Techno-Nostalgic Forms of Digital Pilgrimage: Online Journeys into and out of Mount Athos

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Abstract

In further developing Helland's model axis towards new typologies and fields of 'digital religion' (Siuda 2021), this paper proposes one such dynamic arena of investigation to be that of 'digital pilgrimages' as part of the wider dialectic between 'pilgrimage tourism' and 'digital monasticism' focusing on the "*Athos Digital Heritage*" project. Under the perspective of pilgrimage studies, this paper develops Helland's axis from 'religion online' to the more specific type of *pilgrimage online* (referring to online journeys into the landscape by following designed digitised paths to the monasteries via their objects and art as referential points, or material '*remembrances'*); and from 'online religion' towards the more specific *online pilgrimage* (referring to participation in both liturgical and pedagogical sessions with monks, as well as, in both private and collective online rituals and face-to-face online interactions). In developing Helland's axis towards the formulation of experience that emerges out of the digital 'landscape', the paper focuses on experiencing pilgrimage online as an outward output towards the material history of the 'world', while online pilgrimage as an inward path towards intersubjective 'spiritual' experiences of the 'self'. The paper ethnographically shows how the dialectics between these movements emerge out of the digitisation of the Athonian '*landscape'* and its socio-materiality as a place of *remembrance* (Ingold), giving pilgrimage a *techno-nostalgic* form by transferring its visual representation from its physical dimensions to the reinvented virtual metaverse of tourism pilgrimage online.

Keywords: Online pilgrimage/ Pilgrimage online; Landscape; Remembrance; Techno-Nostalgia; Mount Athos

Introduction

This paper focuses on the "*Athos Digital Heritage*" project, as well as other interpersonal online means through which the monks of the monastic republic of Mount Athos innovate their vocation and connection to the 'world' out-there. The paper examines how the "chaîne opératoire" of the materiality and temporality of the 'landscape' (Robb 2020, Ingold 2000 and 2007) of the place emerges from 'pilgrimage

experience' in the form of techno-nostalgia via a series of overlapping circular processes taking place between physical and digital pilgrimages to Mount Athos as a synthesis of inwards and outwards movements between the 'self' and the 'world'. These opposite movements, in turn, formulate the socio-materiality of representations of the 'landscape' of Athos, which includes the monasteries and ways of life, by reproducing the materialisation of the religious, eternal, immaterial world of God, as found in monastic tradition, into physical objects and landmarks ('remembrances' of pilgrimage). These representations are then de-materialised via the 'pilgrimage experience' and online narratives, gaining their immaterial significance (interpersonal 'meaning'). The 'meaning' of experiencing the representations of the 'landscape' is then digitised and re-materialised in various digital forms of 'digital religion' (Siuda 2021), which in turn constitute the vocation of the Athonian 'landscape' into the 'worldly world'. This circular process opens the digital space for further meanings and interpretations of their significance, with both interpersonal and political implications regarding the vocation and uses of emerging technologies of representation and networking by each monastic institution.

The paper is the result of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in two rival neighbouring monasteries of Mount Athos (Vatopaidi and Esfigmenou) on the turn of the millennium as part of the author's PhD thesis (2010) and subsequent extensive investigation and online research on the evolution of monastic life and uses of emerging technologies of networking and communication by the monks of the two monasteries. Through this complex circular process, the paper argues that the socio-materiality of the 'landscape' of the place raises further questions regarding the paradoxical status of the monasteries, and monasticism in general, set in between material/ socio-material and immaterial/ socio-spiritual worlds, and the role of the new media and emerging technologies of representation, communication, and networking, in this emerging picture of contemporary monastic life.

The Paradox of the Athonian 'Landscape'

> To perceive the landscape is [...] to carry out an act of remembrance, and remembering is not so much a matter of calling up an internal image, stored in the mind, as of engaging perceptually with an environment that is itself pregnant with the past. (Ingold 2000, 153)

Mount Athos is a monastic republic of twenty surviving Christian Orthodox monasteries in northern Greece. For centuries, its 'landscape' has been both informed and emerging from the central prohibition of the *Avaton* ["No Trespass"], which infamously forbids the presence of women and cattle in the republic. According to this "sacred tradition"

[*iera paradoseis*], the Athonian landscape is the "Garden" that belongs to the "Mother of God" [*Kipos tis Theotokou*], and hence, no other woman is allowed to cross its holy border and step on its land. This sacred symbolism given to the 'landscape' is further enhanced by the Christian theological condition given to Mary herself, as she is miraculously and/or paradoxically both a Mother (material reproduction) and a Virgin (immaterial reproduction). This paradoxical bodily condition is projected on the Athonian 'landscape' representation via Mary's omnipotent presence as unchanged and "eternal" over the centuries since the very foundation of the republic in the 10th century.[1] It gives the emerging form(s) of the 'landscape' a *distinctive* character.

