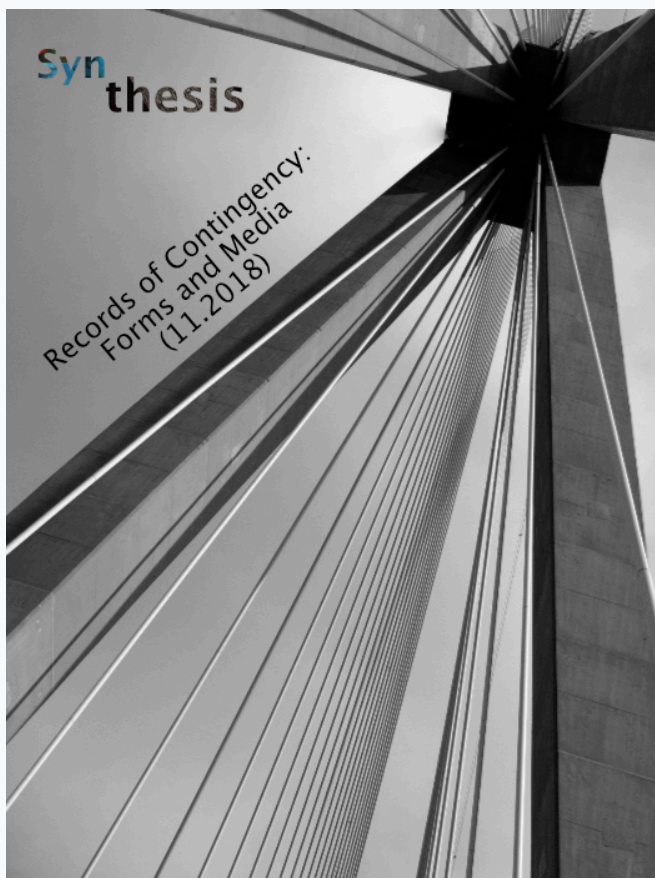


Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 11 (2018)

Records of Contingency: Forms and Media



Automata: Professional Lives and the Time of the Contingent

Chryssa Marinou

doi: [10.12681/syn.20896](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.20896)

Copyright © 2019, Chryssa Marinou



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Marinou, C. (2019). Automata: Professional Lives and the Time of the Contingent. *Synthesis: An Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies*, (11), 108–124. <https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.20896>

Automata:
Professional Lives and the Time of the Contingent

Chryssa Marinou

Abstract

Kostas Peroulis's collection of short stories *Automata* (2015) consists of ten short stories that narrate the experience of ten different characters involved in different kinds of labor. The stories' characters constitute the book's labor force and have a foothold in all sectors of economy: the primary sector (agriculture), the secondary sector (industrial production) and the tertiary sector (services, including sex work). The automatization and repetition that define the work experience of Peroulis's unnamed characters also define their present while the context of the Greek crisis and its social and political effects lurk in the background. This essay reads the characters' relation to labour at a time of historical contingency that is well beyond the austerity measures and what is generally called the financial crisis. I argue that the stories map the experience of the contingent in contemporary Greece as Peroulis's text focuses on the *minutiae* of the characters' professional lives. The details of their labour reveal the condition of contingency which becomes dominant in a literary text that, as this essay argues, returns to the subject, and thus, to the modern.

in memoriam
Nicolas Tourikis, the steel worker
and
Dionysis Marinos, the jack of all trades
Art does not reproduce the visible; it makes visible.
Paul Klee (1879-1940)

Kostas Peroulis's short story collection *Automata* (2015) revolves around the notions of labour, labour power, and capital. I will concentrate on two distinct modernist tropes featured in the collection that both relate to the notion of the contingent: the presence of epiphanic moments that the unnamed characters experience while working, and their reflections on their harsh realities, and the singularity of the experience of their labour. The characters' physical or psychic processes of engagement with labour as such constitute a highly individualised experience of work in all its variations, which, nevertheless, reveals a more generalised and unified

late capitalist structure that overdetermines the working subject in its material and affective operations. The contingent has a twofold significance for my reading since it reveals the prevalent state of being and working within a capitalist context as well as the precarity and fleetingness of the epiphanic moment. The epiphanies¹ are immanent when a past experience or event is superimposed on the present and forces the character to recognise her or his own condition and status in the labour market; thus, the epiphanic moment flashes upon the consciousness of the character and disrupts the linearity of the events that have hitherto determined the course of the story. Similarly, the portrayal of the nine different characters —the protagonist or the tenth and last story is perhaps a persona for the author— reveals the specifics of a variety of distinct labour experiences and their impact on the different subjects within the context of the contemporary Greek economy. I argue that both the use of the epiphanic moment motif and the text's insistence on the details of each professional life dialectically point to a partial and broken unity of labour experience under late capitalism and perform a return to modernist literary tropes.

Moreover, Peroulis's focus on language goes beyond talking shop while still acknowledging various professional slangs. Notwithstanding the pronounced differentiations in the language of each character that betray their social status, the overall impression of the reader is that the world of economy dominates the realm of Peroulis's character's discourse. In the interview that the author kindly agreed to offer, he mentions how he sees his characters as “urbanized, that is to say, moving within the system of the market, money, and transaction.”² As the critic Vangelis Hatzivasileiou notes, “the idioms to which Peroulis resorts are not really idioms, but a nightmarishly cumbersome array of technical details” (n.p.); this results in the creation of a language system that is governed by the vicissitudes of the economic system depicted in the stories, as well as by a sense of the indeterminate and the contingent.

