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Cosmopolitan orientation & creative resistance in contemporary Athenian culture

Abstract

This article investigates ways in which the global and the local coexist and converse in contemporary Greek culture. The study draws on pragmatic aspects of everyday life as presented in the pages of the popular magazine *Lifo*, which is distributed for free in the streets of Athens on a weekly basis. Both the editing style and features of *Lifo* reveal a wealth of cross-cultural influences in matters of artistic production and lifestyle. They also reveal a sophisticated local discourse mostly deployed in sociopolitical commentary and satire feature pieces. How far are these characteristics coloured by the sweeping influence of immigration, European integration and the current digital reality in the country? Further, the article examines aspects of Americanization in everyday life and the impact of the current financial crisis.

Introduction and background

The thirty year period 1974-2004 is defined by two major landmarks in the official political and cultural history of Greece: at its beginning, the restitution of the republic after a forty year lack of political freedom; and at its end, the Athens Olympics that placed the country at the forefront of international attention after a prolonged period of cultural introversion. Large parts of the population enjoyed relative affluence during that time; the previously persecuted spirit of resistance took its revenge by gradually dominating mainstream cultural politics, which on a different note, remained

dedicated to the promotion of ancestral cultural heritage; and despite reservations towards overwhelming western and other foreign influences, a new optimism and euphoria accompanied both the processes of integration into the European Union and the rapid transformation of the country into a multilingual-multicultural environment after the influx of migrants in the 1990s. Apart from a few studies that either glorify or criticize the populist state policies of the period along ideological lines, there is a scarcity of pragmatic research regarding the social and cultural practices of everyday life, and the meanings assigned to them by their subjects. This scholarly vacuum obscures to a significant extent our understanding of the ways in which the personal and the private have conversed with the collective and the public, and how both of these binaries have interacted with the local and international culture in an era during which the world became increasingly globalized.

This article investigates how the dialectic of global and local is manifested in the cultural landscape of the city of Athens by examining the dynamics of this manifold conversation as depicted in the pages of the Greek magazine *Lifo*, which since 2006 has been one of the most popular guides in the Greek capital. Given that globalization is primarily defined as restructuring of the world economy across political states, the analysis theoretically draws from the more refined concepts of glocalization, an attitude of thinking universally while acting particularly, and vice versa; transnationalism, which extends the melding of various boundaries to cultural processes (Roudometof 2005); and most importantly from the notion of cosmopolitanism as a moral and ethical standpoint or quality of openness towards other cultures and values (Levinas, 1998). The analysis also draws from the concept of creative resistance as it is deployed by both activists and artists nowadays, in order to describe alternative and imaginative modes of dealing with polarities or institutional power. According to theorists of glocalization, global culture is not a monolithic institution into which local cultures integrate, but a contradictory and dynamic phenomenon in response to which the local employs its own strategies to preserve its singularity (Robertson 1995: 25-44). According to Michel Foucault's analysis of power (1982), power relationships are not universal or concrete formations, but a nexus within which a whole field of responses, reactions, results and possible inventions is open to the collectives and the subjects. In an era of globalization

like the present, both new media technology and established views about nations and their cultures constitute very influential mechanisms of power. However, intercultural dilemmas related to Greek national identity, such as Neo-Hellenism and Hellenism are kept in the periphery of this analysis. They are rather approached as aspects of the same coin, in other words as equally useful tools for understanding Greek cultural complexities as they have developed through time. Interestingly enough, the magazine examined in this article represents an experiment of reconciling diverse foreign influences with both the ancestral and modern popular heritage of the country, simultaneously participating in and keeping a distance/abstaining from mainstream cultural strategies.

