Ancient sites, modern eyesores? The transformation of the city of Athens in English-language accounts (1945-2005)

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All travel – and writing about travel – involves a process of selective viewing and interpretation. Guidebooks and other prose travel accounts of Athens are no exception. Travel writer Leslie Finer admitted that every visitor to the Acropolis could not avoid seeing it in the light of "his own personal experience and sensitivity" (1964: 193). In this paper I examine how the city has been perceived by, and promoted for, the English-reading public since the end of the Second World War.

Many of the first-person travel accounts of Greece published in the first two decades following the war were little different in spirit or intent from those of the nineteenth century, when the country had been "seen through the eyes of a person educated by means of the Latin and Greek classical writers" (Wagstaff 2004: 9). The literary traveller in Greece discerned the presence of the past everywhere: Patrick Leigh Fermor commented in the 1950s that "there is hardly a rock or a stream without a battle or a myth" (1958: x). In this way, Greece in the twentieth century was similar to the Palestine recorded by medieval Christians: "the Holy Land became an imaginative geography in which pilgrims could roam through the world of scripture in three dimensions, as it were, with every site testifying to the truth of the text and recalling a Biblical tag or quotation" (Elsner and Rubiés 1999: 17). For many writers of the 1940s, '50s and '60s at least, visiting Greece served to validate or reinforce their views of the ancient past.

By the 1960s, however, the era of "pilgrimage" to Greece was coming to an end. Jeanne and Georges Roux commented in the middle of the decade that "it is only a short time since visitors to Greece were more often pilgrims than tourists … [when] the country was visited by archaeologists and scholars seeking on her soil the remains of an antiquity they had learned to love in their college lecture rooms" (1965: 15). Even as he wrote a guidebook entitled *The pilgrim's companion in Athens*, published in 1964, Stewart Perowne observed that "more and more people visit it [Greece] each year in the height of summer, for the joy of the sun and the sea" (1964: 14). Tourists of course continued to visit the Athenian Acropolis. But in recent decades most have viewed the experience differently from those who wrote travel books during the mid-twentieth century. Katherine Kizilos found 1990s tour parties waiting to enter: "the tourists looked displaced, even bored, but still they came" (1997: 17). However, the city was apparently little visited for reasons other than its ancient monuments. *Time Out* recently remarked that "the modern city was until now a reason to bypass the capital altogether, or at most to provide a base while you spent just two or three days taking in the basics" (Rigopoulos 2004: 11).

In analysing the representation of Athens through guidebooks and travel writing, I am following other recent scholars who have argued that these forms of literature are central to the process of tourism. Giles Barber has defined a guidebook as a "usually pocket size work which the traveller is expected to take with him [sic] and consult on the spot" (1999: 94). As such, the guidebook helps to shape travellers' experiences as they move through the city: what they choose to see, and the significance of what they see. Whereas travel *writing* has the author as hero, a guidebook is intended to aid the reader in becoming the hero. In practice, however, the distinction in the form and usage of these two genres is not always so obvious. Travel writing often includes passages of history or information, and may therefore be physically carried by travellers to the locations in question. This is not the only way in which travel writing can be said to influence

travellers' perceptions of what they see. As Holland and Huggan have argued, such prose texts "do not necessarily act as substitutes for actual travel; on the contrary, they may often function as its catalyzing agents" (1998: 9).

In this paper I show that accounts of Athens – whether intended for armchair travellers or as information for those who were visiting – have reproduced a number of common themes over the past sixty years. The city changed significantly during that time, its population and infrastructure growing at a huge rate. In arguing that the modern city was made to "disappear", and that the people were thought of as the "other", I follow Penny Travlou's interpretation of guidebook accounts of Athens (Travlou 2002). I show how an East-West discourse is apparent in writers' characterisations of the Athenian people as well as in their descriptions of the cityscape. When travellers have found Athenian behaviour undesirable or inconvenient, they have had recourse to "orientalising" descriptions. I argue that recent writing and publicity surrounding the Olympic Games of 2004 provides the opportunity for more positive discourses about the city. Firstly, however, I consider the representation of the various ancient monuments of the city, arguing that each is assigned a different value by travel writers.