Furthermore, the physical isolation of the peninsula, with no asphalted roads or electricity (monasteries use electric generators and photovoltaics), as well as the idiosyncratic way of measuring time, the shared rules of obedience, chastity, and poverty (no private property), and the seemingly unidentifiable praying monks dressed in black with their long beards and rosaries in their hands, working hard under the sun, all illustrate Durkheim's definition of ascetic monasticism as a "sacred" way of life: one that offers an "*escape*" from the "profane" secular world: "the only means of *escaping* profane life fully and finally is escaping life altogether" (Durkheim 1995, 37, *my emph*.). This collective urge to 'escape' and transgress the material boundaries of time, the body, and the physical landscape gives the representation of the Athonian 'landscape' its experiential value. Since its very foundation, the monastic republic has been a transnational pilgrimage site for monks and pilgrims. The peninsula's 'landscape' consists of "remembrances", temporal landmarks and objects, which are perceived as portals to the eternal, immaterial dimensions of the 'sacred' world hiding underneath the materiality of the body and the 'landscape'. Furthermore, as in other pilgrimage sites, they are referential objects and mapping points in one's chosen pathway (Mesaritou, Coleman, and Eade 2020, 2). These include architectural landmarks, manuscripts, copies of relics, hagiographies, music scores, oral prophecies, techniques of the self, and other referential points that mark and map a designated space into a 'sacred' one in Durkheim's terms. Conversely, holy objects and the miraculous narratives associated with them give meaning to the 'pilgrimage experience' of entering an otherwise forbidden 'sacred' world of immaterial time and temporality while also, at the same time, open or *revealing* (*Apocalypses/ Revelation*) this hidden world to the material world via a process of circulation between these two worlds.

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[1] Despite the representation of the Athonian 'landscape' as eternally separated from material history, the *Avaton* was *historically* introduced with the foundation of the republic in the 10th century, alongside the introduction of the *coenobitic* (communal) way of life and timetable (horologion) by St Athanasius the Athonite [920-1003AC]. The prohibition of women goes back to a land dispute between the monastery of Kolovos and locals of the town of Ierissos between 885-887A over the land owned and rent paid by farmers to the monastery of Kolovos and other monasteries. Following the economic dispute over the uses of the land, Emperor Basil I intervened by introducing the *Avaton* in his *chrysobull* of 885AC as a means of marking the farmers to pay rent to the monks (Papachrysanthou 1992).

The Holy Girdle of Mary

An example of this circular process between materialised and immaterial representations is the Holy Girdle of Mary on which "Jesus laid his head as a baby" in the tender words of the verger of the monastery of Vatopaidi, where it is kept [*picture 1*]. The use-value of the Holy Girdle of Mary both emerges from and synthesises the form of the Athonian 'landscape' via the technologies used to reproduce and represent it outside Athos. First, the Girdle itself attracts thousands of visitors every year. The monastery averages 120 visiting pilgrims per day. At the same time, on great celebrations and feasts, the number can go up to 1,500 visitors eagerly wishing to touch and venerate it in a special chapel dedicated to it. This is because, allegedly, the Girdle produces a miraculous liquid that heals or helps visiting pilgrims in return for a *tama* ["promise"], an informal form of reciprocity between pilgrims and monks. A pilgrim can ask for the help of Mary regarding a family matter, such as someone's physical illness, in return for donations made to the monastery in the form of golden ornaments (a golden inscribed leg for a broken leg, and so on) offered and attached on the icon.

[*Picture 1*]

These objects of "remembrance" further contribute to networking. Emerging technologies of representation and communication ('religion online') expand their 'miraculous' powers via online distribution of copies in the millennial world market of faith. For example, the Holy Girdle of Mary produces the *Holy Myro*, a liquid which allegedly impregnates women who cannot have children (reproduction of Mary's Immaculate Conception). The monks produce hundreds of ribbons, which they tap on the Girdle to absorb the miraculous liquid that springs out of it, and then package and export them in the market via a network of shops and religious institutions across the globe (Paganopoulos 2007, 122-133; and [*picture 2*]).[2] Other materialising tasks of reproducing the Girdle as a remembrance referential point of the wholeness/holiness of the 'landscape' include exporting copies of miraculous icons of Mary, which are commissioned by private owners for the latter's benefit. Monasteries even 'tour' the original miraculous icons of Mary in big cities, as in Moscow and Athens, to attract pilgrims, expand the monastery's reputation, create connections with cosmopolitan institutions and politicians, and make a profit.

[*Picture 2*]

Conversely, the form of the 'landscape' is *reproduced* out of the socio-material 'taskscape' in Ingold's terms (2000 and 2007) and re-evaluated as a site of remembrance of the *Avaton,* in which the objects that constitute it carry a 'time travelling' experience (as in Robb 2020, 135) referring to the socio-material entanglement of this circulation of the material present with an imagined immaterial past. Accordingly, the socio-materiality of such enactments, narratives, and networks of remembrance, give value to the 'landscape' of Mount Athos by representing and reproducing it via emerging technologies set in-between degrees of temporalities between immaterial (digital and virtual) and material (physical and geographic) worlds.

Techno-Nostalgia

The term 'techno-nostalgia' derives from cinematic appropriations of Walter Benjamin's concept of the 'aura' of an original artwork in his famous 1935 essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1969). The term itself refers to the technological processes employed to foreground and reproduce this 'aura' by using current technologies, such as colorization of documentary archive films, to bring back to life in a nostalgic manner and recover this lost 'aura' as much as possible (Walia 2014). The 'aura' of Mount Athos springs out of its 'sacred tradition' of the *Avaton* associated with the 'landscape' of the place.

