

changing worlds & signs of the times

Selected Proceedings

from the 10th International Conference
of the Hellenic Semiotics Society

EDITORS

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Salonica Other Ways – Otherwise’: A Mirror-λ letter and heterotopias of an urban experiment

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Abstract

Thessaloniki Allios’ is an urban activist group that was founded in Thessaloniki in 2010 and that organized more than 27 public events within the first 3 years of its existence. The trademark of the organization that translates as ‘Salonica Other Ways – Otherwise’, reverses one of the λs in the word ‘allios’ (αλλιώς) into its mirror image. What kind of semiotic significations of city life does this reflection imply? This anthropological analysis focuses on significations of the mirror-λ by approaching the actions of the organization as heterotopic performances during which new topologies are constructed. It also raises the question of change, since Thessaloniki Allios aims at subverting certain conditions of urban living, but it does not seem to assert a conflictual role with formal institutions. Rather, its subversiveness lies within the possibilities of urban living that its actions temporarily materialize, the invisibilities of city life that its actions transform into visibilities. Thus, the performative imaginings and re-imaginings of the city emerge not as temporary utopias for a while coming true, but as forces that promote change in the urban scape, in socialities and subjectivities, bridging the distance between existing and potential habitual structures of everyday life.

Keywords

Urban activism , subversion , mirror-image sign , topologies , heterotopic performances , subjectivities

Thessaloniki Allios is an urban activist group that was founded in Thessaloniki, Greece in 2010. Its first appearance on the 5th and 6th of June comprised of two-day actions that were organized by the free press *Parallaxis* on the occasion of its 20th anniversary. For the next three years¹ *Thessaloniki Allios* became one of the most prominent movements² in the city, having planned and performed several public events in the wider city area. All these events were met with great success, both in terms of volunteer participation as well as public attendance. The 27 actions it organized in those 3 years, the (at the time) 550 volunteers who formed a network of active citizens, the more than 300 cooperating groups and institutions, and the spectators who were estimated around 150000³, all manifest the appeal of the cultural and developmental envisioning of city life that *Thessaloniki Allios* expressed.

Its name, which can be translated as *Salonica Other Ways – Otherwise*, implies that the city can actually be, in existential and in lived ways, different from the way it currently is. Perhaps the most characteristic and broadly recognizable aspect of *Thessaloniki Allios* is its trademark, where the second Greek λ in the word *Allios* (αλλιώς) is reversed into its mirror image.



Figure 1. The logo “Thessaloniki other ways – otherwise: an urban experiment in progress”

This reversal as well as the word *Allios* itself, which since then have become quite popular and have been used on other occasions and instances by other kinds of groups, constitute key characteristic of the group, being portrayed on posters, t-shirts and all communication mediums. While the logo of the group seems a stylistic and design issue, the question

raised here concerns the matters that the term *Thessaloniki Allios* raises about city life; more specifically main issue is what the reverse λ of its logo signifies for the city. What exactly is it in this mirror image λ that effectively catches the eye, making it into an effective image? Besides, where is the mirror and what does the mirror λ mirror other than itself?

In this paper it is argued that the reverse λ is an iconic sign that acquires its signification from the actions that the group organizes and the wider socio-cultural context to which these are juxtaposed. In semiotic terms, as Sonesson (n.d., p.3) argued, the iconic sign is *already* a relation and the co-presence is a precondition for the indexical sign: “the sign character of these signs only endures as long as the object is in their presence” (Sonesson, n.d.: 5). What is thus the present object that the reverse λ as an iconic sign relates to and what kinds of semiotic significations of city life does this reflection imply? Besides, is it a mirror reflection or a reversal? As the mirror image λ stands next to its referent, the normal λ and the rest letters of the two words, the relation between the two signifies the “alternative” of the whole enterprise.

The anthropological analysis of the organization investigates significations of the mirror- λ by approaching the actions of the organization as heterotopic performances during which new tentative spaces are constructed. Background of the particular events are the ongoing economic crisis in Greece, the global and national neoliberal conditions that form the contemporary in Thessaloniki, as well as the long established local and national, formal and informal institutional politics that have been mostly responsible for the formation of the contemporary urban living. It is argued here that it is not so much the neoliberal changes as such that triggered the appearance and the interventions of *Thessaloniki Allios*, as the local and national, municipal and other, state authorities which do not act “as they should” in the direction of solving common public problems and improving urban living. *Thessaloniki Allios* does not aim at substituting the role of the local authorities in the short or in the long run, but at challenging the urban status quo and pinpointing their inefficiency and ineffectiveness vis-a-vis certain public and welfare responsibilities, particularly with regards to the uses of public space.

