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## Capitalism on stage: The performance *The Art of War* by Vicky Kyriakoulakou

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### ABSTRACT

The article examines the performance *The Art of War* that was staged in 2021 at the Onassis Cultural Center. The performance, which uses excerpts from the well-known homonymous military treatise by Sun Tzu, is a critique of the mechanisms of capitalism in contemporary society. The study investigates the performance as a case study of recent political theatre in Greece underlining the characteristics of a market-driven postmodern society pinpointed by political theorist Fredric Jameson that are reflected in the performance. At the same time, I look into the wider social and environmental issues that are addressed such as global warming and the immigration crisis. The performance, which depicts a boss and his employees in an unnamed business office, combines pop culture aesthetic experimentation with a socially engaged theme. As I argue, this performance is an example of the political turn of theatre that became evident during the second decade of the 21st century, in the aftermath of the multiple 'crisis-scapes' such as the European debt crisis at the end of the 2000s.

**Keywords:** Political Theatre, Capitalism, Sun Tzu, Global Warming, Immigration.

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### 1. Introduction

The article at hand is the result of my interest in the investigation of politics in contemporary Greek dramaturgy. The Greek paradigm of politically engaged theatre is a subfield of the evolving political theatre in Europe and the rest of the world. A series of artists and scholars have pointed out the political turn in theatre during the last decade, which also marks a transition away from the detached and fragmented aesthetics of postdramatic theatre towards a more representative and social engaged theatre that restores the importance of narration and character (Pavis, 2016, p. 183). This evolution is made clear in theatre productions during the second decade of the 21st century that illustrate the transition from the "postmodern tropes of detachment, irony and contingency" into "theatres of engagement" characterized by emphasis on social engagement and personal experience (Lavender, 2016, p. 3). As director Thomas Ostermeier has stated: "With the financial crisis, the political camps are becoming more distinct. There is a return of social struggles and contradictions"

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(Ostermeier, 2012). This new emphasis on political theatre, which is often realized in the form of verbatim or documentary theatre is rising in Greece as well. The debt crisis in Greece created a strong sense of political upheaval with the strong influence of local and international media in the restlessness of Greek society under austerity measures (Lynn, 2010, pp. 1-8; Tzogopoulos, 2013, pp. 7-14; Simitis, 2014, pp. 11-38; Doxiadis & Placas, 2018, pp. 1-14). At the same time the immigrant crisis rose in Greece and the wider Mediterranean creating 'crisis-scapes' and forming "languages of resistance, transformation and futurity" (Boletsi, Houwen & Minnaard, 2020, pp. 1-4). These tensions had also a theatre impact. A series of recent performances in Greece have addressed issues of related to human rights and immigration (Nikitas, 2016b; Ververopoulou, 2016; Patsalidis, 2020). Within this context the examination of political theatre in Greece becomes a vital desideratum reflecting a social and aesthetic turn in theatre.

A tendency of contemporary political theatre, which is relevant in the study at hand, is constituted by performances "of capitalism, crises and resistance" (Zaroulia & Hager, 2015, pp. 1-16). In these cases, the dynamics of capitalism at the age of the Fourth Industrial Revolution become a matter of artistic dialects and social inquiry. The political in theatre is always closely intertwined with the exploration of suitable aesthetic forms leading to new dramaturgies that reflect the "essence of the political" through fiction, experimentation and, at times, ambiguity (Revault d'Alonnes, 2002, p. 19). In this way, the didactic element is avoided and a sense of democratic discourse rises on stage. This approach creates 'cracks' on the neoliberal consensus and allows the 'dissensus', according to the term by Jacques Rancière, to inform the scope of the performance (Rancière, 2010, p. 38). The evolving contemporary political theatre maintains the idea that "art's power of transformative and creative action will also surely be the key to altering the realm of the possible" (Rancière, 2010, p. 14). This sentiment is echoed strongly by theatre auteurs. For example, as director Milo Rau and his collaborators proclaimed in the "Ghent Manifesto": "It's not just about representing the world anymore. It's about changing it". More than that: "The goal is not the representation of the real, but to make the representation itself real" ("The Ghent Manifesto," 2018). From this perspective, the consequences of capitalism in the modern world may be addressed, as it happens in *The Art of War*, maintaining two basic principles: experimenting aesthetically in a way that does not reduce the performance to a direct message and proposing a dramaturgy that challenges reality (and the spectator) towards change. The two-hour performance, conceived and directed by Vicky Kyriakoulakou, a director that has also been a part of the theatre collective 'Nova Melancholia', was presented at the festival 'Future Now' of the Onassis Stegi Cultural Center in April 2021. In the sections that follow I look into the depiction of an international company with a capitalistic boss that takes place in the performance, then I examine how the book *The Art of War* of Sun Tzu is used in the performance and finally I explore the further environmental and social questions posed by the director.