Most of these visiting pilgrims I met during my fieldwork in the monastery tended to highlight that besides their reasons, they were drawn to the Mount by a nostalgic collective urge to taste life as "it was a thousand years ago" (Paganopoulos 2021, online). This collective nostalgia for a 'lost' (imagined) 'golden' past affirms the millennial rise of both "religious tourism" and "pilgrimage tourism" as new typologies of travelling (Rejman *et al.* 2016: 568). In this context, Kim *et al.* argued that "Understandings of religious tourism have evolved beyond pilgrimage and now encompass the meaningfulness of a destination", including "individual religious affiliations" and a personal and subjective sense of identity and religiosity associated with the history and vibes of the place (Kim 2020 *et al.*, 185–203; *see* also Badone and Roseman 2004; Olsen and Timothy 2006, 1–22, Rejman *et al.* 2016, 562–75, Mesaritou and Coleman 2018, 178-196). The collective urge for rediscovering a 'lost' identity emerges out of the representations of the Athonian 'landscape' itself, which, in turn, are materialised and marked by objectified "remembrances", such as the Girdle of the Mother of God, its chapel in the monastery, and the network of marketing it in the new online market of faith.

Furthermore, this collective nostalgia associated with the Athonian 'landscape' rapidly evolves into new physical and digital forms, following the technological (r)evolutions in transportation and emerging communication technologies which transform the

'landscape' from a pilgrimage site to a "touristic border zone" in Edward Bruner's terms (2005, 18) as an enacted "experiential, cultural space" (Andriotis 2011, 1614). This *enacted* 'experiential' space consists of a series of reciprocal exchanges, such as the ones associated with the Girdle of Mary, taking place between internal and external actors, and which, in turn, both give and take life from this '*living* landscape', and whose socio-material use-value emerges out of the experience of the pilgrimage in itself (as in Mesaritou, Coleman, and Eade 2020, 1-18; *see* also Ingold 2000 & 2007). In this process of circulation of agency between immaterial and material perceptions of the Athonian 'landscape', the distinctive uniqueness given to the 'landscape' of the place emerges from the socio-material engagements with the immaterial tradition of the *Avaton* via *enacted* "remembrances" of "engaging perceptually with an environment that is itself pregnant with the past" (as in Ingold 2000, 153).

Following Leonardi's reading of Tim Ingold's work, by 'materiality' and 'temporality' here, "we are referring to how its physical and/or digital materials are arranged into particular forms that endure differences in place and time [...] The *arrangement* of an artefact, physical and/or digital materials into particular forms that endure across differences in place and time" (Leonardi 2012, 29, 31, *my emph*.). Hence, the form of the 'landscape' as it emerges out of the arrangement of reciprocities between various actors, techniques and technologies, markets and institutions, internal and external worlds and their respective material and immaterial temporalities, form and performs the 'taskscape' in Ingold's terms (2000) by generating a series of reciprocal tasks. Accordingly, this is what I will call an emerging **techno-nostalgia** for/of *a* 'lost pre-modern past': a kind of techno-induced travelling-back-in-time collective feeling, which not only physically attracts visiting pilgrims and would-be monks absorbing them into the 'landscape' of the monasteries with their 'spiritual' traditions and material history, but also, moving outwards and redistributed online in new emerging digital forms.

Religion Online (Formal Pilgrimage) & Online Religion (Informal Pilgrimage)

The paradoxical condition of the temporality of the Athonian 'landscape', set in between material history and immaterial eternity, inevitably raises moral and legal questions regarding the form and type of socio-materialised reciprocities taking place between the monastic and secular worlds (going back to the writings of Loizos and Papataxiarchis [1991] on gendered masculine forms of reciprocities). These questions regarding the socio-materiality of the 'landscape' spring out of the exceptional status of the monastic republic itself due to the *Avaton* that informs the landscape of Athos in its entirety. The *Avaton* is legally affirmed under the "spiritual" protection of the "Ecumenical Patriarchate" (as per paragraph 1 of Article 105 of the Greek Constitution) and "justified exclusively on the grounds of a spiritual and religious nature" by the

European Community.[3] In this legal context, since 1992, the monastic republic has received funding as a UNESCO World Heritage site to preserve its "authentic" tradition and "spiritual" way of life. The rule was ratified following the inclusion of Athos in the modern Greek state in 1926 and the European Community in 1979, which further ratified its "special status", legally "justified exclusively on the grounds of [its] *spiritual* and *religious* nature" (elevating it to a "state of exception" in Agamben's terms, 2005a).[4] Accordingly, the prohibition of all females from the peninsula became central in modern representations of the Athonian 'landscape', including the monastic buildings and their "spiritual life" ["*pneumatic zoe*"] as a distinctive form of life/life form -in Agamben's terms (2013), whose 'living' form -in Ingold's terms (2000), emerges out of the evolution of the 'taskscape' constituted by the two activities that give to monastic life its distinctive character: prayer and labour.

