches towards the Urban Transformation Conundrum’, in *Subjects Barbarian, Monstrous, and Wild: Encounters in the Arts and Contemporary Politics*, ed. by Maria Boletsi and Tyler Sage (Brill, 2018), pp. 88–111; Ayman El-Desouky, ‘The Amara on the Square: Connective Agency and the Aesthetics of the Egyptian Revolution’, *Contention: The Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Protest*, 5.1 (2017), pp. 51–83; Walid El Hamamsi and Mounira Soliman, ‘The Aesthetics of Revolution: Popular Creativity and the Egyptian Spring’, in *Popular Culture in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. by Walid El Hamamsy and Mounira Soliman (Routledge, 2012), pp. 246–60.
- ⁴⁴ Forthcoming. I am grateful to the author for allowing me to use the quote prior to its publication.
- ⁴⁵ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill (Continuum, 2006).
- ⁴⁶ Evgenia Nim, ‘Nanodemonstrations as Media Events: Networked Forms of the Russian Protest Movement’, in *Citizen Media*

and Public Spaces, trans. by Ksenia Gusarova, ed. by Mona Baker and Bolette B. Blaagaard (Routledge, 2016), pp. 96–117; Ostap Karmodi, “No Playing with Toys”, Russian Police Tell Protesters’, *Observers*, 31 January 2012.

⁴⁷ Nim, ‘Nanodemonstrations’, pp. 96–117 (p. 106).

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 97.

⁴⁹ For example, the Russian online service VKontakte was used in Barnaul by activists to announce and coordinate protest actions (ibid., passim).

⁵⁰ Juliusz Tyszk, ‘The Orange Alternative: Street Happenings as Social Performance in Poland under Martial Law’, *New Theatre Quarterly*, 14.56 (1998), pp. 311–23; Joy Neumeyer, ‘The Little Picketers of Russia’, *Nation*, 8 April 2022.

⁵¹ Neumeyer, ‘The Little Picketers’.

⁵² Malenkiy_piket account at: <https://www.instagram.com/accounts/login/?next=https%3A//www.instagram.com/malenkiy_piket/>.

⁵³ For a more extensive discussion of the hologram protests, see Maria Boletsi, ‘The Revenge of Fiction in New Languages of Protest: Holograms, Post-truth, and the Literary Uncanny’, *Frame*, 31.2 (2018), pp. 13–34. I draw from this article in my analysis of the hologram protests here, in order to further develop my argument there about the critical force of the fiction/reality conflict.

⁵⁴ Almuneda Escobar López, ‘Invisible Participation: The Hologram Protest in Spain’, *Afterimage*, 43.4 (2016), pp. 8–11 (pp. 9–10); Cristina Flesher Fominaya and Andrea Teti, ‘Spain’s Hologram Protests’, *Open Democracy*, 22 April 2015.

⁵⁵ Marios Dionellis, ‘To “manifesto” ton 10 koritsion tis parelasis’ [The ‘Manifesto’ of the 10 Girls of the Parade], *Efimerida ton Syntakton*, 30 October 2019. All quoted phrases from the girls’ ‘manifesto’ are translated by the author (M. Boletsi).

⁵⁶ Dionellis, ‘To “manifesto”’.

⁵⁷ Suhaila Meera, ‘(Not So) Minor Encounters: Little Amal from *The Jungle to The Walk*’, *Theatre Journal*, 75.3 (2023), pp. 321–40.

⁵⁸ Elisabeth Knittelfelder, ‘Interrelating Necrocities and Borderscapes in the Migration Performances *The Jungle*, *Lampedusa*, and *The Walk*’, *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, 11.1 (2023), pp. 102–19.

⁵⁹ See <<https://www.goodchance.org.uk/>>. Amal was originally a silent character in the play ‘The Jungle’ by Murphy and Robertson (a title referring to the camp in Calais). See Meera, ‘(Not So) Minor’, pp. 321–40 (p. 321).

⁶⁰ See <<https://www.walkwithamal.org/>>.

⁶¹ For the partners, see <<https://www.walkwithamal.org/friends/>>.

⁶² See <<https://www.walkwithamal.org/>>.