The ancient city

The sociologist John Urry has argued that "one's sense of place is not simply given but is culturally constructed" (1990: 2). Many travel writers of the period immediately following the Second World War regarded Greece as the cradle of Western civilisation, the country to which their own culture owed its civic and moral virtues, as well as much of its art and drama. In 1944 the young writer Demetrios Capetanakis suggested that in Britain "modern Greeks are little known". However, he did not believe that the same was true for the *Ancient* Greeks, because an Englishman "has done classics at school, perhaps also at the university, and Greece means for him a world of unreal perfection" (Capetanakis 1944: 135). Whilst some of the writers in English I have used in

this paper spent their formative years in the USA or Australia, Capetanakis's comment holds true for the majority, who were educated in Britain. In the first decades of the twentieth century, as Victoria Tietze Larson has explained, "at every level of the educational process classical studies were the dominant ingredient in the education of the gentleman" (1999: 191). To take one writer as an example, Compton Mackenzie listed his preparation for Oxford as Thucydides, Herodotus, Xenophon, Demosthenes, Greek tragedies, and the *Odyssey* (1960: 8, 9, 12). There was a general assumption that readers shared travel writers' appreciation of the importance and value of the classical world. The editor of the 1962 *Blue Guide* to Athens, for example, stated that the ancient state was "of fundamental importance to the Western way of life and as such is of perennial interest" (Muirhead 1962: vi). It is unsurprising then to find the Athenian Acropolis being billed by one 1950s travel writer as "the most famous site in the world" (Krippner 1955: 37). Fifty years later, it could still be called "one of the archetypal images of Western culture. A first glimpse of it above the traffic is a revelation, and yet feels utterly familiar" (Ellingham and others 2000: 91).

Alfred Zimmern's *The Greek Commonwealth* was a widely-read textbook on the ancient world in that, although first published in 1911, it was still in print in the 1960s. Zimmern made explicit the slippage of terms that occurred in accounts of ancient history: "To us in the North, if we are book-learned and home-keeping, Greece and Italy spell Athens and Rome. They are associated in our minds with a host of inherited ideas, with Art and Freedom and Law and Empire" (1961: 17). Such a reading of the past influenced viewings of the monuments of Athens in that travel writers emphasised the artistic and symbolic importance of the Acropolis (rather than other possible values such as historical events that may have taken place there). The Parthenon itself was acclaimed by Brian De Jongh in 1974 as a "harmony of design and execution [which] astonishes and delights" (1974: 128). The Erechtheion possessed "grace and airiness", whilst the wings of the Propylaea were "masterpieces of classical architecture"

(Welsman 1956: 81; De Jongh 1979: 23). The Temple of Athena Nike was praised as "an exquisite shrine" and "jewel-like", by authors writing over forty years apart (Cooper 1960: 37; Olofsson 2004: 32).

Writers attached a number of symbolic values to the Acropolis (Wills 2005). As the quotation from Zimmern's book suggests, ancient Athens could be regarded as synonymous with the cultural and political achievements of ancient Greece in general. At the end of the 1950s one writer was arguing that "artistic impulses which were expressed in architecture, sculpture, painting and poetry, political impulses which determined the world events of the time, all these had their starting point in the Acropolis, or, more broadly speaking, in Athens" (Kriekoukis 1959: 6). The authors of a guidebook published in 2000 observed that Pericles could not have foreseen how "his ruined temple would come to symbolise the emergence of Western civilization" (Ellingham and others 2000: 91). Thus a number of writers described a visit to the Acropolis as one of pilgrimage. In the 1940s Ashley Smith was passed by a group of tourists making the "pilgrimage" (Smith 1948: 198), and, two decades later, Guy Pentreath encountered those whose "faces look less like those of tourists than of pilgrims, expectant of a great experience" (Pentreath 1964: 33).

But the Acropolis could also be seen – by foreign observers as well as locals – as symbolic of the more recent history of the country. Eleana Yalouri has shown how, since the time of Greek Independence in the nineteenth century, the Acropolis has been made to echo the nation's attempts to recover from a ruinous recent past (2001: 185). According to travel writer Barbara Whelpton, the Acropolis:

> was built over and made to look like a Turkish city with narrow winding streets and small Turkish houses. It remained in this state until the nineteenth century, when the Greeks revolted against the Turks [and] were able to free their country from

> foreign rule [....]. Then began the great work of restoring the Acropolis to something of its former glory.[1]

Once the Turkish remains were swept from the Acropolis, as classicist Mary Beard has recently emphasised:

> All that the visitor can now see is what the archaeologists of the nineteenth century chose to leave behind: a handful of monuments with a fifth-century BC classical pedigree, standing in splendid (or uncomfortable) isolation, stripped of as much of their later history as possible.[2]

As British resident in Athens Sofka Zinovieff observed in her 2004 travel book, this left "a monument to ancestor worship, authenticating the Athenians as spiritual descendants of the ancient Hellenes" (2004: 49).