However, between 2003 and 2004 the EU and UNESCO funding was briefly disrupted, as several parliamentarians of the European Parliament raised questions regarding the legality of the exceptional status of the monastic republic due to the *Avaton*.[5] As members of the European Parliament highlighted, the rule directly undermines the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, as per Article 23 regarding the "Equality Between Men and Women" and the Right of Access. Other issues that undermine the exceptional status of the monastic 'landscape' of the place include the impact of the rapid rise of religious 'pilgrimage tourism' (Paganopoulos 2021), questions over the role and commitment of the monks to their traditional tasks, the nature of communication and engagement via emerging technologies between monks and external agents, the fusion of the tourist industry with pilgrimage, and consequently, the experiential value of the entire pilgrimage itself.

In their ongoing research, Tanasyouk and Avgerou (2008) highlighted the challenges presented by the importation of new technologies in some monasteries, seeing them positively rather than the moralised critique of Loizos and Papaataxiarchis cited above.

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[3] Source: UNESCO/CLT/WHC (Official Journal L 291, 19/11/1979 P. 0186). Available online: http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/454.11979H/AFI/DCL/04/ (accessed on 23 April 2024).

[4] *See Official Journal* L 291 , 19/11/1979 P. 0186. Source: UNESCO/CLT/WHC http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/45411979H/AFI/DCL/04 and https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/454). *ATHONIAN CHARTER*. Holy Committee of Mount Athos. 1979. *Constitutional Charter of Mount Athos of 1926*. Mount Athos.

[5] In 2003, a number of members of the European Parliament raised the issue, including Maria Izquierdo Rojo's (PSE) written question P-0556/03 to the Commission (20/2/2003) published the Official Journal of the EU 2004/C 58 E/023, and Anna Karamanou's and the Chairperson of the Committee of Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities' report in July 2003 [See Swiebel and Rojo reports 2003]. See also Corrigendum to Directive 2004/58/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 29 April 2004 on the right of citizens of the Union and their family members to move and reside freely within the territory of the Member States amending Regulation (EEC) No 1612/68 and repealing Directives 64/221/EEC, 68/360/EEC, 72/194/EEC, 73/148/EEC, 75/34/EEC, 75/35/EEC, 90/364/EEC, 90/365/EEC and 93/96/EEC (Official Journal of the European Union L 158 of 30 April 2004), and L 229/38 EN Official Journal of the European Union 29.6.2004 'RIGHT OF EXIT AND ENTRY to all Union citizens' (CHAPTER II: Article 4).

They argued that technology provides more time and space for traditional ("spiritual") practices to take place in everyday life, whilst retaining the "sacred" separation from administrative and financial duties. According to their research, the use of ICT time supports the economic needs of monastic institutions and saves time for the monks in completing their daily tasks associated with the economic sustainability of their monastic institution and everyday life, which, in turn, allows to focus more time on prayer and worshipping God. This positive approach to ICT demonstrates a kind of Weberian "instrumental rationality", referring to the economic way of balancing between the material needs of the monastery as a historical institution and the spiritual needs of the brotherhood. In this respect, Jonveaux (2020) discussed how the introduction of mobile phones in the monasteries contributed to the evolution of traditional religious practices, such as fasting. She illustrated her point by reflecting on the prohibition of using mobile phones during the period of Lent by the Austrian Franciscan monks as a new emerging form of "fasting" from using digital media and the Internet and focusing more of their time towards "spiritual" life. This arrangement in turn allows the Franciscans both to incorporate the use of mobile phones in their personal and institutional life, while also retaining the traditions associated with monastic life.

The rise of pilgrimage tourism, in combination with the unbalanced introduction of emerging technologies and ICT, therefore, presents the monks of Athos with direct challenges in their everyday lives, not only because of the pressure put on their program due to the increased presence of tourist pilgrims, but also, in respect to external matters - such as balancing between receiving funding and the monastic institutions' relation to the Greek state and the EU, incorporating ICT in everyday life, and preserving their 'sacred tradition' of the *Avaton* which gives to Athos its unique form 'landscape', the source of its sacredness.

The "*Athos Digital Heritage*" program

Following such unresolvable and inevitable contemporary challenges, the EU and UNESCO introduced 2020 the "*Athos Digital Heritage*" fund. This program aimed to offer "a portal for the promotion of the Athonite cultural heritage" outside the restricted border and "sacred tradition" associated with the 'landscape' of the monastic republic. The main scope of the project was to preserve and export Athonian knowledge by digitising, mapping, and re-evaluating the architecture of the monasteries, as well as their archive and treasures, foregrounding and disentangling both historical documents and the tradition associated with holy objects as means of re-evaluating and making Athos accessible to the world -regardless of one's gender or belief. In addition, the new technologies of communication and networking, which are imported by a new generation of well-educated monks in computer science and design, have extended the

vocation of the monasteries and enlarged representations of the Athonian 'landscape' beyond Athos onto the world stage. The project carried a "twofold objective":

> Athos Digital Heritage aims at a twofold objective: to communicate, on the one hand, and disseminate the outcomes of this enormous digitisation and documentation project to meet the needs of the academics and research community in general. To support, contribute to and develop, through digital applications and the dissemination of the digitised content of spiritual value, innovative pedagogical tools and applications. https://www.mountathos.org/en-US/The-Project.aspx [visited April 1, 2024]