As supported by the coordinators, the events that *Thessaloniki Allios* organizes intend to contribute to the transformation of urban living by providing awareness of and alternatives to existing, problematic conditions of city life. This stance sets the strategic position of *Thessaloniki Allios* within the current politico-economic milieu as an agency which specifically targets all that constitutes the inhospitability of the urban environment through actions that transform it into a convivial place. The materialization of those events has formed an urban community of engaged people whose spatial praxes realize ideas that reverse the current state of things. Thus, these performative events constitute the urban scape as an emergent, but scheduled and organized potentiality, a new critical social imaginary⁴. During those public performances, the reverse λ acquires an eventual life as differential public time and space are brought together.

***Thessaloniki Allios'* urban activism: Of what sort?**

While many analytical approaches of urban movements in Greece tend to focus on the subversive dimensions of urban activism (see, amongst others, Vradis and Dalakoglou, 2011), for *Thessaloniki Allios* the question of its subversive, or non-subversive role relates to the goals of the urban social movement and the means through which this subversion, or non-subversion is realized. Does *Thessaloniki Allios* meet the “characteristics” of subversive urban activism, since it clearly aims at challenging and/or altering certain conditions of urban living, even though it does not seem to assert a conflictual role with formal institutions? The events with the particular actions that *Thessaloniki Allios* organizes are heterotopic performances during which new tentative spaces are constructed. In this sense, “Thessaloniki Allios” is a form of subversive activism, as its actions – either in the form of performative imaginings and temporary materializations, or of callings to change against existent habitual structures – are actions that target in the long run to subvert well established structures.

In specific, the 27 events that *Thessaloniki Allios* had organized by September 2013 lasted one, two or three days and included several actions within. While the briefer events were equally important, this paper focuses on the larger events and the particular actions those involved, the overall materialization of which was always “in collaboration with” other groups, agents and public or private institutions. In all cases, the people of *Thessaloniki Allios* did not claim the uniqueness either of the creativity or of any of the events as such. On the contrary, in all cases they sought to broaden the scheme of actions and interventions with more, or even as many, agencies. Broader participation, thus, constituted an indispensable, and, therefore, vital dimension of the subversive character of *Thessaloniki Allios*. In the following translated quote from the website description of the very first event, one can read the principles that the members of *Thessaloniki Allios* believe should characterize urban public life: citizen participation, the formation of collectivities, and the cooperation with local authorities.

“It is the philosophy of *Thessaloniki Allios* that the image of the city is determined not only by the behavior of its authorities but also of its citizens. Only through a participatory process and the successful transition from “I” to “we” the face of the city may beneficially and efficiently change. As long as creative minds and groups are given room for expression, in the direction of partnership and synergy, with a view to set the future development of the city as a collective target. With proposals for the use of public space by the citizens themselves, proposals for the improvement of the environment and of culture, and for the socially equitable and sustainable development of the city, with an open and continuous call of the authorities, not excluding anyone who can contribute to the strengthening and reinforcing of initiatives that demonstrably offer to the city”.⁵

At the same time, all the events and the included actions always “utilized” what was already there. They did not construct future visions of the city out of nothing, visions that had no relevance to the existent city; instead they brought to the fore existing spaces that could have a different “life”, that could become part of different public urban habitual and institutional structures. Some cases of events and actions pinpoint this ‘alternative’ –would it even be subversive? – dimension of *Thessaloniki Allios*.

The first events gave prominence to existent parts of the city, which they ‘altered’ by performing –and, thus, producing– different uses, perspectives, etc. of the urban landscape. The very first anniversary action, which introduced the reverse λ trademark, was titled “*Thessaloniki Allios: an urban experiment for a different city*” and included two days of urban interventions –and, thus, suggestions– as to how Thessaloniki might be, not in the remote future, but in the transient present of the event and, potentially and hopefully, in the near future. A series of questions that implied taken-for-granted answers of the impossible presented the possibility of the unbelievable for-a-while-coming-true.

“Is it possible that Thermaikos gulf be filled with sails (i.e., sailing boats) and that there is sea transportation? Do concerts take place on the balconies of Electra Palace? Do paper planes with poetry fly from terraces on Tsimiski str.? Where is Thessalonitsi camping? How many mansions on Agios Minas str. get to open? Do the elderly in Charisseio nursing home dance tango? Can road-crossings be happy? Can a narrow cement city-road be bright? Can I put my tracksuit on to take free courses and exercise on the beach parks on a Sunday morning? Dance charleston in the middle of Iktinou str.? How does a pedestrian road get green? How can stray plots of land be converted into parks? Can the [abandoned] neoclassical building on Ag. Minas str. enliven? Can I go to the city center by carpooling? ...”