As with the Acropolis, descriptions of – and values ascribed to – other ancient sites in the city have been largely consistent across the past sixty years. Visitors were cautioned by guidebooks that they would find the Agora a scene of "sprawling confusion", or "large and confusing" (De Jongh 1974: 133; Mee and Spawforth 2001: 66). However, the fragmentary nature of remains was not necessarily an impediment to earlier travellers in Europe: as Chloe Chard has observed of the Grand Tour, sites were "viewed as independent of any noteworthy qualities that they may exhibit as objects of observation", and the past was conjured into the present through "efforts of intuitive understanding" (1999: 75). Twentieth-century travellers to the Agora were likewise advised to use their imaginations. James Ryan instructed his mid-1980s readers that "you can imagine the cheerful, lively bustle, with the crowded markets, the barbers' shops, the moneychangers, the priests, the beggars and the merchants" (1985: 31). Two decades earlier at the Agora, travel writer S. F. A. Coles had found himself transported back in time to witness the Panathenaic procession

[1] Whelpton 1954: 85.
[2] Beard 2002: 102.

(1965: 38-9). In contrast, the adjacent Hephaisteion has often failed to impress. Osbert Lancaster called it "devastatingly boring" (1947: 48). In aesthetic terms, the Hephaisteion suffered from comparison with its illustrious near-neighbour. It "lacks the curvature and 'lightness' of the Parthenon's design", one guide-book of 2000 informed its readers (Ellingham and others 2000: 100). In addition, unlike the Agora itself, the Hephaisteion had no compensatory historical importance to give it interest. Even the name of this temple – formerly known as the Theseum – had been in dispute until earlier in the twentieth century.

The most important reason for visiting the Theatre of Dionysus has often been said to be its cultural significance. A 1940s writer called this "the home and shrine of drama, the very birth-place of comedy and tragedy both" (Wigram 1947: 48). Likewise, half a century later, the writers of the 2000 *Rough Guide* argued that its place in dramatic history still made this "one of the most evocative locations in the city" (Ellingham and others 2000: 98). According to the same guidebook, the Kerameikos cemetery was "little visited" and "has something of an oasis feel about it" (Ellingham and others 2000: 100). For these same reasons, back in the 1960s S. F. A. Coles had found it easy to visualise this as the location from which Pericles delivered his funeral oration for the Athenian dead of the Peloponnesian War (Coles 1965: 64). The "Roman magnificence" of the Temple of Olympian Zeus impressed a number of writers. John Pollard, writing in the 1950s, emphasised the "ornate Corinthian capitals, burgeoning whitely against the blue", and the "view through the pillars towards the Acropolis" (1955: 22).

My analysis of travel writing about these various ancient sites broadly confirms Penny Travlou's judgment that "in the case of Athens there is an archetypal imagery followed by guidebooks, regardless of publication date" (Travlou 2002: 109). However, it is important to recognise that similarities in representation may occur for different reasons, and one example of this is the brevity with which the Acropolis monuments were described. In 1961 Eric and Barbara Whelpton declined to give details about the

Parthenon sculptures for their readers because "these are so well known that they do not need describing, any more than the present aspect of the Parthenon which everyone has seen from their earliest years" (Whelpton and Whelpton 1961: 31). Many travel writers of the 1960s were burdening their readers with less historical information than those of the previous decade. Writers (and publishers), such as Robert Bell, began to recognise that potential readers may no longer regard themselves as "pilgrims" to the sites and monuments. Although, Bell argued, "in the past it appealed mainly to the archaeologist, the classical scholar and the keen student", Greece "is now making strenuous efforts to attract the ordinary visitor" (1961: 16). Thus Bell, although writing in the same year as the Whelptons, gave very different reasons for his scanty Acropolis coverage:

> I make no apology for dealing with this famous monument in a general way as this book is written for the average motorist; and the fact must be faced that to the average person one set of ruins can be very much like another – to use a favourite *Daily Express* phrase, they can be "off-putting". For those readers who want a detailed description of the Acropolis and its treasures, or the other archaeological wonders of Greece, any public library will recommend books eulogising their attractions.[3]

Ann Rickard's 2004 narrative of the Acropolis included just two sentences of history: "In the mid fifth century BC a man of vision, by the name of Pericles, persuaded the locals to begin an ambitious program of building in Athens. Work began on the Acropolis, with three contrasting temples and a monumental gateway" (Rickard 2004: 23).

