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Space, Art and Architecture Between East and West: The Revolutionary Spirit An international conference (18–20 March 2021)

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SPACE, ART AND ARCHITECTURE BETWEEN EAST AND WEST:

THE REVOLUTIONARY SPIRIT

An international conference (18–20 March 2021).

The year 2021, during which the sanitary measures due to the coronavirus pandemic restricted many activities requiring a human presence, witnessed the flourishing of online educational and scientific events, such as webinars, lectures and scientific workshops.

Against this background, the international conference “Space, Art and Architecture Between East and West: The Revolutionary Spirit”, the fourth in a series of academic meetings organised by the Module “Art–Architecture–Urban Planning” of the School of Humanities of the Hellenic Open University, originally planned to take place in person at the Acropolis Museum, turned into a digital event, live streamed on the Hellenic Open University YouTube channel, from 18–20 March 2021.¹

The opening session started with the presentation of the book *Urban Art and the City: Creating, Destroying, and Reclaiming the Sublime* (Abingdon: Routledge 2021) by Melita Emmanouil, professor emerita of the National Technical University of Athens, and Georgios Panetsos, associate professor at the University of Patras. This multiauthored volume, edited by Argyro Loukaki, professor at the Hellenic Open University, includes 14 chapters,

namely 13 selected papers, in revised form, from the 2017 conference entitled “Art and the City” and organised by the Module “Art–Architecture–Urban Planning”, and one article by an invited author. There followed the introduction to the 2021 conference by Loukaki, who presented its aim and scope. In her thought-provoking speech, rich in ideas and comparative material, Loukaki pointed to the mental constructions of the terms “East” and “West”, their relativity in the highly appreciated post-Renaissance culture, their political and cultural asymmetries, but also their convergences. The Europeans see the Orient as the areas adjacent to Europe which were subject to European colonialism, while the Americans, colonists after the Second World War, understand the Orient as the Far East – China and Japan mainly.² These long-standing geographical notions and their semiology – backwardness and tradition regarding the East, dynamism and progress concerning the West – are now inviting new insights and interpretations. Globalism, postmodernism and psychoanalysis have already opened new

¹ The conference language was English.

² In his influential book *Orientalism* (1978), Edward W. Said introduced the term “Orientalism” to describe the way the Westerners perceived the “East”.

paths for reconsiderations. Thus the interdisciplinary webinar in question offered the opportunity to pour new wine into old wineskins, questioning, during the year marking the bicentenary of the Greek Revolution, how the revolutionary spirit has been involved in this Eastern–Western divide since the sixteenth century.

Over the next two days, 23 speakers from eight countries (Cyprus, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Israel, Romania, Spain, United States) presented 21 15-minute papers arranged in the following six thematic sections: 19th-Century Creative Imaginations, the Classical Legacy, and the Revolutionary Spirit; Charting the Geographies of “Westernness” and of “Otherness” Across the Map; The Mediterranean Cinematic Gaze Between East and West; Art and Spatial Processes: Byzantium and the Ottoman Empire; Modern Architectural Identities, Infrastructures and Social Becoming Around the Mediterranean; and Eastern Architecture and Art in Western Interpretations.

The conference included a keynote speech by François Penz, professor emeritus of Cambridge University, entitled “The Cultured Eye in the Age of Divided Spatial Representation”.³

³ This presentation followed the research project “A Cinematic Musée Imaginaire of Spatial Cultural Differences”, which examined spatial practices in different cultures, namely in the Far East and West. Given that films are a valuable “archive” of buildings and their uses, 53 from Europe and the United States and 53 from China and Japan provided the relevant material.

This talk scrutinised naturalism and analogism, two concepts coined by the French anthropologist Philippe Descola.⁴ Penz associated the former with the West (Europe and the United States) and the latter with the East (China and Japan) in the cultural domain of cinema. Naturalism relates to the perspectival vision of space, invented and developed by the Renaissance architects Filippo Brunelleschi and Leon Battista Alberti (in his treatise *De pictura*), who elevated art to a science. On the other hand, the analogist tradition, on which the Chinese method of oblique drawing, with its non-converging lines, has built, is anti-perspective. Linear perspective paved the way for the development of anthropocentric art. Yet, the single viewpoint of the one-point perspective strongly contradicted Chinese thought, in which man is not the measure of all things. But are these different Eastern and Western artistic tendencies discernible in film-making, given that the motion picture camera, which leads to the construction of an image analogous to the perspective projections developed during the Italian Renaissance, has a universal use? Penz’s thoughtful analysis and visual documentation revealed that the cultured eye, a part of the culture we live in, could detect different cultural qualities between Eastern and Western films. Among others, Eastern film-makers use the camera much slower than those in the West, unify indoors and outdoors, and pay special attention to nature. Penz ended his

⁴ In his influential paper “La fabrique des images”, *Anthropologie et Sociétés* 30, no. 3 (2006): 167–82, <https://doi.org/10.7202/014932ar>.

penetrating keynote with the following “provocation”: “An anthropocentric vision – and its representation of the world announced a new era, that of the Anthropocene,” which invites thoughts and social criticism.

In the closing session, concluding statements by the organising committee pointed, among others, to the enduring East–West social, political, economic and emotional distance in our era of globalism and, on the other hand, to the cultural interchanges and mutual influences in art and architecture. The islands of Crete and Cyprus under Venetian rule are two eloquent premodern cases of Byzantine–Venetian cultural osmosis in the eastern Mediterranean. According to Loukaki, transcending boundaries and creating new prospects are up to scholars. And to artists, I would add.

The webinar “Space, Art and Architecture Between East and West: The Revolutionary Spirit” encouraged academic debate on this broad topic, offering significant insights into the cultural ramifications of East–West

intercourse. All the sessions can be viewed on YouTube.⁵ A book of abstracts with the conference programme is also available.⁶ Besides, the forthcoming 2023 publication of selected papers from the conference, the fourth in the series of edited volumes with essays from the conferences organised by the Module “Art–Architecture–Urban Planning”, will be very much welcome.⁷

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⁵ Day one is at <https://youtu.be/phDJPrJuhNM>; day 2 at <https://youtu.be/SM5o9F7VHO0> and day 3 at <https://youtu.be/184cnJ2YKZY>.

⁶ https://www.eap.gr/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Revolutionary_Spirit_book_of_abstracts.pdf.

⁷ See https://www.academia.edu/53919557/Space_Art_and_Architecture_Between_East_and_West_The_Revolutionary_Spirit.