This first event and its actions were soon followed by other events at the suburban forest, the port, the suburban waterfront, abandoned public pieces of land and parks, etc., places that in general were cut off from regular public use, having become either almost ruins or appalling to any public use. They had thus become not only “useless” but also “invisible” to the citizens, carrying a “negative value” as ruins or trash. The events that *Thessaloniki Allios* organized not only brought those places to the front, but “showed” their hidden value. *Thessaloniki Allios* also actively participated in the official “World Carfree Day”, emphasizing they as well the value and pleasures of a city that is not overburdened by car traffic. Assuming as well a role of knowledge disperser *Thessaloniki Allios* organized the 3-day event “City Plan” that brought a world famous architect⁶ to give lectures to the general public and to university students about the human dimension an urban environment should have, while they also planned for him to meet with the mayor and other city agencies. In another direction, they organized actions that through different means aimed at providing inhabitants with a more intimate –embodied

and experiential– historical knowledge of the city and of cultural milieus within it, such as museums, the planetarium, archaeological sites. Goal of all those actions was to promote the familiarization of the public with existent places but in innovative, involved and interactive ways. In a similar fashion they also organized actions that encouraged practices like reading literature and picture taking in unusual for such activities city settings, providing and encouraging alternative perceptions of them. On the other hand, the actions “Made in Thessaloniki” #1 and “Made in Thessaloniki” #2 aimed at publicizing what they called the “city’s creative economy and identity”, which referred to vocational professions like architecture, graphic design, art, etc., and at intervening in public spaces, transforming them into “living cells of everyday life”. They also set forth events and actions that promote social solidarity for the needy. This clearly social work of *Thessaloniki Allios* was reasoned not with respect to the economic crisis, but to the acknowledgement that people who live in socially and economically deprived and marginalized areas are predestined to live hard lives.

It becomes obvious that the subversiveness of *Thessaloniki Allios* lies within the possibilities of urban living that its actions temporarily materialized, the invisibilities of city life that its actions transformed into visibilities. These performativities of the “other ways /otherwise” provided to the citizens performative imaginings and re-imaginings of the city: organizing music performances in unlikely places like in old abandoned buildings, in the streets; using the streets in unusual ways, like doing tai chi, modern dance, playing games, or having a yoga day in the streets (in the example of New York). All such practices provided to the participating city residents, but also passers-by differential bodily experiences and envisionings of a city life “otherwise” characterized by a hectic routine overwhelmed by traffic, and formal and informal attitudes of indifference, lack of sociality, etc.; habitual practices and structures, that is, that make the city unfriendly to its citizens. In that direction *Thessaloniki Allios* organized the “Claiming Public Space” action at Agias Sophias str., defending its transformation –at the time provisional, but also strongly disputed– into a central pedestrian road⁷. Through this event the group raised a strong voice against those citizens and authorities who at the time claimed its return back into a road. In another action in Dendropotamos –one of the most deprived areas in the wider city–Thessaloniki Allios initiated its support of the efforts of the local priest and some community members to keep the children (mostly Roma) at school and away from drugs by providing them with a daily sheltered environment. In that action the call for volunteers to help by any means that might help the children, underscored the potential for change such an involvement might bring to the everyday reality but not only of the children; They maintained that this would constitute a life transforming experience for the involved “us” as well, the *Thessaloniki Allios* volunteers (“theirs and ours” [sic]), promoting the emergence of new socialities and subjectivities for the volunteers.

In the public events of *Thessaloniki Allios* one locates what Handelman called “the logic(s) of its public involvement”, i.e., that a public event is primarily activated “by the practice of the logic(s) of its organizational design” (1998, p. xi). The logic of the performative imaginings and re-imaginings of the city is to function as temporary utopias for a while coming true and as forces that promote change in the urban scape, in the socialities and the subjectivities of the volunteers and the participating agencies, as well as the participating, or just attending public; ways that may bridge the distance between the existing and the potential habitual structures of everyday life. In this sense, these actions constitute heterotopic performances and the mirror λ of the trademark is the iconic sign of both a utopia and an heterotopia (Foucault 1986)⁸, a means through which people relate to themselves and escape from those long established uses of the public space. Thus, the reverse λ of *Thessaloniki Allios* constitutes a topological sign of political praxes that produce new subjectivities.

The events of *Thessaloniki Allios* as extraordinary happenings bring about “a rupture of previous knowledge(s)” and propose a new truth different from opinions, i.e., an idea that is available to everyone (Badiou in Humphrey 2008, pp.359-360)⁹. The new citizens who emerge, experience, comprehend, sense the city and the urban in novel ways. The events create an urban topology that is ‘coupled’ with a particular mode of subjectivity, in which the imaginary is the most prominent dimension “at the same time experienced and beyond experience” (Lash 2012, p.262). It is these performative events that find their topological signifier in the reverse Greek λ of the logo, its signifieds comprising the social imaginary and driving the self-determination of the social. Being comprised of not images but imagings, the reverse λ produces images in its self-transformation, a social imaginary that is not in space, but it is a space, and as a process it exists not in time, but is a temporality (Castoriadis in Lash, 2012, pp.276-77).