When it was first established by the Greek government in the 1950s, the Greek Tourist Organization viewed itself as having "the responsibility to introduce the foreign pilgrims to both past and present Hellenism" (Yalouri 2001: 128). But by the last years

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[3] Bell 1961: 246.

of the 1960s, the GTO had abandoned references to cultural heritage in favour of the slogan "Fun in Greece" (Simpson 1969: 38). It had become apparent that many tourists wanted to visit Greece for the glories of its present rather than those of the past. Many of those who did visit monuments during their stay might be expected to have less classical knowledge, especially now that progressively cheaper air-fares and package holidays allowed the gradual democratisation of travel. For the members of some social classes in Britain, and for most women, a classical education had never been a reality. In the 1950s, for example, only grammar and independent school pupils were taught about classical culture, via lessons in Latin, whilst the majority – those who attended the secondary moderns – were not (Forrest 1996: 1). But even in very traditional schools the existing curriculum was progressively squeezed to include more of "new" subjects such as science and modern languages. Thus by the early 1960s Her Majesty's Inspectors of schools were growing concerned about the "steady decline in the number of candidates entered for public examinations in Greek and Latin" (Forrest 1996: 15). Classics was formally pushed further to the margins by the reorganisation of education in the 1970s, resulting (at least in most parts of the country) in the disappearance of grammar schools in favour of comprehensives, and the introduction of a National Curriculum in all state-funded schools at the beginning of the 1990s.

Writing in the 1990s, the academic Jennifer Craik divided tourists of her own time into three groups:

> only a minority of tourists are truly cultural tourists (of the Grand Tour type) while a significant number are "culture-proof". Of those in the middle, many tourists may be motivated to take advantage of cultural attractions once other, primary motivations to travel have been met.[4]

[4] Craik 1997: 120.

Ann Rickard and her husband found that "Each monument, church or museum we have toured so far – apart from the Acropolis in Athens – has been virtually empty. We are obviously not the only tourists in Greece this year who are not inclined to explore history, castles and ruins" (Rickard 2004: 92). But as far back as the 1940s Dilys Powell was arguing that, in comparison with Rome, "the temples and theatres of the Acropolis apart, the architectural monuments of classical Athens are, for the un-scholarly, not many or inescapable." However, Powell continued, "gradually as one walks about Athens the consciousness of the past grows stronger": through the landscape, the street names, and the dominating presence of the Acropolis (Powell 1941: 68). This reduced the city, as Mark Mazower has said of Salonica, to "little more than a backdrop to what was left of its more significant ancient predecessor" (2004: 212). In the next section I examine how writers of accounts in English reproduced the buildings, noise, smells and people they encountered as they moved about the modern city in search of this ancient past.

The modern city and the (modern) Athenians

The population of "Greater Athens" (including Piraeus) has been calculated at 1,378,586 in 1951, rising a decade later to 1,852,709, and to 2,540,242 by 1971 (Vermeulen 1983: 115). Those who travelled to visit the ancient city therefore had to confront (or were confronted by) the sounds, sights and smells of modernity. For most writers the post-war transformation of Athens meant urban sprawl and pollution, globalisation and homogeneity. Alexander Eliot warned readers of the 1960s that "the capital is modern and faceless", with "mile upon mile of concrete office and apartment warrens" (1964: 13). By the 1980s, in Brian Dicks's view, Athens had become "a sea of concrete paralysed by traffic, blasted by noise, polluted by fumes, vulgarized by advertising gimmicks and subjected to the incessant, dusty activities of the builders and developers" (1982: 33). Some writers disputed this prevailing view that modern Athens was an example of modernisation gone wrong. At the end of the 1960s, for example, William Sansom

argued that "Athens has too often and too easily been dismissed as a mediocre mess of concrete with neither character nor beauty. This is shortsighted and insensitive" (1968: 110). But even in 2005 an Athenian magazine editor recognised that "many visitors are not immediately taken by Athens" (Bissias 2005a).

