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The Travelling Grocer

Text by Metaxia Markaki, film by Dimitris Koutsibasakos

– *Where have you been this year?*
– *I came last week but I didn't find you.*
– *Liar. (1), I have been counting. Does time flow differently for us living up here?*

Following the itinerary of a travelling grocer at the depopulating mountainous regions of Northern Greece as captured in the ethnographic film documentary of Dimitris Koutsibasakos «O Manavis» (2), this essay recounts time as it unfolds in the peripheral landscapes of Mount Pindos. Sensing their peripheral temporalities, it seeks ways of seeing time differently.

[TAPE LOOP]

Music is playing from the radio, potatoes, tomatoes, onions dangle as a truck follows up the road to Mount Pindos through snow and fog. (3) Nikos, a travelling grocer, departs every Wednesday from the local town of Trikala. (4) He is a vendor on wheels, not the only one, weekly climbing the mountain to service the villages. «I play folk songs on the speakers as I approach. It is the same cassette that has been sitting in the truck since the '80s. I inherited it from my father. Were I to change it, people would be confused» Nikos says. (5) I picture the melody heard along the same itinerary for the last forty years, in the stillness of the same landscape, and I get the strange feeling that the truck, the mountain and the villages might have been stuck in a time warp. In the last decades, the mountainous communities shrunk radically. While official policies have persistently focused on the development of a few urban centers, the mountainous landscapes were understood as declining peripheries, «left-behind» places, frozen in time and their aging inhabitants as guardians of a «living past». Yet, some places might live in multiple temporalities simultaneously, challenging ideas of a linearity of time, present and past, progress and decline.

[ABSURDITY]

The track stops at the crossroads of a village, and an old man approaches. He is a regular, always popping up, walking slowly uphill with a stick, choosing different fruits according to the season. He muses: «The day has got longer now. Today, Wednesday, we gained 32 minutes. From now on, time goes around,» [he illustrates this with a gesture] «it makes a circle to meet the other time from the back. For six months, time goes up. For six months, it goes down.» (6)

He does not wear a watch. What is the time he envisions and describes? Is he counting the minutes from the dawn? Or is he drunk? Absurd to my familiar ways of measuring, a different temporal sensation surfaces in his words: a way of sensing circularly. He talks about a time which flows repeatedly, spirally chasing its own back, growing and shrinking, casting shapes and symmetries. Is this the way, mountainous and rural communities have always perceived time? Or is it just the perception of a perplexed man?

[THE WEATHERMAN]

«It only snows when you buy apples» says the grocer. «I am a weatherman», the old man responds, «not just a shepherd.» (7) He has lived his life following his animals – sheep and goats, the grass sprouts and the seasons' cycles. He learned to read the mountain through their experience, to sense time through the mountainous ecologies. Multispecies communities develop different sensoriums and in their human extensions other ways of seeing percolate and more-than-human perspectives can exist. Have we lost sight of such views as modern urban environments have developed? Why do we buy apples all year long and when will it snow this year?

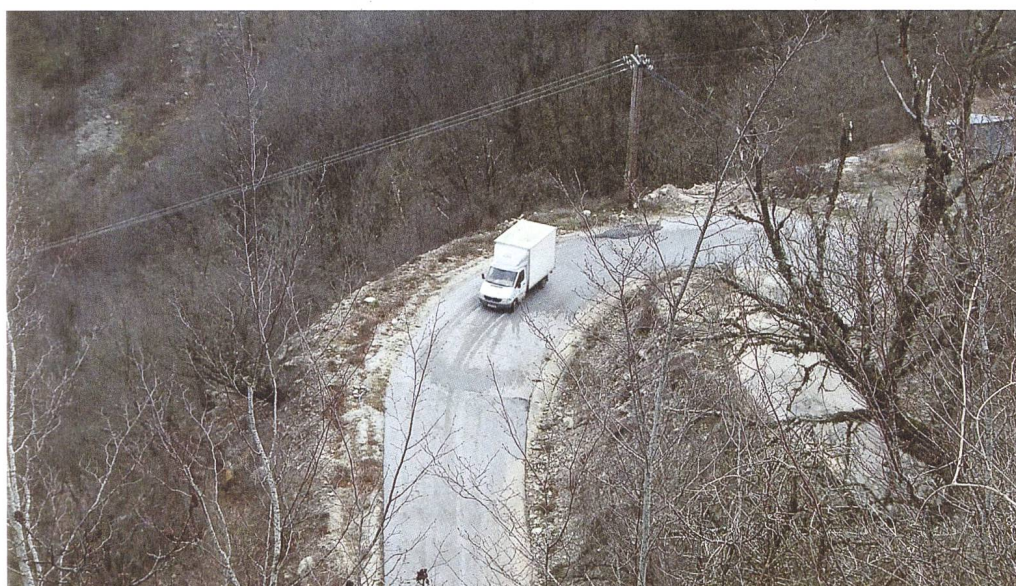
[SLOWNESS]