The twofold objective of the "*Athos Digital Heritage*" corresponds to the double uses of ICT as a means of offering a digital pilgrimage online 'experience' that overcomes the prohibitions associated with the isolated land -including the prohibition of the presence of women in the monastic republic according to the 'sacred' tradition of the *Avaton* ['No Tresspass']-*,* whilst offering easy fast ways of accessing the geographically isolated monasteries and overcoming the administrative restrictions placed on visitors. It is important to note that the site is multilingual to enhance access. Furthermore, the pedagogical applications and innovative use of new tools offer the visitor the option of choosing *how* to engage with the 'pilgrimage experience' in both fragmented (depending on the given options a visitor decides to follow) or holistic (purchasing the whole package). Conversely, online options offer two main orientations formulating the 'experience'. The two main aspects of this online pilgrimage are *sightseeing* and *learning* about the Athonian tradition. These follow Helland's model of 'digital religion' (2000) based on his theoretical axis between the categories of "religion online" (visiting websites and navigating to gain information) and "online religion" (practising activities online and engaging in interpersonal dialogue). Young (2004) and Helland (2005) further determined the *degree* of this interaction in terms of *formal* and *informal* uses of digital technologies, respectively -both for communicative purposes and for opening new fields of worship according to the degree of interactive participation in online activities associated with offline traditional practices.

In this context, 'religion/pilgrimage online' refers to the representations of the 'landscape', which involves sightseeing and offering virtual access to monastic spaces and objects of veneration. An example of this type of digital pilgrimage is the online repository of the "*Athos Digital Heritage*" project.[6] The online repository offers a choice of technologically designated walks by following **pathways** chosen by one's navigation into the virtual metaverses of the monastery (in the 360° degrees visual form of the old 'adventure' platform arcade games). During these designated three-dimensional virtual walks, the visitor follows digitised paths of architectural landmarks associated with

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[6] https://www.mountathos.org/en-US/Discover-Mt-Athos/Digital-Pilgrimages.aspx

specific monastic spaces, miraculous objects, and holy relics. In its current form (though the application rapidly develops as we speak), it has the old 'adventure' game form in which the visitor can navigate by using the cursor following four designated "digital paths" of her/his choice marked by these "remembrances", referential objects and geographical points navigating one's chosen pathway which map in detail the physical monastic building transgressing the physical dimensions of time and place. The app has a strong educational value in teaching the material history of the monasteries encapsulated within theological perspectives, which gives an excellent introductory idea to the visitor of the ambience of the place -as in a quick tour.

On the other hand, by 'online religion/pilgrimage', I refer to interpersonal real-time reciprocities associated with traditional reciprocal modes, such as 'hospitality' ["*filoxenia*"], and interpersonal relations as they develop between monks and visitors. These may include humans, such as real-time dialogues between the guest master or the verger with online visitors, and non-human agents, such as apps and 'living' virtual landscapes of overlapping digital platforms. It may be safe to presume that these applications will be further developed very soon using Artificial Intelligence and other rapidly emerging technologies that will further enhance the 'digital experience' *as one's personal matter of choice,* allowing users to create their own individual ('personalised') paths. Up to this point, a pilgrim of Athos can, among other things:

- Virtually light a candle and pray in a monastery or front of a specific icon and relic for personal reasons. https://athos.guide/en/svechi/vatoped
- Submit online memorial prayers to be performed by the monks of specific monastic institutions or isolated settlements. Notes on Athos about health or repose
- Take an e-course into Byzantine arts and crafts to further engage the pilgrimage in the long term.
- Participate in broadcasted Live Q&A ZOOM sessions with Abbots and elders in real-time web channels and social media, hosted by online channels such as The Uncut Mountain *YouTube* channel, which hosts a series of online weekly talks entitled *Digital Archontariki* ["Guesthouse"].

This circular process of digitising and *de-materialising* the socio-materialities associated with the Athonian 'landscape' takes place via the foregrounding and distribution of objectified "remembrances": material and immaterial objects of reverence whose influential power is amplified via the new media and emerging technologies of communication and networking in the 'worldly world'. As mentioned, these include holy relics and holy sites, objects and architectures of veneration, and even the monastic body and its uses in everyday life (prayer and labour), all of which are

then mystified with miraculous stories of the past and prophecies of the future, which, in turn, show "a favoured pathway for getting ahead" (as in Rutherford 2015, 245). Furthermore, these pathways form overlapping narrative "ancestral chronotopes" through which visiting pilgrims nostalgically reengage with an (imagined) past as part of their marketed pilgrimage 'experience' (as in Eisenlohr's 2015, 281-304). The intensification between the internal structures of monastic life (monastic program and internal 'spiritual' life) and external vocation (planning program including visitors and means of expansion) is enacted by both actors (monks and visitors) via emerging representations of 'lost' time in the present moment of history (as also in Bear 2014, 3, on "sites of nostalgia", citing Guyer 2007).