In his *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, T. J. Clark associates the meaning of “modernity” with the contingent: “‘Modernity’ means contingency. It points to a social order which has turned from the worship of ancestors and past authorities to the pursuit of a projected future —of goods, pleasures, freedoms, forms of control over nature, or infinities of information” (7). Clark reads this process as tied to the annihilation of the imagination and concludes that “the disenchantment of the world,” a term which Max Weber borrows from Schiller, sums up this side of modernity best (7). *Automata* showcases disenchantment precisely by relating the stories to contingency: the reader is invited to zoom in on the precarity, adversities and shortcomings of nine professional trajectories in a fiscally devastated country, while the tenth story, in a very

Foucauldian gesture, takes us to the contingent space of the waiting room in a public hospital that specialises in sexually transmitted diseases, where the author observes the forced encounter between diverse individualities.

The narrator of the inaugural story of the collection, entitled “In the Museum,” introduces a solderer who looks back on his professional life and, in doing so, gives a brief overview of the recent industrial history of Athens. The character had started off in the sixties as a worker in the gas power plant of Athens, called Gazi, which has been converted into an industrial museum and venue for cultural events. He gradually moved on to the shipbuilding and repair zone of Perama and specialised in metal welding. Working flat on his back or belly in narrow steel manholes of rusty tankers that were to be sold and resold for profit, he managed to get personal contracts with ship owners and quickly became sought-after by contractors. His reminiscence takes place in Gazi, while a concert is being prepared. The third person narration of his professional history in the ship industry is interrupted by his thoughts on the photography exhibition held in one of the Gazi halls: “He took a glance at the pictures, in black and white, of some ragged workers in the fifties. The captions full of disease, poverty, strikes, Easter celebrations at the factory. Clichés.” (Peroulis 14). The word “cliché” is instrumental to the way in which the solderer encounters the photographic portrayal of his own past.

In his discussion of the affiliative ties between Walter Benjamin and the French revolutionary Louis-Auguste Blanqui, Eduardo Cadava reminds us that clichéd means “[stereotyped, plated, imprinted, turned into a negative] in bronze” (“Sternphotographie” 24-25), and stresses that the term ‘cliché’ contains the evolution of mechanical reproduction, first used in typography and photography, before acquiring the connotations of the banality of reproduction. Yet still, the negative image contains the trace of the thing as it is being reproduced. The solderer as viewer in the exhibition faces the sudden emergence of an absent past that renews its presence through the combination of photographs and captions, and bears testament to the link between what is and what has been. The character’s dismissive reaction to the depiction of how he and thousands of other workers have spent their professional lives perhaps bespeaks the awkward stance of a country where industry is dying out and former industrial complexes are being repurposed for services, the tertiary sector of production.

The character decides to leave Gazi and takes the bus to Skaramagkas, an industrial area outside Athens, passing through an array of industries: the petroleum tanks of Elin [Hellenic Petroleum Company], the premises of Petrogaz [Liquefied Petroleum Gas], and Hellenic Petroleum. More than closely tied to the labour past of the character, this industrial zone of the outer city emerges as a waste land, especially

in the wake of the financial crisis. Through this ride, Peroulis showcases the Greek secondary sector of production as a spectacle to be seen through the bus window. When the soldierer sees the Hellenic Halyvourgia [Hellenic steel factory], he reminisces the 2012 strike of the steel workers which lasted nine months. The workers protested against lay-offs, cuts in working hours and pay cuts that brought monthly salaries down to 500 euros per month, in the midst of Greece's economic crisis. The memory of the strike is still fresh, although, despite their resilience, the strikers were taken to court and sentenced, while Manesis, the plant owner, "had only kept the plant of Volos where salaries were slashed in half" (Peroulis 17). The concluding sentence of the story, "[p]erhaps the asshole would turn it into a museum and sell tickets" (Peroulis 17) is an unsettling return to the story's title, "In the Museum." While pondering the future of the Halyvourgia plant, the soldierer is also re-claiming the industrial use of the site of Gazi which he has just visited and perhaps the potentiality of a working class that is not put "in the museum."³ Thus, the soldierer's story performs a dialectics between the inescapability of a historical imperative dictated by profit and the possibility of another future for the Greek industrial and economic life.

The leitmotiv of the epiphanic moment resurfaces in the third story, entitled "Veakeio," which recounts the experience of a children's theatre actress; having attended an audition along with 600 other unemployed actresses, she lands the part in a theatrical adaptation of Aesop's fable of Hercules. Her experience of labour is a foil to the heroics of the Herculean fable as acting has become meaningless for her: "She didn't need a thing to mould the part, no memory of emotion, no lived experience; the heroes had no internal lives, she didn't have to feel anything, only to remember her lines at the right moment" (Peroulis 35). The text juxtaposes the low quality of the play with the politically charged history of the venue; the open-air theatre Veakeio, was named after Aimilios Veakis, a major Greek actor of the inter-war years. The actress at some point reflects on the life trajectory of her famous colleague: "Veakis had fought in the Balkan wars, joined the resistance, he had fought in the mountains during the civil war;⁴ they named Skylitsis's junta theatre after him, for his other-worldly blind Oedipus and his mad king Lear" (36). Caught in the dead-end of lifeless acting as a means to escape unemployment, the actress's looking back on Veakis, a heroic figure of Greece's late modernism is dissonant with her historical present. A cornerstone for Greek acting, Veakis represents the historical subject of political and cultural resistance that fully embodies human agency and lives a politically rich rather than barren life; his life narrative sharply contrasts with the unfulfilled potential of the young actress's own life. More than that, the actress's

story, as a story about a young woman artist possibly gestures to the author's very own interpellation by the market.