In part, such concerns were a manifestation of the "middle class anxiety" (Urry 1990: 42) about changes to – and the destruction of – the sights/sites which form the focus of tourism. Some travel writers attempted to distance themselves from the processes that had been set in motion. They were comfortable to pin the blame on *tourists*, rather than themselves as *travellers*, for being the catalysts of change in Greece: "Tourism is like a sickness here", was Katherine Kizilos's judgement (1997:58). Comments about the new architecture of Athens also reflect the steadily growing dissatisfaction with the aesthetic and social consequences of the 1950s and '60s reconstruction of British towns and cities. But in criticising the physical transformation of the city post-1945 many writers were, in truth, guilty of cultural imperialism. They desired the modernisation along Western European lines of *some* aspects of Athenian infrastructure – because they wanted their experience as tourists to be comfortable and ordered. Ann Rickard, for example, has recently praised the "gleaming new airport", which is "as modern, as state-of-the-art and efficiently functional as an airport should be" (2004: 11). But writers looked down upon the manner in which this modernisation was carried out, and upon the aesthetic results. Though neo-classicism has been one of the mainstays of city architecture in the "West", when it was attempted in Athens the resultant buildings were regarded by Patrick Balfour in the 1950s as "of poor inspiration and unhappy proportions" (Kinross 1956: 55). In her 2004 book Melissa Orme-Marmarelis specifically referred to a fall in building standards since ancient times: "it seems that the appreciation for aesthetics and quality workmanship has declined since those golden years" (2004: 154).

When writers turned their attention to the Plaka, its picturesque aspect regularly drew praise in comparison to other parts of the city. In the 1960s Alexander Eliot discovered

> a place of whitewash and rich shadows, of coffee roasting in the open, of howling cats, street fights, passion on the stairs and a profusion of flowers growing in oil cans. Moreover, it can be a place of refuge from the huge blank unreality of the city below.[5]

Four decades later, Ann Rickard found

> a labyrinth of narrow streets, handsome churches and beautiful old homes. Throughout the exciting old quarters are lively cafés and tavernas, elegant restaurants and beckoning shops, all among the stateliness of the Byzantine churches and mosques. You can't help but love it.[6]

At the Acropolis travel writers desired isolation from other tourists, but the Plaka provided an opportunity for what John Urry calls the "collective gaze": the experience was thought to *benefit* from the presence of people to "give atmosphere or a sense of carnival to a place" (Urry 1990: 44-6). However, even here some writers, including William Sansom in 1968, registered their disapproval of the encroachment of modernity: "much of the Plaka is no longer what it was; now the area is a tourist moneymaker, a jazz of signs has sprouted, and a madness of motors has been allowed inside" (1968: 118-19). Writers desired an "authentic" experience – the "real Greece" was that which seemed to be unaffected by Western-style modernisation.

As I have suggested, many of those who wrote about Greece in the period after 1945 knew more about the ancient world than the modern country. It was therefore virtually inevitable that many travel writers would use their images of Ancient Greeks to help them make sense of their encounters with the modern Athenian

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[5] Eliot 1964: 13.
[6] Rickard 2004: 20.

people. Descriptions of the Greeks as resembling ancient gods, characters from mythology or drama, or figures from sculpture, are a common feature of mid-century travel writing about Greece. In Athens of the 1950s and '60s, William Sansom found policemen who stood "with their hands raised in the angular, archaic posture of Zeus saying Stop"; Louis Golding came across an old woman at the Roman Forum "moving erect as any figure on a Greek vase"; and, according to Robert Payne, "there are girls in Athens who look as though they had stepped down from the Porch of the Maidens" (Sansom 1968: 112; Golding 1955: 20; Payne 1961: 115). A few writers made efforts to portray the Athenians as a modern, European people. In the early 1940s Dilys Powell pointed out that Athens had its "fashionable society, just as any European capital" (1941: 81). In 2004, over sixty years later, Kate Collyns formed a similar image: "Modern Athens is literally buzzing with new shops, restaurants and easy-going café culture" (2004: 13).

But over the course of the past sixty years writers have found much to criticise in the Athenian lifestyle and behaviour they have observed. In 1970 Herbert Kubly implicated policemen in scams to lure tourists into bars for over-priced drinks (1970: 177-83). A decade later David Plante encountered a taxi-driver who covered over the meter and tried to charge double the correct fare, and *Athens News* columnist Brian Church has recently claimed that such drivers "rip off many Greeks as well as visitors" (Plante 1986: 250; Church 2002: 10). In her analysis of guidebooks Penny Travlou has identified a duality in the perceived status of the Greeks encountered by travellers:

> On the one hand, they are represented as being like their ancestors, with more or less the same physical features and qualities. On the other hand, in the particular case where they are connected to the tourist services, hierarchy and authority is built between the tourist playing the role of civilised Westerner and the Athenian as the provider of low quality services.[7]

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[7] Travlou 2002: 120.