Online Interpersonal Dialogues and Political Transgressions of the *Avaton*

However, sightseeing and travelling are not the only aspects of online pilgrimage. Above all, it is one's *personal* online journey ('online religion') into Athos to make or take meaning to her or his personal everyday secular life. This can happen by reinventing *interpersonal* relations, emerging from the Father (God)-Son (Christ) matrix, such as between elder and deacon, or 'spiritual father' and pilgrim, digitised and enlarged in social media. The circular process of incorporating emerging technologies and social media into the 'living landscape' transforms socio-material connections, moving from personal to interpersonal dialogues, and consequently, changing the educative and missionary role of the monks and their institutions on the world stage. This is only possible via the innovation and re-innovation of the reproductive uses of online and offline emerging technologies. These technological innovations or reinventions of the 'sacred tradition' are essential for monastic pilgrimage sites because they offer access to all without breaking the EU rules as a condition for continuing to receive funding, as well as keeping in order with the increased presence of visiting pilgrims in the monasteries that puts extra pressure on the monastic program.

Furthermore, by expanding the monastic institutions' vocation, emerging technologies create new emerging online 'communitas' in the classic anthropological terms of Victor Turner (1969 & 1974), referring to spontaneous extended communities emerging out of collective pilgrimages. Digital pilgrimages formally represent *collective* memories of a nostalgically imagined past, whilst informally making monasticism relevant to the *personal* lives of their flock on face-to-face, real-time connections. Hence, emerging technologies transfer these personal aspects of one's pilgrimage by giving access to both the land and its material references, as well as to the 'spiritual' world of the monks, promoting an alternative, contemporary 'Christo-centric' way of thinking and 'economical' way of living against the 'materialist' and 'anthropocentric' excessive world of their visitors with politicalised implications regarding the emergent variety of meanings given of these interpersonal reciprocities and style of their performance.

It was a Tuesday evening in June on Malvern Hills in Worcestershire, killing time. In the older days, I would be zapping on the telly, but these days, I am browsing YouTube instead to find something to watch. To my excitement, I bumped into a Live Q&A ZOOM session with Abbot Ephraim of the monastery of Vatopaidi of Mount Athos, one of twenty thriving Christian Orthodox monastic institutions of the geographically isolated monastic republic in north Greece. The Uncut Mountain YouTube channel hosted the live interactive session as part of a series of online weekly talks entitled Digital Archontariki ["Guesthouse"] for which Abbot Ephraim is a frequent speaker.[7] This *YouTube* channel is one of the informal online media that Abbot uses to address the extended community of the monastery beyond its medieval walls live from his Office. The young deacon monks behind the camera framed him in an intimate close-up, facing the camera directly in a fatherlike manner. In this patriarchal spirit, the Abbot faced the camera directly, addressing the audience intimately and personally. He offered blessings, listened to the participants and responded to their everyday problems.

During the real-time online broadcast, it became apparent that the session was mainly designed for women, who do not have a chance to visit the monastery or even meet the Abbot in person due to his heavy timetable, and according to the thousand-year-old traditional rule of *Avaton* ["No Trespass"] which prohibits women and cattle from stepping in the monastic republic physically. Yet, despite the prohibition, a special characteristic of the online session was that most participants were women: working wives and young mothers who asked questions and received advice about their children's upbringing, health, and other personal family issues. The session took place at 7:30 pm, the only short break the monks enjoy from their relentless liturgical daily cycle, set after the "After-dinner" prayers and before the Midnight prayers and Matins. One caller from Australia had to stay up until 3:30 AM (Australian time) to receive the Abbot's blessing, while another participant from Greece connected from a hospital bed, holding her newborn baby and giving the Abbot the good news. Their husbands were poignantly left in the background, as it became apparent that they were frequent visitors to the monastery, so this session gave their wives a chance to give their views and news on their personal issues and everyday family matters. Of particular warming moments was the Abbot's open communication with a group of nuns gathered in the "Common Room" ["*Synaxari*"] of their monastery. The sisters joined the session using ZOOM group chat to connect in real-time and give the Abbot the news from their monastic community. The Abbot appeared to know all of them by name and was already informed about their issues and developments in their monastery.

In an intimate, personal, direct, accessible, and yet, highly intellectual and complex manner, via the use of network technology for communication, the Abbot used his free time to represent the vocation of his monastery beyond its medieval walls by offering

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[7] Watched Live on the day (June 27 2023 at 17:30 Greenwich time) and recorded here
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N7wKmKY-CSY [Accessed on June 27 & 30, 2023].

his advice —while transgressing the material and gendered boundaries set by the *Avaton*. By opening real-time online access, the Abbot represented the ethos and "spiritual" values of the monastery, hence, making monasticism relevant to the personal lives of the participants regardless of their gender or background in an interpersonal dialogic manner. He seized the opportunity to touched on contemporary ontological preoccupations with religion in social and theological sciences, while offering the alternative "Christo-centric" way of thinking and an "economic" way of ecological living of the monks against the "materialist" and "anthropocentric" excessive world outside Athos. Conversely, this real-time session merged the extended community of Vatopaidi beyond the medieval walls of the monastery, into the living rooms and private lives of its members worldwide. In the light but strict Vatopaidian monastic spirit, Abbot Ephraim finished in a playful note, asking the organiser of the session: "*Is not time yet (to finish)? We also have a programme to follow",* referring to his wish to return to his monastic duties and daily liturgical programme.