As was the case with the soldierer, the epiphanic episode with Veakis is also as an instance of involuntary memory that reveals the character's clinging to a forgotten link with the past of her professional field and a partial and incomplete, yet collective social history. Unlike the soldierer, who ruminates on his work during his leisure, the actress contemplates the case of Veakis during her time of labour, before stepping on the stage. Both workers are defined by the economies of employment and unemployment, subsistence and survival. Their interactions with different temporalities underpin the text's dialogue with contingency, which is immanent in the potentialities of the future; moreover, the actress's own engagement with Greece's political history and her concern about not being actively involved in politics reveals Veakis as the dialectical opposite of the resigned and frustrated actress. At the same time, if the actress is read as a persona that stands in for the author, her reminiscing of the history of the theatre punctuates the Greek hegemonic narrative of the so-called post-civil war "national reconciliation." As Kostis Kornetis writes, "the post-Civil War status quo of curtailed democratic rights and limited social expression extended from the Communist defeat at the end of the three-year conflict of 1946-1949 up to 1974 with the collapse of the Colonels' regime (1967-74)" (94). As Kornetis also argues, "the long-lasting post-Civil War era came to a close, at least on an institutional level, with the decriminalization of communism and the rehabilitation of the exiled and imprisoned left-wingers" (94). Against this backdrop, in the actress's mind, the name "Veakeio" is only a euphemism for the "junta theatre" which opened in 1969 and was named after Skylitsis, the city's mayor, arbitrarily appointed by the military junta of 1967. Thus, the appropriation of Veakis's name comes across as intended to silence the original historical content of the theatre and obliterate its disturbing past.

Contingency, as the fall-of-the-dice moment, the open-endedness that affirms the chance factor, also dominates in "Vine Harvest" and "Capital"—the second and fourth stories of the collection. In "Vine Harvest" the main character is a land owner and vine-grower who finds himself amidst a vineyard crisis due to a fungus infecting 70% of the grapes in Nemea, a major viticultural region of Greece. The devastating grape disease along with adverse weather and frequent showers further endanger the harvest. Lucky enough to still have his vines unaffected, the land-owner gambles with an array of parameters, such as weather forecasts, the rises and drops in the current market price per kilo of grape, and humidity measurements. His race against time exemplifies contingency in a variety of ways: rain at harvest affects the quality of grapes but adds to their weight; the longer it takes to harvest, the more sugars the

grapes will contain; if the grapes are harvested prematurely, the wine produced will be of lower alcohol content (Alcohol by Volume). Feverishly, the land-owner observes the local market variations, waits for the increase of demand due to lack of product, and when he finally delivers his grapes to the Cooperative Winery, he mentally calculates his earnings to 5,500 euros: "If he had brought the grapes five days earlier, he would have got less than half the money, if he was to wait until tomorrow, he would lose his entire crop. He had fucked them all" (Peroulis 26). His business practice is nothing less of speculative, bearing a strong resemblance to stock market vacillations; his sense of a contingent future and of the role of the haphazard, that is of pure chance, define the narrative course of the story.

In the background of his risky yet successful transactions, a network of informal labour⁵ disturbingly unravels and includes his right-hand man Ermir, an Albanian immigrant paid daily wages along with his whole family, the tractor driver Daniel, son to Ermir, who is fifteen years old and missing out on school, and three Bulgarian Roma who are occasionally recruited and compensated by the hour. At the bottom of the food chain, there is an unnamed, voiceless Pakistani migrant worker who has been up working for twenty-four hours straight, while burning up with fever. The Pakistani worker, a subaltern voiceless figure, speaks no Greek and does not utter a single word in the story. He gets bullied and is forced into drinking Albanian wine. At the end of the day, while the Albanians get 30 euros and the Bulgarian Roma 25, the Pakistani worker is only given "two tenners" (Peroulis 32). The policies of austerity form the background of the "Vine Harvest" much like they do in most of the stories in *Automata*. The massive entry of immigrants in Greece provides all the temporary and seasonal cheap labour the landowner needs. It should be noted that this story was written before Europe's citizens and denizens witnessed the building of "razor-wire barriers and fences" and the "injunction of a closed-border policy to fend off the refugee crisis" (Karavanta 2).⁶ Yet, cruelty and exploitation prevail; the land-owner's "gambling" with contingency is an attempt to capitalize on the surplus value produced by the labour of these workers who have no rights and are part of the precariat working strata. Greece's financial crisis, which allows for such work conditions and the relations of production that enfold them, thus lurks in the background of *Automata*.