## 2. Methodology and research questions

The article examines the performance *The Art of War* by Vicky Kyriakoulakou focusing mostly on its political connotations. The research questions posed are: What is the power dynamic between the boss and his employees that is portrayed? How are the characteristics of 'late capitalism' reflected in the performance? Why is the treatise *The Art of War* chosen as the title and how does it relate with managerial tactics in the contemporary world? Why does the performance also address issues of global warming and immigration and how are they related to capitalism? Finally, how does this performance reflect 'the ruins of neoliberalism' in modern society and what is the future it imagines? In order to investigate the thematic, ideological and sociological aspects of the performance I employ the thought of political theorists such as Fredric Jameson and Wendy Brown, while also referring to scholars such as sociologist Daniel Bell. The various transformations of capitalism, from 'climate capitalism' to 'coyote capitalism', are also taken into consideration in order to illuminate the performance. It is also important to clarify that the article aspires to take a step in the direction of charting contemporary political theatre by proposing a relevant bibliography and using *The Art of War* as a case study. Addressing theatre trends of the last decade within the context of political theatre in Greece and investigating them in the socially engaged tendencies that have appeared after the domination of a postmodern sensibility in European and global theatre can lead to the bridging of a seminal research gap. This gap,

that is a theoretical and a knowledge gap (Jacobs, 2011, pp. 125-142), calls for a systematic research on the subject.

### 3. A boss and his employees

It is important to start with an overview of the performance. At the start of the performance a man enters the stage. Acting as a boss of a company he rehearses various ways of firing an employee. Then he explains to his imagined employee the reasons that lead to his lay off. His monologue focuses on the chores he assigns to the employees and the mind games he plays. After a short narration of an excerpt from Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, the six employees of the company and the real boss, the only one dressed in a suit, appear on stage. The employees sit rather idle in their empty desks, executing minor tasks in a routine fashion. Boredom, silence and lack of productivity are the main characteristics of the workplace. In the scenes that follow, the boss shouts at his employees in a foreign language while someone translates his harsh orders. Afterwards, one of the employees turns to the audience and explains the logistics of a successful business. As she states, the existence of a company relies on algorithms and the financial system that keep the business afloat and reinforce the cash flow all year long. The boss starts calling a series of his partners in orders to close deals, while the rest of the employees seems completely out of tune. The favorite object of the boss is a small revolver which he brandishes while he gives inspiring speeches to the employees who look at him petrified, fearing he will shoot. He advises the employees to choose their battles carefully in order to achieve the success of the company.