Free press¹ represents an alternative response to the overwhelming influence of the contemporary media industry that does not seem to have attracted much attention in media studies. According to web resources free press newspapers were launched in Sweden with the daily newspaper *Metro* in 1995 and some of them were soon franchised extending their multilingual editions in western and developing countries reaching audiences of millions of people worldwide (*Metro* n.d.). Mainly relying on revenues generated through advertising, free press editions are mostly addressed to city residents providing information of general or local interest, or representing specific social groups such as minorities and artists. They counteract the dominance of Big Media by a select handful of super rich families and tightly knit financial interests controlling both governments and issues debated locally and all over the planet (*AmericanFreePress* n.d.). Lately this type of discourse has become an extremely hot topic in Greece, where there are more TV and radio stations than anywhere else in the world and mainstream media have been basically state funded (Tsangarousianos 2008a). Yet, since the 60s, no one can question the increased awareness and involvement that high electronic speed has generated in modern societies. Today even free press can: utilize cross-media practices such as blogging, electronic editing and social networking; rely on the interplay of visual, written and verbal texts to engage audiences creating a sense of a community and shared values (Stenglin 2008); and participate in debates over highly engaging and aesthetically integral forms of journalism, all of which are particularly relevant in the case of the Greek magazine examined.

Data, method and discussion

Lifo has been selected as an important resource for investigating cultural trends in Athens on the basis both of its popularity, and its singularity. Launched as an entertainment and cultural guide to the city in 2006, the magazine has published 216 issues up to 2010, with a circulation ranging from 90,000 to 300,000 printed issues per week and a community of 400,000 online readers. With such a large audience comprising young, single and educated people at a percentage above the Internet average (Alexa n.d), in a city that has five million people, and half the population of the country, there is no doubt that it tackles real trends and issues related to the arts, popular and youth culture, and life style, and provides genuine insights. The research method used combines analysis of content (textual and visual) with discourse analysis of the issues from the period 2006-10, with a specific emphasis on covers, themes, features, special issues, images and titles. Given the significant bulk and fluidity of this information, its presentation is roughly systematic in this article. Selected data that highlight both cosmopolitan and alternative local attitudes are presented in a chronological (yearly) order, thus forming a kind of a chronicle of the contemporary cultural life of the city during the discussion.

2006

The first edition of *Lifo* came out two years after the Athens Olympics which boosted Greeks' morale, confidence and optimism. Before long it would raise serious questions about the high cost of the games, the environmental irresponsibility of the organizers, the neglect of the city's suburbia and the prevalence of a parasitic social elite overly oriented towards foreign norms, consumerism and easy glamour (Hadjianastasiou 2004). On the positive side, the games, as shown in their widely praised opening and closing ceremony, brought to the fore a generation of young people, characterized by a deep concern for creatively transforming the city's and country's culture. The aspirations of that particular generation seem supported by the issues of the first year of *Lifo*; in the words of two interviewees reported in its pages (Anon 2006; Koutoudi 2007), it is an ambitious and self-assertive group, which

- is aware of the potential of the changes that are taking place in the town
- insists that local artistic output lacks nothing when compared to works acclaimed in the international market
- but itself lacks institutional support within the country.

It is also a generation of young artists that self-critically admit that they are:

- overly fond of foreign cultures
- fascinated with the openness and free spirit of American society
- ambivalent about the very old cultures of the European metropolis
- fed up with the mistrust with which the Athenian state treats artists working outside its borders.

The covers of the magazine in 2006 reveal a strong hold both on the city's ancient heritage and on contemporary foreign influences, a systematic/ evaluative approach to editing and a playful aesthetic style. A Poseidon bronze head gazing unwaveringly ahead, for instance, is accorded the same full front page coverage as the Australian rock singer Nick Cave (highly popular in Greece), and a front page multicolour collage made of all previous covers summarized and celebrated the first year of production (*Lifo* 2006). In the Christmas edition, the year 2006 is named after Pitsirikos, 'the kid', the satirical columnist of the magazine, who in the years to come and under its *Lifo* name would excel in the city as a blogging genius, an SMS joker, an author, a radio reporter, and with a song and a number in the musical theatre of Athens.

2007

In the first months of 2007 an intense debate over nationalism and national identity broke out in Greek media regarding a primary school history textbook, the writers of which were challenged for distorting historical truth by choosing to present atrocities committed during past Greek-Turkish wars in a very detached manner. *Lifo* participated in the dialogue with a special issue under the title '1821 revisited', in which Pitsirikos, the kid, ironically depicted the leading figures of the Greek national revolution against the Turks as a bunch of bandits, cannibals, city and island freaks, feminists and arsonists, whom the Church was absolutely justified not to have canonized as saints and who must be forever banished from Greek education for opposing the solidification of the traditionally friendly Greek-Turkish ties (Pitsirikos 2007a).