A dog is stretching, a cat is meowing, a bird is flapping its wings, a few goats are turning their heads as the grocer drives by. Human time decompresses, allowing for other temporalities to be perceived – times shaped by other forms of life: the melting of the snow, the flow of water through springs and creaks, the cracking of eroding rocks. The mountain prescribes a temporality of itself, deep and geological. «Slowness» accommodates story-telling here, as «still» people narrate histories (8): about their lives in the past, about a Mycenaean censer that was found buried in the fields, about classic antiquity and past centuries' wars, myths and geomorphologies about sacred forests and dragons that have guarded the mountains. (9) «There is a secret bond between slowness and memory, between speed and forgetting» Kundera writes, describing how quickly modern time moves and modernity forgets. (10)

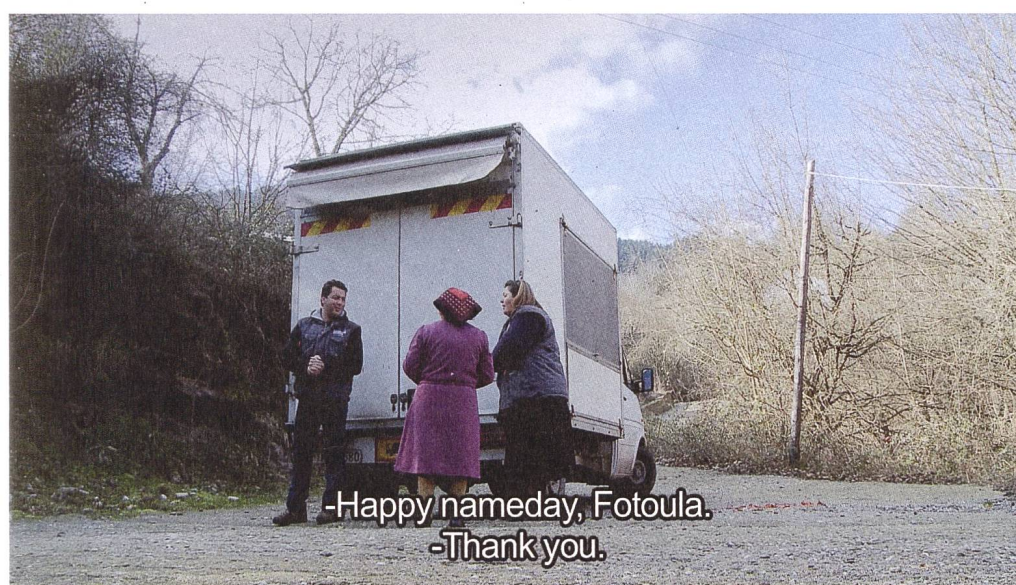
A



B



C



A «O Manavis», Greece 2013. Director: Dimitris Koutsiabasakos. Film stills (00:20:19)

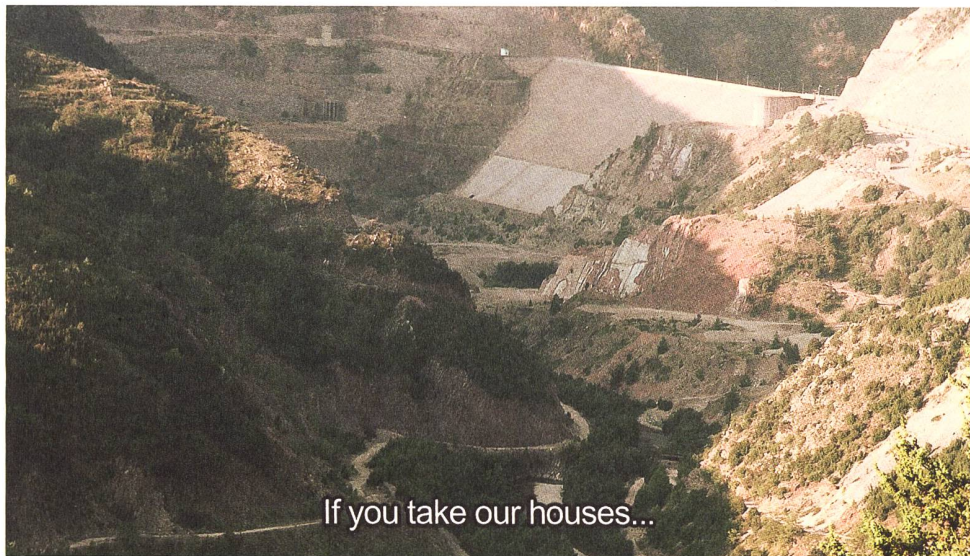
B (00:07:37)

C (00:07:08)

D



E



F



D (01:00:13)

E (00:36:32)

F (00:50:37)

In the slowness of the mountainous region, deep time, historic time and everyday life coexist, time decompresses to «re-compress» again, now in a different, queer and uncanny manner.