"Capital" also examines the notion of gambling through the fictionalised online gambling and economic speculations of a student. In this case, money-making is explicitly the main objective of the character, as the narrative shifts to a first-person narration. The character tells his story at an intermittent pace, with short, matter-of-fact sentences. Setting up several websites and Facebook pages behind different avatars, the student imports army knives from China for twenty euros per item and

resells them for forty euros. When the two Chinese suppliers decide to claim more money for themselves, he places an order that explains he will be ordering twenty knives and that only the lowest bidder will be assigned the order. The e-mail is sent to the two Chinese suppliers as well as to a third one, one of his fake identities: “That was the first risk I took, to order knives I hadn’t sold with money I hadn’t made” (Peroulis 41). As expected, one of the two suppliers, in turn sends an e-mail to the third supplier, the character’s avatar, suggesting that they will not offer more than a 10% discount. The character responds that he needs the order, having three children and all, and that he will definitely offer a 25%-30% discount.

Dealing knives, bicycles, and brass-knuckles, perhaps an allusion to the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn violence,⁷ quickly leads him to invest in the stock market, a much riskier task. When he comes close to losing everything, the student ventures to re-invest money he does not have and manages to make a handsome profit. The end of the story reveals that the student had been acting on his father’s directions so that he would get a taste of “the nature of the accumulation of capital” (Peroulis 49). The father is content with the sum of money his son has made, but displeased about the fact that the money was made through gambling and breaching the law. He lectures the student on the value of understanding capital accumulation through salaried labour and exploitation by an employer who would capitalize on the surplus value that the student’s labour power would produce: “Otherwise, I would never have the chance, he said obviously disappointed, to comprehend the depths of the nature of capital; those who ignored it sooner or later lost the capital they had inherited” (Peroulis 49). The father figure here stands for the old-school capitalist: his own father, also a trader had been the first to import balloons in Greece “shortly after the end of the civil war,” having predicted that although people had more urgent needs, “they would sooner or later turn to useless things” (Peroulis 48). The grandfather of the student is reported never to have given his children a balloon, not even as a birthday present, “since for him, they had remained useless” (Peroulis 48-9). Thus, gambling appears in its pure form in both stories and the rationality of estimations is subordinated to contingency.

If, in modernism proper, emphasis was put on individuality and the individual thought process, Peroulis resorts to nine distinct individualities within the late capitalist market in order to re-affirm the singularity and the political potentiality of the experience of labour as it is being transformed into a thought process within but also against a late capitalist context. *Automata*, the title of the collection, like the soldierer’s cliché, contains more cultural significations than simply the description of working subjects gradually adapting to the automatisations of machinery through a robot-like, mechanical repetition of movements that has dominated relations of

production since the emergence of Fordism and Taylorism. As Adelheid Voskuhl argues, the eighteenth-century automaton anticipated the nineteenth-century factories and in the nineteenth century both the worker's bodies and the factory unit were perceived as automata (207-8). The nineteenth century was by and large characterised by its fascination with the automaton.⁸ Karl Marx in the first volume of *Capital*, argues that the automaton, that is the automatic mechanism, is capital and thus "is endowed, in the person of the capitalist, with consciousness and a will. As capital, therefore, it is animated by the drive to reduce to a minimum the resistance offered by man, that obstinate yet elastic natural barrier" (527). Marx draws on Andrew Ure's 1835 *Philosophy of Manufactures* and his self-moving machines, yet the excerpt above seems to associate the machine more with the capitalist who possesses the will and intelligence and less with the worker. When Marx discusses automation and the development of industrial capitalism in the *Grundrisse*, the machine transforms the means of production into fixed capital. When Walter Benjamin discusses automation, he goes back to Marx's view that within all capitalist production "the worker does not make use of the working conditions", instead the "working conditions make use of the worker" (Benjamin, *SW 4* 328). By working with machines, the workers gradually adapt to the automatisisation of machinery: they coordinate "their own movements with the uniformly constant movements of an automaton" (Marx qtd. in *SW 4*, 328). Peroulis's working subjects lack *strictu sensu* such automatisisation, yet retain it in their moments of estrangement from their labour.

"To the Police Van" and "On the Bridge" look at the very different circumstances of a police man and a seaman: through a focus on the worker's detachment from the object of labour, Peroulis reveals another aspect of automation that borders on alienation. "To the Police Van" returns to the setting of Piraeus, this time the city center, where the character, a policeman of the riot police walks the streets with his partner Kotsias, before heading to Athens to police a demonstration. The city streets emerge in all their filthiness because of a strike in waste disposal and in a devastation that echoes Greece's economic recession. The reader here finds the second reference to the Golden Dawn; Kotsias aspires to be transferred from the riot police and become a special police guard, thanks to the election of the mayor Mihaloliakos, a relative of the head of the neo-Nazi party. The main character is more concerned about how massive the demonstration will be. Not having been able to get much sleep, he hopes the day will be rainy so that there will be a poor turnout at the demonstration. His colleague is more cynical: "It is civilians you push back, not human beings [...] He was a clerk, he dealt blows like envelopes in boxes" (Peroulis 54). Police brutality is consistently conflated with the banality of bureaucracy in the

character's thoughts as he and Kotsias walk towards Piraeus harbor. Peroulis's story becomes a poignant reminder of officially sanctioned police violence.