The columnist's satirical point of view justified both the deconstructionist aspirations of the book's feminist writers and the traditional revolutionary spirit of the country. A selection of covers of the same year confirms the postmodern trends appealing to the most-informed young audiences of Greek society: an emphatic focus on hybrid popular art, global



Figure 1: Lifo coversheet of issue 59. Photo by Taxis.
Source <<http://www.lifo.gr/issues/view/59>>.

high tech developments, interest in European city policies and English headlines. Digitized portraits of Andy Warhol and ‘popera’ singer Maria Callas for instance appeared side by side with English head titles such as ‘Free equals Freedom’ and ‘The Future is Wow’ (Lifo 2007a).

In the same year the magazine:

- Published accessible yet serious research on the profile of Greek Internet users, the majority of whom prove to be 11-35 years old, male and residents of Athens
- Embraced a brilliant high tech future by listing the most influential Greek and foreign websites
- Hosted interviews with high tech experts and popular bloggers
- Emphasized the importance of the new media for the promotion of young Greek unknown artists
- Critically reviewed the electronic editions of Greek newspapers

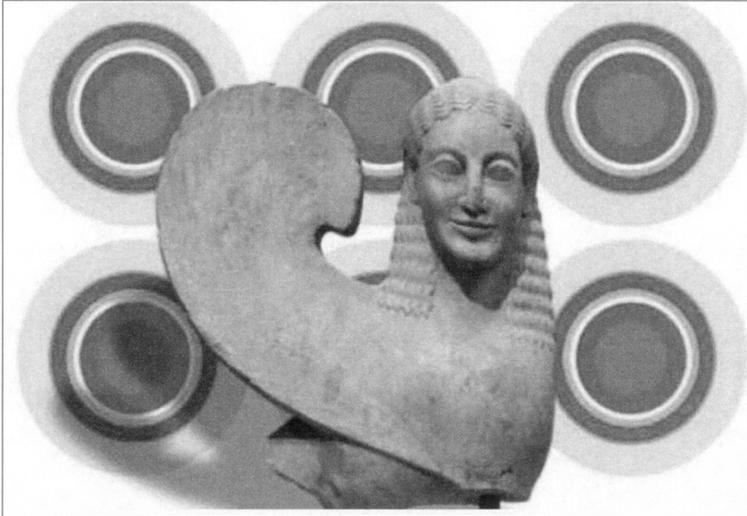


Figure 2: A tribute to Acropolis 2009, Lifo 162. Poster by D. Arvanitis.
 Source <<http://www.lifo.gr/mag/features/1560>>.

- And most importantly announced its own electronic edition, which admittedly met paradigmatically high standards.

Three major artistic events (The first Greek Biennale under the title 'Destroy Athens', Art Athina and Remap Athens) were also praised extensively as pioneering private initiatives on the grounds that they introduced the local art to the international scene while adopting alternative approaches to the urban space such as interactive/multimedia installations in neglected and unusual surroundings. Moreover, the Christmas edition of 2007 was dedicated to 'The Influentials', a wide spectrum of public figures and anonymous groups or citizens who pioneered in various fields in and outside the country, as well as in the Greek diaspora. An outstanding person among them held an interview with the general manager and driving force behind the New Acropolis Museum who summarized the philosophy of the work as aiming at the development of a lively and multifaceted relationship between the

museum visitors on the one hand and its 4000 exhibits and the city landscape on the other (*Lifo* 2007b).

Both the Museum and Acropolis will be presented in a variety of ways in the following years, with references to their renown and forgotten history, through the eyes of young designers, advertisers and innovative archaeologists, as well as focal points for regeneration of the districts surrounding the archaeological site.