⁶³ Rosaria Ruffini, ‘The Walk: A Participatory Performative Action across the Borders of Europe’, in *Postcolonial Publics: Art and Citizen Media in Europe*, ed. by Bolette Blaagaard and others (Edizioni Ca’ Foscari; Venice University Press, 2023), pp. 169–88 (p. 174).

⁶⁴ On 14 November 1973, students from the Polytechnic and Law School occupied the building to protest the Greek junta which was in its sixth year. They created a pirate radio station inviting Greeks to join their resistance and managed to get ten thousand people to gather around the building’s gate. On 17 November, the dictatorship sent army tanks to force the protesters into submission, with one tank crashing through the gate and injuring and killing several students. Since the return of democracy on 24 July 1974, the Polytechnic building has been a memorial site and 17 November is a national holiday.

⁶⁵ Artemis Leontis, ‘Not Another Polytechnic Occupation! Reading the Graffiti on the Athens Polytechnio, March 2015’, *Hot Spots, Fieldsights*, 21 April 2016.

⁶⁶ Konstantina Drakopoulou, ‘The Graffiti Covering of the National Technical University of Athens and Its Politico-cultural Symbolism’, *ARTis ON* 5, 5 (2017), pp. 160–67 (p. 162).

⁶⁷ Leontis, ‘Not Another Polytechnic Occupation!’.

⁶⁸ Drakopoulou, ‘The Graffiti’, pp. 160–67 (p. 162).

⁶⁹ Konstantinos Avramidis, ‘Crises and/of Representations’, *City*, 25.3–4 (2021), pp. 526–42 (p. 540).

⁷⁰ Leontis, ‘Not Another Polytechnic Occupation!’.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² ‘Periergi “zontani” bala ekove voltes stin poreia tou Polytechniou’ [Weird ‘Living’ Ball Was Walking along the Polytechnic March], *GRTIMES*, 17 November 2023.

⁷³ ‘Thessaloniki: Lithike to mystirio me tin “zontani bala” pou “symmeteiche” stin

poreia gia to Polytechnio' [Thessaloniki: The Mystery with the 'Living Ball' that 'Participated' in the March for the Polytechnic Has Been Solved], *GRTIMES*, 17 November 2023.

⁷⁴ The artist's name is not mentioned in online sources and news reports on the event (possibly for reasons of protecting the artist's anonymity).

⁷⁵ Jacques Derrida, 'This Strange Institution Called Literature: An Interview with Jacques Derrida', in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge (Routledge, 1992), pp. 33–75 (p. 36) [original emphasis].

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 38.

⁷⁷ Fominaya qtd. in Flesher Fominaya and Teti, 'Spain's Hologram Protests'.

⁷⁸ Nim, 'Nanodemonstrations', pp. 96–117 (p. 101); Miriam Elder, 'Doll "Protesters" Present Small Problem for Russian Police', *Guardian*, 26 January 2012.

⁷⁹ Nim, 'Nanodemonstrations', pp. 96–117 (p. 105).

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 100.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 101.

⁸² Quoted in Elder, 'Doll "Protesters"'.

⁸³ Nim, 'Nanodemonstrations', pp. 96–117 (p. 102).

⁸⁴ Quoted in ibid., p. 105.

⁸⁵ Dionellis, 'To "manifesto"'. All phrases from their statement are translated by the author (M. Boletsi).

⁸⁶ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Angelico Press, 2016), p. 138.

⁸⁷ Dionellis, 'To "manifesto"'.

⁸⁸ The label 'Greek Weird Wave' was coined by Steve Rose in an article in the *Guardian* (2011). On the weird wave, see Dimitris Papanikolaou, *Greek Weird Wave: A Cinema of Biopolitics* (Edinburgh University Press, 2021).

⁸⁹ According to the news article 'Nea Philadelphia: Oi "agnostes" pou "lerosan" tin parelasi tis 28is' [New Philadelphia: The 'Unknown Women' who 'Sullied' the 28th of March Parade], *FX News*, 29 October 2019.

⁹⁰ Papanikolaou, *Greek Weird Wave*, p. 118.

⁹¹ Marios Psaras, *The Queer Greek Weird Wave: Ethics, Politics and the Crisis of Meaning* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 152.

⁹² Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006), p. 106; Psaras, *The Queer Greek Weird Wave*, p. 151.