At some point, his boots step onto a soft pulp, which he discovers to be three dead birds. He soon notices the dead birds to be dozens, hundreds, thousands, covering everything "like a rug" (Peroulis 56). More composed, Kotsias explains the birds were high flyers, caught up in a storm and scorched by lightning. Yet, panic sets in as the character feels the birds being crushed under his feet. Meanwhile, the sky is clearing and he fears there will be a million protesters at the demonstration. Kotsias attempts to calm him down saying that forty to fifty thousand policemen will also be present and they carry on walking while crushing the dead birds with their feet. The character's initial disgust and horror turns into resignation: "he stepped on soft little heads and breasts, breaking wings, but could not feel them at all, it was as if they had ascended to heaven" (Peroulis 58). He becomes oblivious to the sight of mice eating the dead birds in much the same way as when he spoke of his detachment from the act of beating demonstrators:

He had been sleepless during other demonstrations, as well. That helped him beat like a machine. At first, he felt as if he had wings on his feet when they all [the police forces] attacked and rushed forward in the same direction ... but the more he hit blindly, stooped behind the shield, the more he felt like he was waiting for his shift to end, while from his initial sense of being hyped up his body started becoming mechanical. (Peroulis 54-5).

The element of the automaton is precisely contingent on his detachment from the given harsh reality, whether it is the dead bodies of the birds or the living bodies of protesters. If the alienated condition of the automaton is read as the dialectical opposite of the flashing epiphanic moment that brings awareness, then the experience of labour in *Automata* unfolds between these two polar opposites. The policeman's alienation from the body of the protesters is reflected in the experience of his own body; the "ascension" of the dead birds "to heaven" finds an echo in the image of Kotsias feeling as if he had "wings on his feet." This upward movement wherein, like the birds, he rises above the banality and morbidity of bureaucratic violence is tantamount to the non-feeling of the automaton and not just in the sense of mechanical repetition.

From the urban spaces of Piraeus, the next story moves to the stereotypically Greek landscape of the Cycladic island. The seventy-year-old seaman and narrator of "On the bridge" offers a brief history of his professional trajectory in the first lines of the story: now in charge of bridge watches on yachts, as a young man he worked in the engine rooms of "oil tankers sailing to Iran and later in containers going to Shanghai"; yet he had preferred to keep 2,000 dollars per month for himself rather than pay for his social security (Peroulis 69). When his "lungs collapsed at the engine

room, captain Tsakos, the ship owner, took [him] along on the yachts” of industrialists and property developers; so, at this age, instead of a pension, he gets a “year-round salary” (Peroulis 69). This retrospective in the character’s mind is interrupted by the actuality of his current duties; in addition to sailing the boat he has to select the crew, take care of paperwork, order the fuel and the supplies for the scheduled trip. He will be taking “five young men and four young women, the offspring [of the rich]” to the island of Serifos for the weekend.

Thinking about the journey, he reflects on how the port of Serifos, “with the mountain in the background, is affected by rear winds blowing, ascending over the top of the mountain and then going down, hitting the vessels” (Peroulis 71). A glimpse of the late nineteenth-century industrial history of the island is brought into the narration, the time when the miners were digging the ore deposits that were found on the northern part of the island. Although the presence of mineral deposits in Serifos had been known since antiquity, the intensive exploitation of mines did not begin until 1880, with the exploitation of the ore deposits by the French company “Société des mines Seriphos-Spiliazeza.” The French had built bridges so that the minecarts could be directly unloaded to ship holds (Peroulis 71). The character seems to return to these past realities of the history of the island in order to make better sense of his present. With his characters trapped in a perpetual present. Peroulis establishes a dialogue with the modernist paradigm that focuses on historical temporality. Yet, in the case of the seaman, the soldierer, and the actress, Peroulis represents their present as entwined with a past history and with a future.

The characters’ epiphanies are evoked either through direct references (as is the case with Veakis and EAM-ELAS) or through allusions to historical events or history (the mining past of Serifos) and active human subjects: in their epiphanic moments, Peroulis’s characters resist historical amnesia. The allusions to the poor and dangerous working conditions of mining for instance emerge in contradistinction to the pleasures of yachting enjoyed by the offspring of the wealthy. The young guests are enjoying the nightlife of the island and as soon as they return on board, the boat will sail to the island of Hydra so that they reach its port by the time they wake up. Through the reference to the metallurgical activities in Serifos, Peroulis sets up a contrast between this past industrial activity and tourism, as is exemplified by yachting, a case of services from the tertiary sector of production which replaces mining, the secondary sector. What is more, the seaman seems to be the oldest labouring subject in the collection so the story also reads as a depiction of the ravages of contingency; if things had gone more smoothly, he would not still be obliged to work in late life. The story ironically ends with the seaman reporting on how the ship owner, Captain Tsakos, occasionally eats with the crew. In a depiction of the

character's blindness to the cruel and crude class divide, the worker feels a certain solidarity and companionship with the capitalist who exploits his labour.