On a different note, underneath the youthful and free flowing surface of the covers and the festive presentation of the achievements of an aggressively rising business class, a deep scepticism lurks in the more reflective features of the magazine regarding the social and political ethos of the city and the country. In his weekly editorial Stathis Tsangarousianos, a self confessed fanatic of machines, stigmatized the new trendy violence circulated on the web by Greek hooligans and foreign Neo-Nazis, and distanced himself from the collusive financial practices of the mainstream media in league with the political parties describing the magazine's policy as 'above, lonely and outside'. He also introduced an extended analysis of the Greek political system and economy by the journalist Christos Michailidis, which presented Greece of the millennium as the easiest and most cartelized country of the world in instrumental areas of the public and private sector such as transport, education, media and constructions (Michailidis 2007a, b, c). The article also depicted the leading political parties as adopting timid and copycat stances under the shadow cast by the EU guidelines. With surprising insightfulness - it was 2007 - the political columnist charged the city residents for manic consumerism and the political leaders of hiding the ugly truth that all over Europe huge cuts in pensions, salaries and public expenses were approaching fast. Lastly, under the shocking influence of the extended fires that turned to desert more than one million hectares of the countryside in the summer of 2007 - a summer which also attracted 17 million tourists to the country - *Lifo* hosted environmentally sensitive Athenian groups, and in late November a tribute to Berlin, an old European metropolis, and its culture.

2008

An overview of the covers and features of 2008 and 2009 indicates that the magazine, although questioning the stereotypically touristic image of Greece, *Lifo* itself joyfully celebrated a summer culture, noting its inevitability in a country with eight months summer.



Figure 3: Lifo (2008) 'For the heart of the tourist' – coversheet of issue 122.

Source <<http://www.lifo.gr/issues/view/122>>.

Many issues promoted innovative aspects of large cultural events such as the Festival of Athens and Epidaurus, stressing their newly won power to attract large scale international productions; they also gave extensive coverage to local or foreign live musical shows hosted in city clubs and youth parties. *Lifo* itself organized a series of musical events called *Lifo Nights* which initially attracted 13,000 fans, invited distinguished foreign DJs and musicians, encouraged party spirit in the streets and squares of Athens, and in 2009 sponsored the initiative *Lifo Illustrations*.⁸ Apparently, far more than simply (re)presenting the city, the magazine deployed visual communication as a powerful editing tool, and most importantly, participated actively in the city culture in constant interaction with people from the creative industries and young artists.

Interviews with innovative performers can also systematically be found in its pages, and theatre is presented as a garden that flourishes all year in Athens: counting 200 stage productions in 2008 alone. An overview of the latter in the entertainment section of the magazine, showed an increased rate

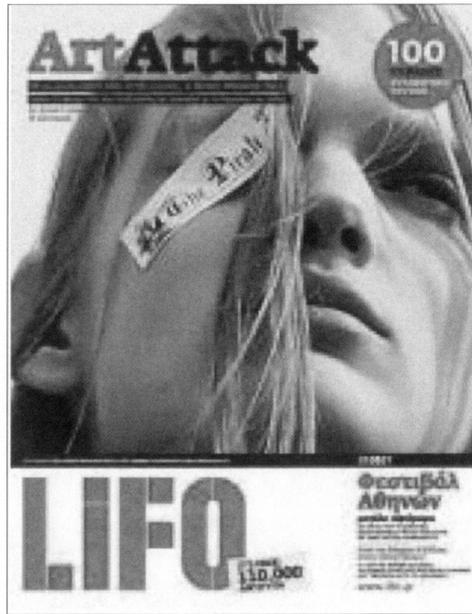


Figure 4: Lifo (2007) – coversheet of issue 69.
Source <<http://www.lifo.gr/issues/view/69>>.

of adaptations of foreign and local literature, a revival of the modern Greek play, and free experimentation with unfamiliar staging spaces and low budget shows due to the global financial crisis (Kaltaki 2008). Even the violent street riots that broke out due to the death of a teenager shot by the police at the end of 2008 became a source for inspiration for investigative journalism and creative expression in the city's guide.