On the same day and time as the monastery of Vatopaidi's broadcast, a parallel ZOOM session was broadcast from the neighbouring monastery of Esfigmenou. Entitled "*The Flaming Speech of Elder Methodios Abbot of the Monastery of Esfigmenou + St Methodios's Day*", the session was also performed in real-time, recorded and posted on *YouTube* by the "Friends of Esfigmenou" [Filoi_Esfigmenou. Com].[8] Yet, this session carried a very different character and style than the broadcast of the monastery of Vatopaidi. As described, Abbot Ephraim of Vatopaidi orchestrated a personalised and intimate dialogue with the participants, accessing their private homes, living rooms, and personal lives. He also gave them the digital space to contact and talk with him about their problems in an interpersonal manner. By contrast, Abbot Methodios of Esfigmenou addressed an invisible audience. He received no feedback, did not engage in any personal conversation with participants on the other line, and did not offer his blessing to each online member of the audience. Framed in an amateurish foggy long shot, in addition to bad sound, Abbot Methodios did not wish to conversate with anyone, nor did he care to do so. Instead, the session culminated with the psalms of the day in honour of St. Methodios, who was celebrated on that day according to the "old" Julian Calendar and whose name the Abbot also shared. During the Live speech from the *Synaxari* ('meeting room'), he was closely surrounded by his brother monks. He portrayed the hardships facing his brotherhood because of what he perceived as a 'persecution' from the Athonian authorities, making the parallelism of the self-sacrifices of St. Methodios and Christ in the hands of their persecutors with the current situation surrounding the monastery.

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[8] Η πύρινη ομιλία του Γέροντος Μεθοδίου Καθηγουμένου της Ι.Μ. Εσφιγμένου στις 27/06/23 +Αγ. Μεθοδίου. - YouTube
[Accessed June 27 June & July 2, 2023].

Situated five kilometres northeast of neighbouring Vatopaidi, Esfigmenou is known worldwide for its black banner calling for "*Orthodoxy or Death.*" The banner was raised in 1973 in protest of the "compromises" made by the Ecumenical Patriarch and the Orthodox Church, as well as the Council of Elders of Athos, because of a series of politico-ideological matters regarding the central "issue of the calendar" and other "matters of (True) Faith" ["*Themata pisteos*"]. Due to the monastery's ultra-Orthodox vocation and refusal of its monks to engage with the mainstream Orthodox authorities or other monasteries, Esfigmenou was placed under embargo following the third eviction note to the brotherhood issued back on February 5th, 2003 (the first two were issued way back in 1974 and 1976 by the central authority of the Council of Elders of Athos). In the third eviction, which is still ongoing, the authorities call the "New Zealots" of Esfigmenou "occupiers" and "fundamentalists" with a "cosmopolitan ideology" who purposefully divide the "peaceful" Athonian community (*Eviction Note* issued by the Holy Committee, 2003, 5).[9]

Twenty years on, the embargo is still in place. In his address to the public during the online session, Abbot Methodios criticised the Athonian authorities, who have since confiscated all the monastery's land and property, shut down its bank account, and even reintroduced a new monastery and brotherhood as "Esfigmenou" nearby, as a means of further excluding the "old" monks of Esfigmenou. He highlighted how "they" [*sic*], in his words, are undermining the means of survival, health and well-being of the monks of Esfigmenou, by targeting the monastery's material sources and income. For him, the mainstream authorities of the 'Ecumenical Patriarch' and the Council of Elders of Athos illegally undermine the monastery's constitutional independence and legality of its monks' monastic status, as they purposefully disrupt the monastery's economic self-sustainability. Their aim, always according to the Abbot, is to make the monks of Esfigmenou give up and leave Athos. This effort includes blocking access to Esfigmenou's fields for their agricultural activities, employing the coastal guard to block the monastery's three fishing boats from leaving the harbour, as well as, blocking pilgrims from entering to visit or physically access the monastery, blocking access to the monastery's bank account, confiscating all properties of the monastery inside and outside Athos (called *metochia*), and threatening the Abbot and the members of the monastery with arrest the moment they step out of its medieval walls.

However, in an ironic postmodern way, the tighter the embargo became over the last twenty years, the greater the monastery's worldwide reputation has also risen, spreading worldwide across online venues and making it the most popular destination for would-be monks and visitors. Despite the imposed embargo and tightening of

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[9] It is important to highlight that the term "New Zealots» ["*Neozealotes*"] does not refer to the zealot ascetic form of life of charismatic or hermit monks, such as the famous Joseph the Hesychast or Father Paisios. Rather, the "New Zealot" monastic movement refers to the 20th century political rise of ultra-Orthodox groups of monks and their followers who are members of the international sect of the "Old Calendarist Church."

security around the monastery by replacing the local with Greek state police from Athens, more and more visitors eagerly climb over the fence (even BBC journalists made it to the monastery by illegally breaking the embargo)[10] and walk secretly in the dark of the night to reach the forbidden destination. In addition, hundreds of interviews on media, social media, and online sites (the monastery also has its website at esfigmenou.com) have rapidly increased the worldwide reputation of the monastery as the "last tower of zealots" where "authentic" monasticism still rages on and against cosmopolitan institutions and 'their' project of Ecumenism.[11] Esfigmenou then demonstrates an alternative way of using ICT and emerging technologies of representation and networking from that of Vatopaidi through which the 'landscape' of Athos gains a different meaning in relation to the 'worldly world' outside Athos and becomes a political matter of "True Faith." The use of emerging technologies here becomes the socio-material online means of breaking the embargo imposed by the authorities on the monks of Esfigmenou, as well as for making and amplifying the impact of their voice and ideological cause in the same 'worldly world' they denounce.