Such internal contradictions of the subject's relationship to the notion of work are at the core of the book; in a 2016 radio interview, Peroulis discusses his interest in how individuals commodify the object of their labour, while at the same time put their personalities and soul in it.⁹ "Concrete" and "Civil Courts" register this inherent contradiction as experienced by a construction contractor and a young lawyer, while exposing social stratification and class distinctions. The main character of the sixth story works in the construction industry, bidding on municipal construction projects, no longer funded exclusively by the Greek state, but by the Partnership Agreement for the Development Framework (widely known in Greece as ESPA). The auction is a male universe of contractors going to great lengths in order to win the contract to the point that one of them gets punched in the face, another one breaks down and cries, while all make offers to buy the contract from its future holder. With tactics that range from bribing to blackmailing, contingency erupts in the "sheer concatenation of profit and loss, bids and bargains" (Clark 8). The contractor who gets the much sought-after project rides his motorcycle along Patisision Avenue in order to look at the project he has just undertaken: he is to repair the road surface and sidewalks of an area in the centre of Athens, stretching from the historic building of the National Technical University all the way to the neighborhood of Aghios Panteleimon, both significant for what they have come to represent in the contemporary Greek imaginary. The historic building of the National Technical University of Athens has a strong political resonance: occupied by students and then stormed by the police and the military of the Greek junta in November 1973, these events precipitated the fall of the seven-year long dictatorship in 1974. Aghios Panteleimon, on the other hand, is the name of a church and of a neighborhood around it, that had become by 2015 –the year *Automata* was published– a stronghold of the Golden Dawn neo-Nazi party. Inhabited primarily by immigrants, Aghios Panteleimon was targeted by the neo-Nazis who set-up racist "people's committees," distributed a journal of xenophobic discourse, organised violent pogroms and notoriously savage individual attacks.

Instead of surveying his future project, the contractor's attention is caught by the flat blocks on Acharnon St. Walking around, he arrives at one of the six-storey buildings he had once built in the area. The building is exemplary of "vertical social differentiation"¹⁰ and of a multi-ethnic amalgam of Greek and non-Greek residents: the two-bedroom flat on the first floor is apparently occupied by seven Pakistanis "chatting and laughing" (Peroulis 67) on the balcony. One floor above, he sees three African women, "one of them watering her plants" (Peroulis 67). The shutters of the

four-bedroom flat are shut “but the air-conditioning was on,” while “[o]n the steps of the entrance to the building a black child was sending text messages” (Peroulis 67). When the elevator door opens, the contractor sees the old Greek lady who had originally commissioned the building. He turns his gaze to the two basement flats: in one of them, the shutters are closed and the TV is on, while through the wide open windows of the other flat he sees “a little girl playing on the floor” (Peroulis 68). The child’s play interestingly reproduces the primary housing function of the building; she is playing “house” and has “set up an entire household” (Peroulis 68). The mother is “a young woman” who appears carrying a box that contains cheap bibelots and the father, “a young man” also enters bringing a coffee table in the room.

The text subtly engages in a tripartite exploration of the notion of space while the end of the story has the character witnessing this threefold household scene that begins with the child’s play of make-believe home, then passes to the family’s moving into the new flat, making a new life for themselves, and ends with the housing use of the building as a whole. The contractor reflects on how he used thicker iron rods and more concrete in his first buildings —driven by a professional ethos that he has now lost as was evidenced in the opening scene of male antagonism for the contracts in the bidding room. From the initial hectic scene of the bidding room the story has come full circle to a serene, almost idyllic family image. Yet, the bleak subtext remains: the neighborhood is downtrodden, basement flats typically suffer from limited sunlight, insufficient ventilation, and humidity problems. The vertical social geography of these Athenian buildings reflects the residents’ social status or degree of social integration: the higher floors are typically rented or owned by Greeks, while as one moves downwards, African tenants who have lived in the neighborhood for a long time can afford the rent of a higher floor in comparison to Pakistanis, who are more recent immigrants.

“Civil Courts,” the eighth story of the collection, tells the *minutiae* of the day of a young female lawyer who is working with her father on a car accident case. The story unfolds on the day of the court proceedings, and here Peroulis exposes the shortcomings of justice. The pair of lawyers has been hired by the relatives of the driver who has sustained severe brain damage and is on mechanical ventilation while the passenger in the front seat has died. When the wife of the driver is called to the stand, the perplexities of road traffic accident claims and the realities of class discrimination unfold. The wife, also a passenger and cousin of the dead passenger’s widow (Peroulis 77), explains that while driving to work —the “Jumbo” store warehouse on Piraeus St.¹¹— her husband lost control of the vehicle and crashed into a jeep. The dead passenger leaves behind a wife, a baby, and a ten-year-old child. With a quick estimate of what the deceased would have offered to his family, had his

life not been cut short, the lawyer argues for a compensation for injuries paid to the family. The lawyer of the insurance company cross-examines the witness, unsuccessfully trying to establish whether the woman was aware of her husband's drunkenness and negligence, and then, in turn, the lawyer of the deceased jeep driver uses the wealth of his client, a doctor, to secure a big compensation for the family of the deceased. Eventually, while the working-class family claims 130 euros per month for each of the two orphans, the doctor's child is apparently entitled to 1,050 euros per month. When the young lawyer explains to the working-class family that compensations are paid according to financial and social status, she is faced with their telling reaction: "they stared at me as if I had written the civil code myself" (Peroulis 83). Overall, the case on trial becomes in Peroulis's story a process of reconstructing the past, the two families' social status, and the accident itself. Notwithstanding the notion of justice being served, the courthouse is the site of this reconstruction which is performed solely on economic terms.