Travlou refers to “Greeks being different from Western people”, Athenians being reduced to the exotic “other” (2002: 120, 124). I would go further, and argue that the specific characteristics of the “other” attached to the Greeks represent an “orientalising” tendency on the part of travellers. When describing Athenian markets in particular, travel and guidebook writers have regularly used the vocabulary of “oriental” or “eastern”. Hans Rupprecht Goette, for example, found Monastiraki in 2001 to have “the atmosphere of an oriental town with its many shops, its busy traders and its bustling activity” (Goette 2001: 91). As the anthropologist Michael Herzfeld has explained, during the nineteenth century it was a prevalent British attitude that “delivered from its oriental yoke, [Greece] was a child of its antique past, one that had failed to mature in the manner of the West” (Herzfeld 1987: 55). Accosted by a policeman for using his typewriter on the slopes of the Acropolis, travel writer Ashley Smith revealed a continuation into the 1940s of this cultural snobbery when he exclaimed that “things like this wouldn’t happen in England” (1948: 193). In presenting examples of Greek corruption and trickery, as well as making the overt connection of commerce and “hard sell” tactics with the “East”, writers were reproducing a stock “orientalising” portrayal more commonly associated with descriptions of Turks. As Herzfeld has summarised, qualities associated with this Turkish stereotype have included “shiftiness, double-dealing, illiteracy, influence-peddling and rule-bending, disrespect for norms and admiration for cunning individuals who could twist them for their own advantage” (1987: 29). Travel writer Monica Krippner explicitly identified “a Turkish legacy [that] has left the Greeks with a taste in oriental opulence which [...] leaves much to be desired” (1957: 31).

Whilst writers found certain aspects of the “oriental” (such as Monastiraki) picturesque, many found the contrasts and contradictions of the modern city difficult to reconcile. In the early 1970s, for example, Glyn Hughes found it “impossible to realise that here, in this hideous semi-circle between the mountains and the Mediterranean Sea, was the home of the Greek poets and

philosophers, where a vital spring of our civilisation arose from the people and their myths" (1976: 42). In the next section, I explore writers' attempts to focus upon the ancient, and to shut out the modern.

The disappearance of modernity

Some visitors were unable to prevent the present from affecting their experience of viewing the antiquities of Athens. As John Pollard surveyed the Acropolis from Philopappos hill in the early 1950s, the "distant growl of traffic destroyed the illusion" of being back in the fifth century BC (1955: 24). Most writers, however, claimed to have succeeded in cutting themselves off from the modern city. Standing atop the Acropolis in the same decade as Pollard, Monica Krippner felt "a peace and silence, a remoteness from the noisy grimy world over the wall where the goods trucks bumped and clattered" (1957: 21). Some sought in their writing to distinguish their appreciation of antiquity (as travellers) from that of the masses (of tourists). For Ann Rickard, viewing the Theatre of Herodes Atticus in 2003 was "so absorbing that I don't even see or hear the hordes of tourists around me" (2004: 24). Such writers appear to have desired an "authentic", individual experience when visiting sights/sites, what John Urry has characterised as the "romantic gaze" (1990: 20). Penny Travlou has argued that for many writers of guidebooks "there are two different time narratives within the same space; one refers to classical Athens and the other to the modern city. These narratives show a preference and therefore resurrection of the former and a sort of indignation towards the qualities of the latter" (Travlou 2002: 111). Rickard, for example, encountered the "depressingly golden arches of a fluorescently lit McDonald's. It breaks the spell like a bucket of icy water thrown over us" (2004: 23). Although some have felt that the modern surroundings have imposed themselves upon the archaeological remains, for most writers the ancient city remained the true identity of Athens. The Parthenon was seen by Guy Pentreath in the 1960s to physically dominate "all the tall

blocks of flats and making them somehow look but a passing fashion" (1964: 28).