It is worth noting that, apart from a few condemnations describing the violent episodes as 'cheap surrealism and criminality thumbing its nose at justice' (Papagiorgis 2008), most interviews, reportages and political features agreed to a surprising extent with the spirit of the uprising. 'I am against destroying, but I do not consider it immoral. It is extremely modern to destroy your past, particularly when it has absolutely nothing to offer you' in the words of a photographer who witnessed and recorded the episodes for the international press with his cameras (Hulot 2008). They also reveal a deep crisis of political representation, with reservations towards the

forced 'Europization' of the country, the rise of a bloggers' movement as an alternative to the inefficacy of mainstream media coverage, and overall a significant shift of young audiences towards autonomous or anarchic forms of political action. Besides, as Pitsirikos (2007b) - the caustic kid- had claimed in his renamed column 'Talk of the town' in the previous year, 'governments in Greece operate as non-governmental organizations', therefore had proposed 'Pitsirikos' government' to come into power, with the composer Mikis Theodorakis as prime minister and Virgin Mary the Idle, Saint Nickolas and the Mermaid (Alexander the Great's sister) in charge of critical ministries, along with nineteenth century politicians claimed to have shown themselves to be far more efficient and charismatic. In regards to the local and global media practices, a series of editorials of the time raised the issue of an exaggerated focus on appearances at the expense of content and substance.

2009

Undoubtedly 2009 is the year of the dark side. More than ever before, the features focused their lens on marginalized social groups of the city such as junkies and migrants, and on phenomena of foreign dependence and corruption. Prominent among these were the Siemens and Vatopedi scandals that brought to the fore shady dealings of the parties with foreign financial and local religious interests at the expense of the Greek public sector finances. 'It's a jungle out there, so let's party' in the words of an extended article dedicated to the guru of Athenian clubbing Christos Kalopitas, who for 26 years had been organizing impromptu jungle parties and after-parties with local and foreign DJs and performers in locations ranging from degraded to prestigious venues in Athens, Mykonos, Japan, Italy and the Balkans (Kokkini 2009). In the same issue, the sociologist Konstantinos Tsoukalas reflecting on the 2008 riots attributed their origin to political despair, unemployment and corruption. He noted that 'it is impossible to opt for a Greece of behaving and peace loving family men, with two million Greeks in famine and three million migrants' (Dioskouridis 2009).

That beggars are a daily phenomenon in Athens was noted in reportage, and the majority of them were gypsies, migrants, homeless and junkies including 150,000 children all over the country. 'Our problem is residency documentation, not racism' confess four actors of East European origin interviewed on the occasion of a performance based on their experience as

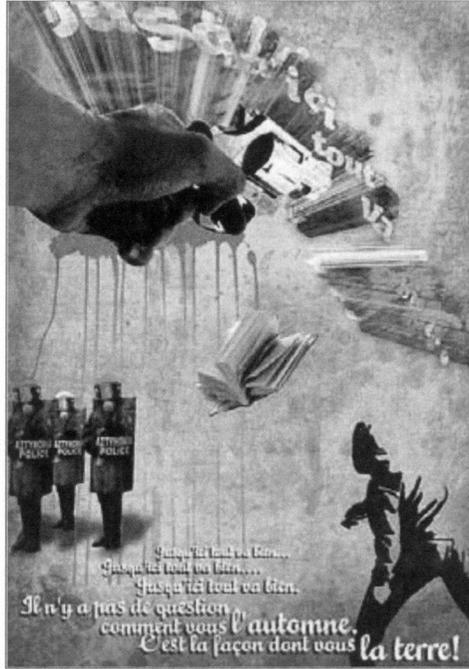


Figure 5: Lifo (2008)'Riots in Greece: Designer Reaction'. Poster by Nassos K.

Source <<http://www.lifo.gr/mag/features/1146>>.

already second generation migrants in Athens (Hulot 2007). Another article noted that the majority of those arrested by the police during the riots were not Greeks, but migrants. The echo of increasing intolerance reached the magazine offices when the editor became the target of outraged extreme right wing blogs after his intervention in the sale of Nazi books in an open book market in the centre of Athens.