⁹³ 'Orgi Vourou gia ton vimatismo neon stin parelasi: "Geloia ypokeimena"' [Vouros's

Outrage for the Walk of Young People in the Parade: 'Ridiculous Individuals'], *LiFO*, 29 October 2019.

⁹⁴ Quoted in Nim, 'Nanodemonstrations', pp. 96–117 (pp. 102, 103, 110).

⁹⁵ Responses I collected from readers' online comments on Elder, 'Doll "Protesters"'.

⁹⁶ Nim, 'Nanodemonstrations', pp. 96–117 (p. 114).

⁹⁷ López, 'Invisible Participation', pp. 8–11 (p. 10).

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 10.

⁹⁹ Chris Allen, 'Little Amal: A Symbolic Puppet, the Problematisation of Immigration and the Rhetoric of Islamophobia', *Journal of Muslims in Europe*, 12.1 (2023), pp. 118–36 (p. 119).

¹⁰⁰ Ruffini, 'The Walk', pp. 169–88 (p. 181).

¹⁰¹ Allen, 'Little Amal', pp. 118–36 (p. 123).

¹⁰² Ruffini, 'The Walk', pp. 169–88 (p. 181); Allen, 'Little Amal', pp. 118–36 (p. 123).

¹⁰³ Niki Kitsantonis and Alex Marshall, 'Giant Puppet Ruffles Feathers on Long Walk through Greece', *New York Times*, 27 August 2021; Ruffini, 'The Walk', pp. 169–88 (p. 181).

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Ruffini, 'The Walk', pp. 169–88 (p. 181).

¹⁰⁵ Boletsi, 'The Revenge', pp. 13–34 (p. 23).

¹⁰⁶ Fisher, *The Weird*, p. 13.

¹⁰⁷ Eugen Fink, 'The Oasis of Happiness: Toward an Ontology of Play', *Yale French Studies*, 41 (1968), pp. 19–30 (p. 19); Valerie Frissen and others, 'Homo Ludens 2.0: Play, Media, and Identity', in *Playful Identities: The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures*, ed. by Valerie Frissen and others (Amsterdam University Press, 2015), pp. 9–50 (p. 15).

¹⁰⁸ Frissen and others, 'Homo Ludens', pp. 9–50 (p. 18).

¹⁰⁹ Fisher, *The Weird*.

¹¹⁰ Ruffini, 'The Walk', pp. 169–88 (p. 175).

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 178.

¹¹² See Basil Jones and Adrian Kohler, 'Segal Talks with Basil Jones and Adrian Kohler', online video recording, The Segal Centre, 17 November 2021.

¹¹³ Ruffini, 'The Walk', pp. 169–88 (p. 178); Gerhard Marx, 'A Matter of Life and Death: The Function of Malfunction in the Work of Handspring Puppet Company', in