The intellectual concentration upon the classical past also led to a relative dismissal of the extant Byzantine and Ottoman remains. Antoinette Moses admitted at the end of the 1970s that "most tourists neglect Byzantine Athens in favour of the classical sites" (1978: 231). John Russell recognised the extent to which the capital had been shaped for 1980s visitors by generations of classicists and archaeologists:

> If there had ever been a Byzantine era in Greece, they were not going to tell us about it. If the long Turkish domination had brought mosque and minaret even into the interior of the Parthenon itself, they took them out and saw to it that they were never mentioned again.[8]

But this was not merely rhetoric imposed by the West. In the nineteenth century the Greeks themselves had put forward this view of history as an important part of the process of forging the new nation state. The classical ancestry of the Greeks was emphasised in order to secure the support of the European powers for their country's independence. Greek sources sought to assert their people's distinctiveness in opposition to what they were not – Turkish – so that "forgetting the Ottomans was part of Greece's claim to modernity" (Mazower 2004: 474). The Byzantine period was likewise considered to have been "a disgraceful period for the Greek nation, an era of foreign occupation" (Hamilakis and Yalouri 1996: 121). Indeed, "full of intrigues, eunuchs, courtiers and infinite wealth, Byzantium was but the medieval version of the Ottoman Empire" (Agapitos 1994: 2). In their concentration upon the classical past of Athens, writers since 1945 were therefore part of a long tradition originating from both Greek and earlier "Western" sources.

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[8] Russell 1986: 247.

In recent years more Greek voices have been heard in English-language accounts of the city – publications by people of Greek descent from America or Australia who are visiting their country of origin for the first time. Just as earlier generations of (Western) writers were looking to find the origins of Western civilisation, these authors have been on pilgrimages of their own, wanting to "find themselves". George Sarrinikolaou, a New Yorker from the age of ten, arrived in Athens "to reclaim a space for myself in the city where I was born" (Sarrinikolaou 2004: ix). However, these writers have often viewed aspects of Greece no less critically than others approaching from "the West". Sarrinikolaou, for example, described at length his experience of corruption in the public health system, in which "the extent and quality of care depend on an institutionalized practice of bribery" (Sarrinikolaou 2004: 112). In the last section of this paper I consider the extent to which recent events, especially the Olympics, may herald new ways of writing the city.

The contested city

In the run up to the Olympic Games of 2004, familiar negative representations of the city of Athens emerged in British newspapers as well as in guidebooks and travel writing. In *The Independent* Guy Alexander wrote that "Athens" Olympic preparations have been laughingly billed as the modern Greek ruins" (2004: 3). Rick Reilly subsequently apologised on behalf of his fellow American journalists: "We envisioned you as a bunch of lazy, swarthy guys in wife-beater T-shirts chugging ouzo instead of finishing the baseball dugouts" (Yannopoulos 2004). Travel writer Ann Rickard had tried to give a balanced view: "next year, when the Olympics are about to be staged, we are sure Athens will be a place of grandness again, but now it is just an awful mess" (2004: 25). But the eventual success of the Games – and of the infrastructure put in place to host them – caused new versions of the city to be written, at least in periodical publications. In a review article *Athens News* trumpeted a "definitive shift in global media opinion", as "the flagships of the world's mainstream press

plead "Sorry" for their past doubts about a successful Athens Olympics" (Yannopoulos 2004). The improvements to buildings, monuments and pedestrian areas in time for the event drew praise from Coral Davenport who asserted that "the Greek capital may still be surrounded by swathes of concrete sprawl but its ancient and modern centre is looking better than it has in decades" (2004: 37).

The Greek authorities were aware of the transformative potential of the Games. Athens mayor Dora Bakoyannis argued that "the Olympics gave us a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to show that Athens is a lively, modern metropolis" (Bakoyannis 2005: 6). She anticipated long-overdue changes to tourist patterns: "Athens is attracting tourists in its own right, rather than just being treated as a stepping stone on the way to the Greek Islands and is pitching for a share of the lucrative city break section of the tourism market along with Amsterdam, Paris and Madrid" (*World Report* 2004: 12). At least in the short term, this appeared to have been realised: Gianna Angelopoulos-Daskalaki, chief organiser of the Games, reported a 20% increase in tourism to Athens since the Games (Donald 2005). A leaflet inserted into the magazine *Time Out: Athens* in 2004 reversed expectations: the "Clubbing Map" was devoted to "the best bars and clubs you need to know to have fun at night in Athens", but for those who subsequently surfaced for a few daylight hours there was a tiny section on "must-see Athens sights" (including the Acropolis).