Similar to Daskalaki’s et al. (2008) analysis of parkour, who note that in essence human agency and the performativity of the everyday can transform alienating non-places to grounds of possibility, creativity and civic identity, participation in *Thessaloniki Allios* events empowers the disempowered citizen; being else him/herself caught in the (re-)production of urban life habitual structures, s/he attains a temporary empowerment during which volunteers and participants become constituents of a topology. This topology is produced out of the ability *Thessaloniki Allios* provides to its inhabitants to interfere and transform the conditions of everyday life in a direction that institutional agencies habitually disregard.

Conclusion: Changes in the habitual structures of everyday life

While *Thessaloniki Allios*’ urban activism challenges those institutional and habitual practices that construct urban life as problematic, the volunteers and the participants themselves are not necessarily against the particular political establishment in any radical way. Many, if not most, are principally against established practices that dom-

inate both on the level of long established institutional and habitual structures, raising thus the broader question of change. Do these events in general constitute change? If, however, for many people change is believed to be impossible to come, because there are strongly established habitual structures and ideologies, Badiou considers that the impossibility of a total reversal of ideas and behavior is actually possible through new ways of doing politics and thinking the political (Brancaleone, 2012, pp.62-63); through what Badiou termed the “evental sequence”, which involves the subjectivization of the body by the political event (Brancaleone, 2012, pp.64-65).

Thessaloniki Allios exists in an urban environment that resembles those of other first world cities, which compete for investors, affluent residents and tourists by developing marketing policies of themselves. Such self-brandings as event cities, culture cities or creative cities with festivalization and mega events involves the sanitation of the urban space to be consumed by the desired customers (Mayer, 2013, p.9). Whether *Thessaloniki Allios* intentionally assumes a reinforcing role to the marketization of the city aiming at its neoliberalization is not at all clear. As Mayer noted (2013, pp.10-11), the neoliberalization of first world cities presents a contradictory set of changes: it has intensified social fragmentation and, at the same time, it has allowed movement groups to be absorbed into city marketing and the locational politics that aim to attract investors, creative professionals and tourists. These tendencies Mayer considers to be at the root of the incongruent make-up of contemporary urban activism, which often coheres under the label of ‘right to the city’. Even radical movements, she notes, take on an ambiguous role, as they mark urban space as attractive and thus charge spaces initially with cultural, but then with economic capital as well.

Returning to the issue of the significations of the mirror λ of *Thessaloniki Allios*, this mirroring, as Neumann remarked, may provide us with knowledge about the event of being as sense and event (2004, p.67). *Thessaloniki Allios* as a mirror offers, in Foucaultian terms, the mixed experience between utopias and heterotopias. While, however, the mirror as utopia is a placeless place –“In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent”, says Foucault (1986, p.24)– the visibility of the potentials and the capabilities that emerge out of *Thessaloniki Allios* make its events into heterotopias that exert counteractions on the way things are. In Foucault’s words, “the mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there” (1986, p.24). This is exactly what one of the *Thessaloniki Allios* organizers said at the end of its very first action “What we changed for a weekend we should change forever”.

Endnotes

1. This paper includes data gathered until September 2013. 'Thessaloniki allios' has continued its actions since and the research continues alongside its actions.
2. Christodoulou (2013) also supports that by 2011 various residents' initiatives had made their appearance in Thessaloniki with different political and other objectives. These collectivities held different views on the uses of public space and did not necessarily relate to the condition of the crisis. Some of these groups supported the 'Initiative for Thessaloniki' that in 2010 ran and eventually won the municipal elections.
3. Aside the personal evaluation of public involvement and participation in the actions, the numbers mentioned are included in the *Parallaxis'* and *Thessaloniki Allios* website www.parallaximag.gr/diff/i-thessaloniki-allios
4. On the definition of scapes and the social imaginary see Appadurai, A. (1990). Disjuncture and difference in global cultural economy. *Public Culture* 2(2), 1-24, and Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at Large*. University of Minnesota Press.
5. <http://www.thessalonikiallios.gr/index.php/%CE%B9%CF%83%CF%84%CE%BF%CF%81%CE%B9%CE%B1.html>
6. David Sim of the Gehl Architects
7. The road eventually became a permanent pedestrian road.
8. For Foucault (1986), the mirror constitutes both the reality and unreality of utopian projects.
9. On these issues see Badiou, Alain, (2001) *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (trans. and introduction Peter Hallward). London: Verso and Badiou, Alain (2006) *Being and Event* (trans. Oliver Feltham). London: Continuum.

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