Afterwards, an austere woman, appearing to be the second in command after the boss of the business, begins to train the employees. Her target is to improve them both physically and mentally by using self-motivation and self-improvement techniques. Later on, she seems to sexually harass one of the employees. She grabs him with her legs and expresses her desires. The harassment in the workplace ends by the employee running away. The performance then follows the daily life and the capitalist habits of the boss. His employees shave him as though they are obedient servants, he is photographed for the front cover of magazines such as *The Rolling Stone* and he is showered by money while he is followed by admirers. He showcases his harsh side by shooting an employee that dares to dream a more humane reality outside the company in a lyrical monologue addressed to the audience. The routine at the office continues with the employees performing miniscule tasks. However, gradually a sense of tension and unwavering antagonism rises in the workplace. The employees move from funny games to dangerous fighting with weapons. In a characteristic scene one of the employees is tortured with rope, almost choked by his boss and one of his co-workers who is wearing a paper mask. In an intermission, the female assistant of the boss appears once again to recall the employees back in order. She shouts hysterically and expresses her complains. She finally says that one of the employees deserves punishment. The employee agrees and goes through a strenuous corporeal test.

The boss appears again with his revolver and insults his employees. He calls them close to him in order to celebrate Christmas and then presents a celebratory sweet bread. He appears a little drunk and disheveled and the employees take part unwillingly in this bittersweet office party and dance. The atmosphere in the company seems to become better for a little while. The boss gives an inspiring speech once again, while excerpts from the *Art of War* are heard from the loudspeakers. But slowly the stage becomes darker and a sense of danger is spread. The employees seem to get ready for war under the sound of a drum. Indeed, soon the employees get guns and hand-made arms and start fighting along with their boss. After minutes of total mayhem and complete destruction the stage is obliterated. However, this is not the end. The aftermath of the war is rebirth. A series of tropical trees rise and populate the space of the office. The boss appears without his suit wearing a floral shirt and the employees now act more as primitive (yet happy) Neanderthals rather than catatonic workers as they used to be. An atmosphere of triumph and glory ensues with loud music playing. Humanity, as the performance seems to imply, may be ready to restart after the impending demolition of capitalism.

### 4. The signs of late capitalism

The performance *The Art of War* is a vitriolic critique of late capitalism. It presents the power structure in the workplace and the force of the boss, a clear representative of the rich and powerful,

versus the employees, who appear as disoriented middle-class and lower-class citizens, unable to react. Psychological and, at times, corporeal violence seems to be the most useful tool for the boss in order to apply his tactics. Full of absurd moments and exaggerated scenes, the performance displays the irrationality of capitalism. In his book *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) Fredric Jameson illustrated the hegemony that is established in the postmodern world through capitalism and mass media. As Jameson states 'late modernism' is the form of capitalism that rose in the modernist period and dominates the postmodern culture (Jameson, 1991, pp. xviii). As the theorist explains, the preparation of this subtly yet clearly evolved form of capitalism began in the 1950s, evolved in the 1960s and was established from the 1970s. This evolution, connected to economic, cultural and psychological factors was made possible largely due to new media and technological advancement leading to a pervasive form of capitalism. The term 'late capitalism' was initially introduced by the Frankfurt School (e.g. Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer) that stressed two basic elements of capitalism: the bureaucratic control and the connection of government and big business ('state capitalism'). Jameson argues that new characteristics should be added to this model. These are: 1) new forms of business organization (multinational, transnational) leading to a global-scale model 2) new dynamics in stock markets and international banking 3) new forms of media interrelationship (namely internet, tv, film, print) 4) computers and automatization that boost mass production 5) planned obsolescence due to the economic urgency of new goods and aesthetic innovation and 6) American military domination (Jameson, 1991, pp. xix, 5). Jameson's critical thinking through 'late capitalism' maintains a connection between Marxism before and after the Second World War and extends to the end of the 20th century. While investigating thoroughly the "spatiotemporal dynamics of postmodernity" Jameson emphasizes the "omnipresent culture of consumption" (Homer, 2018, pp. 1; Jameson 2007, pp. 166). The transformations of capitalism do not stop here. An evolution of capitalism, reflecting on the age of the Digital Revolution, was added with the concept of 'digital capitalism', a few years after Jameson's book, by Dan Schiller (Schiller, 1999, pp. 1-14). Schiller stressed the social inequalities that flourish due to market driven policies of the internet. Nowadays, claiming that Marx is "fashionable again" the scholars move further, towards "Marxian Internet Studies" and a "Political economy of disturbed media" (Fuchs & Mosco, 2015, pp. 1, 22, 68).