2005 saw Elena Paparizou's victory in the Eurovision Song Contest with "My Number One". For *Athens News* journalist Maria Paravantes, Eurovision helped put the country on the map: "it 'reminded' our fellow Europeans that Greece is also part of this continent" (Paravantes 2005). A further result was that, as Kyriacos Karseras reminded us, 2006 saw Athens "host the (somewhat lowbrow) Eurovision Song Contest" whilst Patras became "the (decidedly highbrow) cultural capital of Europe. This means that the entire spectrum of Greece's cultural and

organisational credentials will be showcased at the same time" (Karseras 2005: 75).[9]

Conclusion: a city transformed?

Late 1940s Athens was a bustling place, a city of contrasts:

> glittering jewellery, salted nuts sixpence a bag, fish mart, fowl mart, flower mart, near-Parisian elegance to dungeoned squalor, a one-legged boy with a carnival hat, twelve bootblacks in a row, more stock in the shops than there is in Burlington Arcade, more poverty at the other end of the elegant road than there is in Piano Sorrento.[10]

In a 2005 editorial for a magazine distributed free in Athenian hotels and museums, Ilias Bissias also represented his city as having a multiple identity: "take a carefree wander around Athens to discover the neighbourhoods that combine the ancient with the modern, the classic with the subversive, the conservative with the rebellious, and Europe with the East" (Bissias 2005b). Although over the past sixty years writers have recognised the dynamic elements of Athens, all too often they have viewed static as desirable. Athens was undergoing a transformation during the post-war period, but travel writers wanted the city to have a kind of theme-park antiquity. Elements that challenged writers' ability to experience the ancient past, or their notions of what constituted "Greek", were ignored, denigrated, or described as "Turkish".

Travel writers in English have new opportunities to demonstrate their awareness of the positive achievements of the Turkish period, through greater access to its remains. In a recent leaflet the

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[9] The British media, however, showed little interest in Eurovision. On the day itself (20 May 2006) the event was barely mentioned by the "quality" newspapers *The Independent* and *The Guardian.* Afterwards, press attention focused (understandably) upon the Finnish winners, "death metal" outfit Lordi. However, veteran commentator for the BBC Sir Terry Wogan took the opportunity to praise the hosts: "Athens and Greece has been transformed by the success of the Olympic Games" (live television broadcast, BBC1, 20 May 2006).

[10] Smith 1948: 36.

branch of the Museum of Greek Folk Art which houses the Kyriazopoulos ceramics collection very clearly advertises its location as at "the Tzami (Mosque) on Monastiraki Square". This is in contrast to the situation before the building opened to the public, when even the presence of the mosque was not marked on guidebook plans of the square (Plante 1986: 253). As recently as 1991 John Freely, in his book of walks through the city, described the baths of Abid Efendi as "now abandoned and beginning to fall into ruins". However, Freely's prophecy that "it is only a question of time until the *hammam* itself disappears" (Freely 2004: 245) has fortunately not come to pass. Instead, the "Bathhouse of the Winds" (as it has been re-christened) has been lovingly restored and has opened complete with an audio tour evoking for visitors the sights and sounds of a typical Turkish bathhouse. However, two recent "archaeological guides" for travellers to Athens give a mixed impression of interest in the post-classical past: Goette's includes information about extant Byzantine and Turkish remains, whereas Mee and Spawforth elect to cover only the period until the 7th century AD, pleading that subsequent "equally fascinating periods require an expertise which we do not claim to have" (Goette 2001: 91; Mee and Spawforth 2001: xii).

As I have shown, since the end of the Second World War writing about the city has remained remarkably static. But in 2004 Sofka Zinovieff wrote in her travel book of a city "where you can choose between visiting a chic Indian restaurant, a designer-kitsch gay bar with fusion cuisine, or a converted warehouse specializing in mussels" (2004: 117). A guidebook of the same year trumpeted that "a cosmopolitan Mediterranean and European city is being born [...]. Athens has come of age" (Church and Ayiomamitis 2004: 24). It is too soon to tell whether the Olympics of 2004 will finally encourage a new, more positive view of the (modern) city of Athens to emerge in travel writing and guidebooks. But the aftermath of the rhetoric and recriminations, as well as physical regeneration, surrounding the Games does provide an opportunity for the prevailing representations to change, for the performance of a narrative transformation.

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