[TIDES]

«Καλή χρονιά – happy new year» (January, 1st). «Καλή Παναγιά – happy Virgin Mary's Day» (August, 15th). «Καλό τυχερό – good destiny» (for a wedding). «Καλά πανηγύρια – happy festivities» people wish periodically to the grocer. Their wishes highlight events and moments punctuating time, marking it periodically, offering syntax and a rhythm. What they also highlight, is the tidal manner in which the mountainous regions are inhabited today. «In winter there is no soul here, but in summer, the village looks like a kindergarten» the grocer observes, and an old woman continues: «I have fifteen grandchildren. They all live in the city but they come back every summer, every Easter. They keep coming to the village all the time, during breaks and festivities.»⁽¹¹⁾ More than static and depopulated, the mountain regions experience seasonal tides of inhabitation. A «break» of timeline somewhere else means a return and a continuation here. Similar to the grocer's itinerary, periodical movements and seasonal returns connect the mountain to other places, entangle temporalities and worlds often considered distinct if not antagonistic—cities to villages, rural and urban rhythms. In their intersection, they reveal a different time: tidal and discontinuous, fragmented and hybrid, able to bridge and heal, countering narratives of drainage and narrating alternatives.

[INTERRUPTION]

«This dam will flood our village. Tell them to take it elsewhere. I want to spend my last days in the place where I was born, grew up, and walked barefoot. In my village. In my home», a man recounts at the crossroads.⁽¹²⁾ A 150m-high dam is planned to divert Achelous River. The project, originally initiated to ad-

vance the irrigation of the intensified agricultural plains of Thessaly, and more recently, under the light of the energy crisis, changed to foster the production of «green» hydroelectric energy. The villages of the area are meant to be flooded and the villagers displaced. An operation of a different scale, speed and reach intersects. It interrupts the life of the region, profoundly restructuring its timeline.

Different clocks are ticking, in different temporalities and speeds. Their echoes intersect. What kind of time do they create as they fuse? Time in modernity is measurable, writes Jean Baudrillard – it divides chronometrically; it is linear – irreversibly progressing from a past to a future; it is historically relational – always seeking for contemporaneity and global simultaneity, defining other forms of past as archaic, folkloristic, rustic, traditional.⁽¹³⁾ Modern age is also ideological, often employed to enable ruptures, to push development, to facilitate urban operations, enclosures, dispossessions.

Yet, peripheral landscapes and their peripheral temporalities seem to resist. «Landscapes refuse to be disciplined. They make a mockery of the oppositions that we create between time (History) and space (Geography), or between nature (Science) and culture (Social Anthropology)» Doreen Massey observes.⁽¹⁴⁾ In urban peripheries, countryside, mountains and islands, time survives in different manners. Slow and periodical; tidal and patchy; not measured but sensed through other sensoriums and sensibilities; accommodative to past and present, to storytelling and everyday life; neither modern and urban, but also not purely rural; peripheral time calls for paying attention to peripheral landscapes. It recounts them not as «left behind» places, but as spaces of latent knowledge, of deceleration and of learning. Peripheral temporalities emerge messy and hybrid. They manifest in slowness and absurdity. Yet, they recount alternative worldviews and possible ways towards socio-ecological repair. Do we have time to slow down and listen?

Metaxia Markaki, born 1987, is an architect and educator, pursuing a PhD the Institute of Landscape and Urban Studies at ETH Zurich on the urbanisation of mountainous landscapes in Greece. She taught research and design at ETH Studio Basel and Harvard GSD and at the ETH chair of Architecture and Territorial Planning. She is co-author of the book «achtung: die Landschaft», co-curated the summer-school «Tentacular Writing» and the theater play «Who Owns the Land?» and currently practices at Landscape In-Between and That Studio, Athens-Zurich. In her research and design work, Metaxia loves to experiment with the many possible ways of storytelling.

Dimitris Koutsiasakos, born 1967, is a Greek film director, writer, and independent producer, known for his documentaries, series, short and feature films. He studied at the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography in Moscow, Russia. He taught in several drama schools, including the National Theatre of Northern Greece and was a lecturer at the University of the Aegean. Since 2018, he is Associate Professor of Film Directing at the Film School of Art Faculty at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. His work has been critically acclaimed and has received national and international awards.