2010

The recent financial crisis and the often threatened national bankruptcy has shifted the priorities of the Greek society and people's way of thinking vastly. Under the heavy shock of the crisis, traditional conversations on local and global politics have shifted to reviews, self-criticism and reflections on the country's course with reference to major historical landmarks such as the

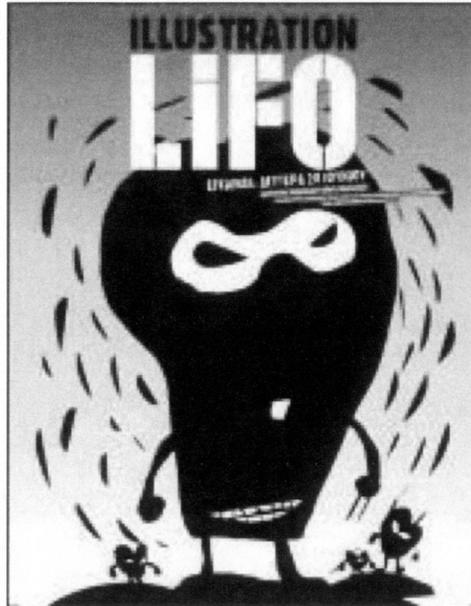


Figure 6: Lifo (2010), coversheet of issue 208.
 Source <<http://www.lifo.gr/issues/view/208>>.

restitution of democracy in the 70s, WWII and the formation of the modern Greek state in 1830, which are often extended to the Ottoman occupation and the ancient past (Kouloglou 2010; Politakis 2010; Papagiorgis 2010). The emotional impact of the crisis as reflected in the serious features of *Lifo* fluctuated from fear and frustration to rage and hatred. The vocabulary of the crisis was being dominated by long forgotten terms such as colonialism, occupation, foreign dependence, exploitation and class struggle. On the cultural front, a summer of 2010 account reports a drop in the prices of shows of any kind, a turn towards cheap local or colossal foreign artistic events, the mediocre quality in that year's stage productions, a return to the traditional cuisine, a rise in Internet marketing, and a significant turn by book readers towards sociopolitical themes and academic studies on the local and international crisis (Anon 2010). In stark contrast with this pervasive

pessimism, the covers of 2010 are more than ever creative, empowering and bright, assigning a leading role to everyday activism as an outlet from the crisis.⁸

The questioning of mainstream politics as reflected in the local elections was overwhelmingly on the rise, while the euphoria for web technology alternated in the magazine with titles such as ‘Murder in the Internet’, and ‘The Lost Honour of Greek journalism’ (Kokkini 2009: 212), with harsh criticism of the role of the social media and Greek journalism, especially after the brutal murder of an influential blogger and journalist outside his Athens home in the summer of 2010.

Overall, the data drawn from the magazine constitute a vivid representation of the city’s life and point to a continuous osmosis between local and global trends in the areas of performing and visual arts, entertainment, politics and popular culture. A list of themes repeatedly appearing on the front page and usually accompanied by a series of specific features inside, as shown in the following table traces these trends roughly, and their shift and frequency in the passage of time.

Summer and holidays held the lead position, followed by a very lively focus on vibrant or neglected areas of the centre of the town and its environs. Third came the city’s diverse movements (mostly activists and artists) signifying the return to politics via a different route at the outbreak of the crisis. They were followed by the themes of interpersonal relationships and relationships with the others (refugees, foreigners, migrants), both particularly popular in a culture that favours intimacy and sharing on one hand, and in the postmodern discourse concurrently prevailing in western societies on the other. Educating the audience in regard to the latest book releases was also a persistent aim of the editing team, usually accompanied by interviews with writers. There was a steady emphasis on politics, which since 2009 was overly intensified, on innovative artistic production, on media technologies, women, and on traditional or innovative approaches to the classical heritage of the town. Only one issue was dedicated to Europe, the dominant topic of mainstream discourse in the country; however the manifold European influence was broadly diffused in features of sociopolitical commentary and mainly in the entertainment section of the guide. Besides, as Pitsirikos noted in his column, ‘Europe owes the Greeks a benefit soon after the end of the global financial crisis; without them Ahmadinejad would be

Table 1: Lifo 2006-10. Frequency of themes appearing in special issues and covers by year.