Here, the blatant inequalities of justice go hand in hand with the vibrant solidarity among the two rival attorneys: "[Y]ou might have been in his shoes. We don't expose a colleague," says the young lawyer's father while they both help out the insurance company lawyer who has made an omission in building his case (Peroulis 86). Moreover, the physicality that Peroulis introduced in the story through injury, the body in pain, and death, takes on a different guise towards the end of the story when the young lawyer goes over the repeated daily toll of labour on herself and her father:

It was hot and my trousers were tight. My father took off his jacket, his shirt was all sweaty in the armpits, and I told him. I put lipstick on because I had been biting my lips, my father gave me his jacket and went in to pee, he came out and I went in. He put on his jacket again and we went up to go to the elevators. (Peroulis 88)

Both the civil engineer/developer and the lawyer experience moments when they passionately strive for the object of their labour: yet both have become estranged from themselves and from their work as a result of the mechanisation of their labour. The two protagonists and all the peripheral characters in the two stories emerge as autonomous human beings and economic entities, while capitalism surfaces as a unified collective condition; the division of labour with its increasing specialisation and repetition culminates in the alienation of the subject, the disassociation from the process of production.

The penultimate story of the collection, "On All Fours," with its focus on male sex work is perhaps intended to remind to the reader of the old Marxian maxim that sex work is "only a specific expression of the general prostitution of the laborer" (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* 99). The third person narration presents the working day of a thirty-year old male sex worker and starts with a snapshot of

the main character during a “date” with Alekos, a fifty-year old tax office employee, and Nikolakis, a younger professional footballer. After taking the necessary cocaine in an all-familiar scene of “cutting” and sniffing, they engage in a threesome. Criticism has often characterised the language of the book as “naturalistic,” and “rough,” and here the detailing of the routine and machine-like performativity of sex acts borders on the pornographic. When the appointment comes to an end, the sex worker, back in his hotel room, mechanically goes through his e-mails, reviews from clients, etc., to plan the next meeting. Throughout the story the reader gets background information about the character: he schedules about 40-50 “appointments” per month and makes approximately 5,000 euros; having worked as a sex worker for the past eight years, he aspires to buy a franchise business like “Mikel” or “Grigoris”¹² and retire as soon as possible.

Dimitris Manoukas has observed that the story features a “body-machine being inextricably tied to the process of automatized production and commodification.” More than that, the tale’s focus on male “prostitution” (Peroulis 89-99) unsettles stereotypes about its female counterpart and, on a much larger scale, serves as a metaphor for any kind of labour; we might remember here, that in his discussion of female prostitution in nineteenth-century France, Walter Benjamin, echoing Marx, termed the prostitute “the ur-form of the wage laborer” (Buck-Morss, *DS* 184). Benjamin acknowledges the common ground shared by prostitutes and the working class and agrees that “prostitution can lay claim to being considered ‘work’ the moment work becomes prostitution.” (*AP* 348). Perhaps even the positioning of “On All Fours” at the end of the collection nods to such a gradual understanding of the profession of the sex worker as encompassing all previously presented professions.

The final story of the collection “Venereal Diseases” presents the forced encounter between several individuals in the waiting room of the Hospital of Skin and Venereal Diseases, in Thessaloniki. The unnamed male narrator, most probably a persona for the author, as evidenced by his reference to the eponymous main character of W.G. Sebald’s novel, finds himself sitting “at the banks of time, as Austerlitz said” (Peroulis 106), waiting for his doctor’s appointment along with people from all walks of life; an eighteen-year-old girl accompanied by her mother, a young prostitute, a Pakistani immigrant, a university student, a middle-aged working-class man, and a wealthy “libertine” (Peroulis 108). The story loosely discusses the history of the clinic as well as that of the Athens Syggros Hospital of Cutaneous & Venereal Diseases, evoking the background of the charitable work of the two benefactors who founded the clinics. While the previous stories are set in spaces of production, consumption, and services in the more conventional sense of literary setting, here space, the hospital, is foregrounded in the detailing of the hospital museum morbid exhibits. Peroulis’s

return to the modern paradigm emerges here in the narrator's observation of the taxonomic classification and display that defined the nineteenth-century museum as an iconic space of modernity: the author goes to great lengths to describe the display of casts of disfigured faces and deformed body parts, the result of venereal diseases.

The story, in its tragicomic hues, decompresses the convolutedness of the nine professional lives that have preceded. The notion of the contingent is transferred at the level of the suffering body: however, no information is given about the health status of either the main character or the peripheral individuals that appear in the story. The clinic stands as a Foucauldian site of biopower, focusing on the body as the site of subjugation, implicating subjects in the self-regulation of hygiene, and sexuality. The humorous allusions to carnal pleasures and their potential side-effects are made along the lines of, supposedly, false assumptions about why each patient is there. Assuming that the girl sitting across the room suffers from a venereal disease and not, for instance, a skin problem, the character infers she has had numerous sexual experiences. Yet quickly, he disproves his own line of thought: "And like everything in capitalism, quantity always misleadingly drives us to accessibility (we also can have sex with her)" (Peroulis 107).

Capitalism, as well as the contingent, is always there in *Automata*: the characters are caught in an endgame "with everyone accepting (or resenting) a high level of risk" (Clark 7). It is no accident that Peroulis's characters are far from the prototype of an industrial proletariat which would apparently bear the brunt of working with machinery; as discussed, the distinct types of labour that they perform range from the primary sector of economy (the land owner in Nemea), to the secondary sector (the solderer and the developer), to the tertiary sector (the actress, the lawyer, the sex worker, the policeman). The allocation of narrative space to each sector of production seems to reflect the sad realities of the capitalist job market wherein services overwhelmingly outweigh primary production and industry. Individuality is interwoven with the very notion of the division of labour, while the text registers a dialectics between automation and epiphany through the characters. By painstakingly registering the differences among the different types of labour and the singularity of contingency in each story, *Automata* offers a glimpse into the discordance and the homogeneity of the experience of the working subject in this Greek version of late capitalism.