The domination of late capitalism is evident in *The Art of War*. The characteristics prevailing in 'late capitalism' pointed out by the Marxist political theorist are clearly pinpointed in various scenes of the performance that appears, at times, as a performative playbook of Jameson's critical thinking. Firstly, the creation of multinational companies that override the imperial model is clear as the company of the performance is run by a foreign boss who only speaks broken Greek. The fact that the boss is played by a German actor and he is given, as a character, his real German name (while the employees maintain Greek names) is no accident. In a way, this choice underlines the recent political tension between Greece and Germany during the economic crisis of the last years. In the early 2010s a 'North-South narrative' was growing in the European media according to which Greeks were fiscally irresponsible, while Germany appeared to be too iron-fisted (Davis -Cross, 2017, p. 198) In May 2011, for example, Merkel pointed out that South Europeans (Greeks, Spanish and Portuguese) appear lazy and should not "receive a pension before their German peers" (Dempsey, 2011). This sociological context seems to linger in the choice made in the performance. The company on stage is not Greek, but an international company that only stations in Greece in order to build a multinational capital in a country not as rich as the one the boss comes from.

The new dynamics of the stock market that lead to the control of the businesses of the First World over the Second and the Third War, pointed out by Jameson, are also reflected in *The Art of War*. For example, the boss calls insatiably his partners on the phone and gives them directions to sell and buy. He maintains his vertiginous control over the market while deciding which supercar he prefers to buy, a Porche or a Lamborghini. Except the boss, who is the prevailing symbol of capitalism and an apparent 'Wolf of Wall Street', the performance presents one more comment on the stock market of late capitalism. In a characteristic scene the actors dress up as animals and present the various types of investors that dedicate their life in following the fluctuations of Dow Jones and other stock market indexes around the world. The types of the investors, who carry the traits of different animals, are seven: the pig, the chicken, the ostrich, the wolf, the deer and the (imaginary) monoceros. The pig represents the impatient and greedy investor that is doomed to become the biggest loser of the

market. The chicken is the fearful investor who takes the lower risks and remains silent while he is bullied by others. The ostrich is the investor that seems full of self-esteem but gets scared easily when there is a change in the market and disappears easily. The wolf is the investor who is forceful and effective and will be merciless until he succeeds. The deer is the investor who moves swiftly and focuses on winning here and now. Lastly, the monoceros represents the start-ups, the big data and the new technologies of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. These 'stock market animals' are well known symbols of the market and reflect teachings of books on stock market that offer advice on how to become 'profit hunters' and succeed in "beating the bulls, taming the bears and slaughtering the pigs" (Defalco, 2010, p. 1).

The performance focuses less on other characteristics of late capitalism pointed out by Jameson. The media interrelationship, for example, is not really explored as the company onstage seems to work in a rather lazy rhythm without employing the internet. The mediatization of culture and the creation of an overblown reality through mechanisms of media and fame is pinpointed through songs and references to the newspapers and magazines that create stars and praise capitalists. The automatization that creates great profit-margins is absent in the slow and unproductive environment of this company that seems more like a bureaucratic agency than a fast-paced open market business. But that is exactly what creates the menace of the boss and his female assistant who preach productivity. Finally, the American military domination that was pointed out as a trait of late capitalism by Jameson in 1991 is replaced thirty years later, in 2021, by American cultural and Chinese economic domination. More specifically, the assistant of the boss, the female dominator that punishes sadistically the employees is wearing the costume of Wonder Woman, a well-known American superhero. Using a whip she overpowers everyone and represents the wide spread of American pop culture all around the globe through cinema, as the pop-corn movies on Wonder Woman are popular nowadays. The Chinese economic domination is also stressed when the boss of the company puts on multiple times a characteristic Asian rice hat and suddenly transforms into a Chinese person who speaks the language of his country and infiltrates the space of the company. All the signs of late capitalism that were underlined by Jameson become apparent in a performance that critiques capitalism with a sense of vitriolic humor and echoes at times a modern reincarnation of Brecht's plays such as *The Good Person of Szechwan* or *The Threepenny Opera*. In *The Art of War* the big wolves of capitalism show no mercy and the sheep-like employees are destined to be devoured.