Special issues/Covers						
Theme	No.	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
<i>Summer</i>	17		■			
<i>Neighbourhoods</i>	14		■			
<i>City movements</i>	10				■	■
<i>Cinema</i>	9					
<i>Books/writers</i>	9					■
<i>Lifo</i>	8			■		
<i>Politics</i>	8				■	■
<i>The others</i>	8			■		
<i>Relationships</i>	8		■			
<i>New music/ events</i>	6					
<i>Visual arts</i>	4					
<i>Technology</i>	4					
<i>Classical Athens</i>	4					
<i>Women</i>	4					
<i>Creative industries</i>	4					
<i>Large cultural events</i>	3					
<i>Greeks</i>	2					
<i>Europe</i>	1					

Source: Lifo: A guide of the city of Athens. Issues 1-216

making his rounds in Piccadilly today, and European women would be dressed in chadors and burkas instead of Dior and Armani (Pitsirikos, 2009).

Further findings and conclusions

Greek notions of the collective/national self are currently undergoing a period of profound transformation, which is etched deeply into various aspects of the culture of

the capital of the country. A wealth of cosmopolitan orientation in matters of artistic and literary production, language practices, lifestyle and the city's daytime and night life characterizes Athenian society of the first decade of the millennium, as represented through both the editing choices and features of *Lifo*. For its part the local culture has its own points of resistance or singularity: a very well-informed audience, an openness to innovative areas of cross-cultural interaction and a highly sophisticated local discourse mostly deployed in sociopolitical commentary and satire.

In the absence of effective state policies, this society, previously enriched multiply by an extroverted orientation and the temporary affluence of the last decades of globalization, pins its hopes on independent youth initiatives, autonomous collectives, and the potential of ordinary people and local communities. The interest in the development of local peripheries so popular in both left and neoliberal discourses of the post-junta era has broadened its focus to extended areas around the traditional centre of the city. It has also been enriched by the experience of the creative industries of western metropolises that blend financial with cultural regeneration, high with low, and the traditional with the avant garde.

Enduring Greek values such as passionate involvement in education and politics, questioning of established views, respect for foreigners (*filoxenia*) and a focus on the broad picture, although challenged, are still dominant in the city culture. However, the most progressive part of the population does not favour stereotypical cultural practices or traditional representations of the past, and young generations are already comfortable with a future that seems to be irreversibly hybrid and globalized. There is an urgent need for a better quality of life and for creative ways of addressing problems, which include the individual and everyday life.

Lifo has played a unique role in bringing together, reinventing, fuelling and critically supporting these trends by encompassing street, mainstream and avant garde culture, and by maintaining a publishing style that is simultaneously inclusive and selective, educative and light-hearted. In the words of the editor when welcoming the artistic director of the Athens Olympics as a guest editor, it represents a stylistic proletariat that investigates its limits, is fascinated by the aesthetics of the enemy, sees new depths underneath cheapness and superficiality, and outside of traditional politics is after a claim that is not miserable and narrow-minded (Tsagarousianos,

2008b). In this respect, it could be said that it moves along a modern Greek cultural continuum, that of creative Greeks who since the 1960s have experimented with merging high and low forms of expression, operating themselves in the public sphere both as influential political figures and as artists.

In parallel to that, the new movements that the magazine highlights are aligned with the spirit of a very old local spiritual tradition that favoured a holistic grasp of reality and was primarily concerned with the ethos, the aesthetics and the quality of its management.

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Notes

- ¹ Free press is the Greek term for city newspapers distributed for free.
- ² These were lately hosted as an exhibition in the prestigious Benaki Museum as 'a first attempt to map the lively and unclassified world of Greek illustrators', who have gained prominence as freelancers either on the walls of the city or through the pages of the magazine.
- ³ 'Underneath the strait jacket of the official state of Athens there is a city on the boil. Many independent groups are experimenting with that which tomorrow will become the new lifestyle.' (Kokkini 2009: 217).