¹ I use the term with regards to its tradition as a central trait in works by Dorothy Richardson, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Marcel Proust, among many others. Epiphany is an *aporia*, a disruption of the text that offers a new set of semantics. It constitutes new-found recognition or re-visited past knowledge that in some way or other transforms the text.

² The idea of holding an interview with the author, as the critical editing of this article, is owed to Mina Karavanta who, besides being a constant source of inspiration, took an interest in this project from the very start and suggested I go through with it. Mata Dimakopoulou was the most diligent critical reader and editor I could have wished for.

³ Interestingly, while the author was going over my translations of the quotations from the book, he suggested that the title of the short story should be “In the Museum” rather than “At the Museum,” readily explaining that “the working class is now in the museum.” Sotiris Paraschas (King’s College, London) also offered generous feedback on the translations of quotations. I wholeheartedly thank them both for their valuable comments.

⁴ Veakis (1884-1951) probably fled to the mountains sometime in December 1944 to avoid persecution in Athens after having fought against the Axis Occupation of Greece with the resistance and the National Liberation Front (EAM). In October 1944, when the Germans evacuated Greece, EAM controlled about two-thirds of the country and when the new government called for the disarmament of the National Popular Liberation Army (ELAS), ELAS refused, resulting in an outbreak of hostilities in Athens (December 1944).

⁵ A sincere word of thanks goes to Aliko Vaxevanoglou (Academy of Athens) for our long discussions about informal or underground economy in Greece. Her extensive and detailed work, based on interviews and “life-stories” material has facilitated my understanding of informal economy.

⁶ The 2016 special issue “Living through the Interregnum” of *Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies* is of relevance here for its take on what the crisis articulates and what it wishes to erase.

⁷ Fascist violence and Golden Dawn attacks in Greece have repeatedly featured brass-knuckles.

⁸ Walter Benjamin, who was extremely interested in the phenomenon and its workings, found that it was expressed in literature: for instance, Edgar Allan Poe’s uniformities in the description of professional clusters in “Man of the Crowd” (1840). The Greek author Giannis Skarimbis (1893-1984) also explores the idea of the automaton in *Figaro’s Solo* (1938), an idea that largely remains unexplored for its connections to the modernist paradigm.

⁹ Sto Kokkino Radio. 23 February 2016., min 3:00. Available at:
<http://www.stokokkino.gr/article/100000000026591/>

¹⁰ For a comprehensive description of the notion, see Maloutas and Karadimitriou.

¹¹ The driver’s workplace is laden with allusions to class distinctions: the Jumbo chain store is a very well-known retailer selling a wide variety of rather low-quality, inexpensive products from toys to houseware. The owner of the company, often called “Mr. Jumbo” in the Greek financial press, is known as the mogul of the crisis, since his company has managed not only to survive the economic recession, but also to expand. The lower-class driver of the story thus appropriately works for a company whose target market is mainly the poor.

¹² For the non-Greek reader, it should be noted that these are popular coffee and fast food chains (Costa or Starbucks would roughly correspond as examples).

Works Cited

- Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1999.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings 4 1938-1940*. Ed. Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings. Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2006.
- Buck-Morss, Susan. *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989.
- Cadava, Eduardo. "Sternphotographie: Benjamin, Blanqui, and the Mimesis of Stars." *Qui Parle* 9.1, *The Dissimulation of History* (1995): 1-32.
- Clark, T.J. *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from the History of Modernism*. New Haven: Yale U P, 1999.
- Hatzivasileiou, Vaggelis. "Professions and Social Images." *To Vima* (newspaper) 21/02/2016 [«Επαγγέλματα και Κοινωνικές Εικόνες»].
- Karavanta, Mina. "Introduction: In the Wake of the Polity to Come." *Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies* (o. 2016) 1-13.
<https://ejournals.epublishing.ekt.gr/index.php/synthesis/article/view/16221/0>. Accessed 20 May 2019.
- Kornetis, Kostis. "From Reconciliation to Vengeance: The Greek Civil War on Screen in Pantelis Voulgaris's *A Soul so Deep* and Kostas Charalambous's *Tied Red Thread*." *FILMICON: Journal of Greek Film Studies* 2 (2014): 93-116.
- Maloutas, Thomas and Nikos Karadimitriou. "Vertical Social Differentiation in Athens: Alternative or Complement to Community Segregation?" *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 25. 4 (2001): 699-716. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/17672030>. Accessed 20 May 2019.
- Manoukas, Dimitris. "On All Fours': Queer Sex and Prostitution in Late Capitalism" [«Στα τέσσερα»: Queer σεξ και πορνεία στον ύστερο καπιταλισμό]. <http://milanode.cloudmin.gr/%CE%AC%CF%81%CE%B8%CF%81%CE%B1/39/>. Accessed 20 May 2019.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital A Critique of Political Economy*. Introduction: Ernest Mandel. Trans: Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin Books, 1990.
- Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Trans. and Ed. Martin Milligan. New York: Dover Publications, 2007.
- Peroulis, Kostas. *Automata*. Athens: Antipodes, 2015 [Αυτόματα: Αντίποδες, 2015].
- Voskuhl, Adelheid. *Androids in the Enlightenment: Mechanics, Artisans, and Cultures of the Self*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2013. *Google Books Search*.