## 5. Sun Tzu in business

*The Art of War*, which is used as the title of the performance, is a famous ancient Chinese military treatise that is attributed to Sun Tzu, a general and strategist, and was written roughly in the 5th century BC (Lo, 2012, pp. 404-414). The book, which is recited various times throughout the performance (mostly in order to reflect the speeches of the boss), has become a kind of handbook for contemporary businesses that use the ancient principles in order to create powerful strategies and tactics in order to achieve success in the context of a competitive market. Dozens of relevant books have appeared during the last two decades, such as *Sun Tzu: The Art of War for Managers. 50 Strategic Rules* (2001) by Gerald A. Michaelson, *The Art of War for the Management Warrior: Sun Tzu's Strategy for Managers* (2007) by Gary Gagliardi and *Sun Tzu and the Art of Business: Six Strategic Principles For Managers* (2012) by Mark McNeilly. Even women-oriented reiterations have flooded the market such as *Sun Tzu for Women: The Art of War for Winning in Business* (2011) by Becky Sheetz-Runkle. These books transform military advice from the original Art of War such as "to capture the enemy's army is better than to destroy it" into capitalistic rules such as "Win all without fighting: Capturing your market without destroying it". And reshape powerful sayings such as "A victorious army wins its victories before seeking battle" into mottos such as "Avoid Strength, attack weakness: Striking where they least expect it" (McNeilly, 2012, pp. 9, 28). The wisdom of the Chinese strategist is rebranded for the needs of capitalist motivation. Smashing all antagonists in the market-place is enriched with a touch of orientally inspired philosophy.

The performance explores precisely the sentiment that rises from such self-help books where the philosophical Chinese concept of empire 'All-Under-Heaven' ('Tian-xia') which reflects the geopolitical space of dominance is transfigured into a materialistic concept of 'All -For-Money' within a

global market context (Zhao, 2006, 29-41). Two excerpts that are recited from the book *The Art of War* during the performance, one at the begging and the other towards the end, are quite telling and fuel an ironic viewpoint. In the first one, the boss stresses the harsh and responsible way in which a general should train his army, showing no mercy when the soldiers do not abide to the orders. This short speech, given in front of the shy employees prepares them for the rules they will have to follow in their workplace. In the second speech, the boss (along with a woman's voice reciting the excerpt) explains the ways in which the soldiers should recognize the dangerous techniques of the enemy in order to avoid traps. What ensues is the frantic battle of the employees who are fighting helplessly an invisible enemy and lose. As the performance insinuates, the war-like mentality that is used in capitalist societies will finally turn against the people that try to take advantage of these strategies in order to profit. The incompetence of the employees to rise to the demands of war and the blindness of the boss to anything except money leads to a bittersweet ending: the art of war in management becomes the art of humane extinction.

## 6. Global warming and immigration

The critique against capitalism does not end within the context of the business onstage. The director also explores the effects of capitalism in the environment. While the boss in *The Art of War* conducts his business spreading terror in his suppressed employees, a mysterious huge glazier is hanging over the company's office. This glazer is a symbol of the impending doom of humanity due to greedy consumerism. Destroying earth for the sake of money and overlooking protocols of global warming in order to maximize profit will lead sooner or later, as the performance underlines, to extinction. In this way *The Art of War* poses a clear political statement on the issue of climate change. A series of scholars during the last decade have explored the dire consequences that can rise from an uncontrolled free market economy. Peter Newell and Matthew Patterson, for example, explored 'climate capitalism' (Newell & Patterson, 2010). The scholars charted the evolutions in the world of climate politics and suggested that the only way to deliver growth on a low-carbon basis is to introduce changes in the current mechanics of capitalism. Strategy, politics and technology must be combined and environmental activists should get together with development NGOs, carbon traders and financiers in order to engineer long-term solutions for a sustainable global economy (Newell & Patterson, 2010, pp. 1-2). The director seems to be very aware of this critical thinking when she chooses to present the glacier melting, filling bottles and glasses with ice water. A harrowing music fills the stage presenting a dark omen for the future of a greedy humanity.