Conclusion

The above opening of the monastic vocation onto the world stage by both monasteries, via the digitisation and circulation of the Athonian 'landscape' reveals two formally similar '*chaîne opératoires*', referring to the various "ways of conceptualising the sequence of operations involved in making and using a thing" (Robb 2020, online), which, however, are given a different dynamic, character (style), interpretation of the Athonian 'landscape', and means of communication for connecting to a 'world' out-there. On the one hand, the Vatopaidian use of emerging technologies of representation and communication as a means of techno-nostalgically re-appropriating and exporting the Athonian 'landscape' in relation to the 'self'. They put their emphasis on real-time interpersonal communication and develop personalised relations as they emerge out of the Live session itself. On the other hand, Esfigmenou's uses of the same technologies formulate a public protest oriented against the politics of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Council of Elders of Athos, the mainstream authorities and guarantors of the landscape's exceptional status.

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[10] Persecution of Esphigmenou Monastery of Mount Athos (youtube.com) first broadcasted on November 4 2019 [accessed on June 1, 2024].

[11] 'Ecumenism' refers to the ongoing international effort to bridge the Schism of 1045AC between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. This effort started in the 1960s and is still ongoing due to the opening of Christianity on the world stage and in the emerging world society. But according to the Abbot of Esfigmenou, this is a "betrayal" to the Orthodox "True Faith" because of the compromises the elders of the other monasteries make, which result in distorting the monastic Orthodox "sacred tradition" [*iera paradoseis*] from the inside.

Conversely, new technologies give various socio-materially enacted forms to the Athonian 'landscape' in direct relation to the form(s) the monks give to the representation of *a* 'world' out there. In this two-fold (internal/external) dialectical (landscape/taskscape) circular manner (materialisation, de-materialisation, re-materialisation/digitisation), the vocation of each monastic institution is incorporated and recycled according to the socio-materiality of the technologies of representation and the way they are used in terms of reciprocal relations in-between those two worlds (the eternal/material and the ephemeral/immaterial). As the comparative material from Vatopaidi and Esfigmenou shows, this process is open to various uses, interpretations and heterogeneous two-fold ways in how each institution both internally relates to the representation of *an* Athonian 'landscape', and externally to the representation of *a* 'world' out there. Multiple representations of these competing 'worlds' (in Durkheim's terms), and the conflicting temporalities from which their picture emerges, synthesise the heterochronic *living habitus* of each monastery as the mediatory institutional contested ground in which conflicting temporalities of the 'landscape' "become visible" (Bear 2016, 487) as they emerge from "acts of labour" in everyday life and the "relationships *within* and *between* these rhythms" (Bear 2014, 18-19). This process of the reproduction of the 'temporality of the landscape' (Ingold 2000) takes place by "fashioning new techniques to preserve older values by retooling culturally familiar signs and practices" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000, 317; *see* also Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, Oberholtzer 1995 141-153, and in Heelas *et al*. 1996, Tanasyouk and Avgerou 2008 online).

Yet, both monastic institutions reengage with material history and the emergence of a 'world society' in a techno-nostalgic manner, whilst demonstrating opposite understandings of this imaginary relation to the Athonian 'landscape' within and against *a* 'world' out there. Furthermore, this heterogeneity in interpretation and representation of the 'landscape' in techno-nostalgic forms, reveals the paradoxical condition of the monasteries themselves, and monastic *living* in general, as a 'life form' and a 'form of living', or a 'landscape' and a 'taskscape' in Agamben's (2013) and Ingold's (2000) respective terms. These paradoxes become digitally visible in terms of the tensions between internal and external processes of structuration and decoupling (Paganopoulos 2024) springing out of politicised and personalised interpersonal roles within and/or against the emerging 'world society', and the technological evolution from a physical single entity to a virtual, post-millennial, fragmented world picture(s) of societies and their virtual 'landscapes'.

Hence, the degree of engagement with the online 'communitas' in Victor Turner's classic terms [1969, 1974] depends on, on the one hand, one's personalised engagement with technology and, on the other, the quality and degree of this engagement accommodated by the technologies themselves in their present and future development ('affordance'). *Techno-nostalgia* is the circular process through which an

institution creates and reproduces collective new 'memories' between immaterial and material worlds. Conversely, *the media is the journey or the memory* as the 'pilgrimage experience' becomes an online socio-material matter of representation of landscapes and social relations. By offering users access to visit online and participate in the virtual life of the monasteries via their online social presence, pilgrimage tourism has reemerged online alongside the reinvented and personalised emerging markets of faith.

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