- Handspring Puppet Company*, ed. by Jane Taylor (David Krut Publishing, 2009), pp. 227–52 (p. 243).
- ¹¹⁴ Marx, ‘A Matter’, pp. 227–52 (p. 243); qtd. in Ruffini, ‘A Walk’, pp. 169–88 (p. 178).
- ¹¹⁵ Ruffini, ‘A Walk’, pp. 169–88 (p. 178).
- ¹¹⁶ See Jones and Kohler, ‘Segal Talks’.
- ¹¹⁷ Knittelfelder, ‘Interrelating’, pp. 102–19 (p. 117).
- ¹¹⁸ Janet Banfield, ‘Walking with Amal: The Politics of the Stranger’, *Cultural Geographies*, 29.4 (2022), pp. 603–09 (p. 605).
- ¹¹⁹ See Jones and Kohler, ‘Segal Talks’.
- ¹²⁰ Ruffini, ‘The Walk’, pp. 169–88 (p. 175).
- ¹²¹ David Gurnham, ‘Stopping the Boats, Changing the Narrative: How the Migrant Refugee Bildungsroman Became a Ghost Story’, *Law & Literature*, (2023), pp. 1–24 (p. 14).
- ¹²² Jones qtd. in Ruffini, ‘The Walk’, pp. 169–88 (pp. 176–77).
- ¹²³ Gurnham, ‘Stopping’, pp. 1–24 (p. 8).
- ¹²⁴ Quoted in Ruffini, ‘The Walk’, pp. 169–88 (p. 173).
- ¹²⁵ This connection is strengthened considering that Amal’s makers are also based in South Africa.
- ¹²⁶ Ingrid Jonker, ‘The Child Who Was Shot Dead by Soldiers in Nyanga’, in Ingrid Jonker, *Black Butterflies*, trans. by Antjie Krog and André Brink (Human & Rousseau 2007).
- ¹²⁷ Meera, ‘(Not So) Minor’, pp. 321–40 (p. 334).
- ¹²⁸ Ipek A. Celik, *In Permanent Crisis: Ethnicity in Contemporary European Media and Cinema* (University of Michigan Press, 2015), pp. 127–34.
- ¹²⁹ Ruffini, ‘The Walk’, pp. 169–88 (p. 180).
- ¹³⁰ Hartmut Rosa, in Andreas Reckwitz and Hartmut Rosa, *Late Modernity in Crisis: Why We Need a Theory of Society* (Polity Press, 2023), p. 3.
- ¹³¹ Ibid., pp. 152–53.
- ¹³² Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 179.
- ¹³³ Drakopoulou, ‘The Graffiti’.
- ¹³⁴ Alexandros Papadopoulos, ‘To Graffiti sto Polytechneio einai pio klasiko apo ena neo-klasiko ktirio’ [The Polytechnic Graffiti Is More Classical Than a Neoclassical Building], *LiFO*, 14 March 2015.
- ¹³⁵ Miéville, ‘Weird Fiction’ pp. 510–15 (p. 511).
- ¹³⁶ Avramidis, ‘Crises’, pp. 526–42 (p. 533).
- ¹³⁷ Myrto Tsilimpounidi, *Sociology of Crisis: Visualising Urban Austerity* (Routledge, 2017).
- ¹³⁸ Leontis, ‘Not Another Polytechnic Occupation!’.
- ¹³⁹ Drakopoulou, ‘The Graffiti’, pp. 160–67 (p. 161).
- ¹⁴⁰ Leontis, ‘Not Another Polytechnic Occupation!’.
- ¹⁴¹ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, p. 1.
- ¹⁴² My translation of journalists’ questions during a recorded impromptu interview with the artist. ‘Ti dilose i foititria Kalon Technon gia tin ... mystiriodi bala’ [What the Fine Arts Student Stated about the ... Mysterious Ball], *GRTIMES*, 17 November 2023.
- ¹⁴³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴⁴ Understood as ‘the belief in the ontological distinction between representations and that which they purport to represent’ (Barad, *Meeting*, p. 804).
- ¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 802.
- ¹⁴⁶ Miéville, ‘Weird Fiction’, pp. 510–15 (p. 512).
- ¹⁴⁷ ‘I “kardia” pou symmeteiche stin poreia toy Polytechneiou kai berdepse kai tous astynomikous’ [The ‘Heart’ that Participated in the Polytechnic March and Confused the Policemen], *Mynews*, 18 November 2023.
- ¹⁴⁸ Barad, *Meeting*, pp. 814–15.
- ¹⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 808, 810.
- ¹⁵⁰ Rancière, *The Politics*, pp. 42–43.
- ¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 39.
- ¹⁵² Ibid., p. 40.
- ¹⁵³ Alain Badiou, *The Century* (Polity Press, 2007), p. 4.
- ¹⁵⁴ Marshall, *Novels*, pp. 18–19.
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Maria Boletsi is Endowed Professor of Modern Greek Studies at the University of Amsterdam (Marilena Laskaridis Chair) and Associate Professor in Comparative Literature at Leiden University. Her book publications include *Barbarism and Its Discontents* (Stanford University Press, 2013), *Specters of Cavafy* (University of Michigan Press, 2024), and the two-volume study *Barbarian: Explorations of a Western Concept in Theory, Literature and the Arts* (Metzler, 2018; 2023) co-authored with Markus Winkler and others. She has published on the concepts of barbarism, crisis, and spectrality, on crisis rhetoric, contrarian grammars, and future imaginaries in Greece and the Mediterranean, and on fictionality in the post-truth era. She currently works on the *weird* and the concept's mobilisations in aesthetics, ecology, and politics. Email: m.boletsi@uva.nl