In a sentimental monologue towards the audience, one of the employees takes a break from the antagonistic office and addresses her deeper dreams for a more sympathizing and anthropocentric humanity. She thinks of the immigrants who have maintained their original identity, the aborigines who preserve their ethnicity, the people from Saudi Arabia to Australia who strive to remain connected to their roots. In an age of 'coyote capitalism', as Jeffrey Kaye calls it, when people become natural resources, supplies that are moved around like cargo in order to meet economic demands in a capitalist society, the employee in the performance dreams of breaking this nightmare cycle of power and merciless avarice (Kaye, 2010, p. 1). She speaks of an innocent future where homeland is more important than market. In a way, her speech on immigrants and aborigines is a proposal against impersonal globalism and a praise of the folk characteristics that forge the ethnic identity. It is an example of the melancholic "d calage of vernacular cosmopolitanism" (Meerzon, 2020, p. 35). Given the tendency of Minority Theatre of "statelessness" in Greece and Europe during the last decade, the performance *The Art of War* connects with the social concern of immigration, evident in a Greek and global level (Wilmer, 2018, p. 1-10).

## 7. Conclusion

The performance *The Art of War* constructs a critique of late capitalism in the age of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. It implements tools of postdramatic theatre such as 'parataxis', 'simultaneity' and 'visual dramaturgy' (Lehmann 2006, pp. 86-87, 93), in order to create an "energy and corporal universe" (Nikitas, 2016a; Nikitas, 2018, p. 232). Thematically, the performance displays the negative consequences of a money-driven society with no human bonds. Although the director employs the

postmodern tropes of detachment and irony she also poses a request for a more socially engaged art and a dialectics that reenergize a political outlook. As a result, *The Art of War* abides partly to the aesthetics and sentiment of postmodernism while opening a dialogue with the new theatre tendencies that are evident entering the third decade of the 21st century. The director, with an approach of aesthetic “auteurism”, connects to a ‘Theatre of engagement’ (Sidiropoulou, 2011, p. 1; Lavender, 2016). The performance, avoiding a didactic attitude, dares to examine the mechanisms of capitalism that were pinpointed by Jameson thirty years ago placing them in a broader context than class struggle and addressing related issues such as global warming.

One of the most crucial elements of the performance is the reflection of the ‘cultural contradictions’ of capitalism, as Daniel Bell called them in his classic analysis of Western liberal capitalist society, which stressed that the culture of capitalism leads to an unavoidable downfall by boosting the need for personal gratification (Bell, 1996, pp. 3-14). *The Art of War* presents the unending circle of self-destruction in a society with no personal values. The end of the performance, where the employees appear to become monkeys jumping around aimlessly in a post-apocalyptic world, much like the monkeys in *2001: A Space Odyssey* by Stanley Kubrick, breeds a ‘hauntology’ of “lost futures” (Fisher, 2012, p. 16). No clear solution rises in the horizon, just a humanity starting from scratch in an uncivilized jungle. Does capitalism lead humanity to oblivion? What is the answer in the age of Post-Communism? The antidemocratic politics, as political theorist Wendy Brown recently pointed out, are rising in the west in the ‘ruins of neoliberalism’. Neoliberal intellectuals strived for years to replace democratic values with market-driven technocratic ones (Brown, 2019, pp. 1-22). Surely, the performance *The Art of War* cannot give political answers. It can only pose questions on the future of a society burdened by plutocracy and post-truth. A rebirth of society will surely call for Sun Tzu’s wisdom.

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