

From Tragedy to Collective Memory: Cultural Responses to the Tempi Train Crash in Greece

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Abstract

This paper examines how the 2023 Tempi train disaster in Greece generated a large-scale cultural and political response that blurred the boundaries between art, protest, and civic participation. The study connects the aftermath of the tragedy with theories of cultural democracy and artistic activism, arguing that when institutional accountability is perceived to fail, cultural expression can function as a form of democratic infrastructure. Following the crash, which killed fifty-seven people and triggered widespread public outrage, sustained demonstrations and artistic initiatives emerged across Greece and internationally, combining mourning with demands for justice.

Using Dietrich Heissenbüttel's concept of globalized protest art and Hadley and Belfiore's theory of cultural democracy, the paper analyzes cultural production as both political mobilization and participatory meaning-making. Particular focus is given to the 2024–2025 memorial concert at the Panathenaic Stadium, interpreted as a performative civic ritual that transformed a national monument into a space of collective accountability and symbolic resistance.

Methodologically, the research applies Critical Discourse Analysis to media coverage, protest slogans, artistic works, and digital activism. The study concludes that post-Tempi cultural mobilization demonstrates how artistic practices can redistribute authorship, amplify collective memory, and sustain democratic engagement beyond formal political institutions, positioning culture as an active agent in social justice movements.

Keywords: Tempi Train Disaster, Cultural Democracy, Artistic Activism, Protest Art, Performative Protest, Collective Memory, Civic Participation, Cultural Mobilization, Social Justice, Public Mourning, Political Accountability, Global Activism, Citizen Art, Critical Discourse Analysis, Participatory Culture.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present the connection between the Tempi train disaster, the theory of cultural democracy and artistic activism and performative protest. On the night of February 28, 2023, two trains collided, and fifty-seven people lost their lives under unclear circumstances. Up to this day, two years later, large social and cultural mobilizations have taken place, aiming to exert political pressure and demand justice [1, 2].

Due to strong evidence of political corruption in Greece and the lack—or even absence—of proper investigation at the crash site, citizens have come to believe that there are no safe infrastructures in the country. Over the past two years, dozens of demonstrations have taken place throughout Greece. The culmination of these mobilizations came with the 2025 memorial demonstration, marked by a massive movement not only within the country but worldwide—from Argentina to Palestine [3, 4].

Alongside the demonstrations, there has also been a strong artistic presence and expression of solidarity. School performances, songs, memorials, concerts, and documentary films—ranging from local initiatives to large-scale productions—have sought to support the families of the victims and to amplify the citizens' outrage over the degradation of political and judicial authority. The Panathenaic Stadium concert in October 2024, attended by thirty-eight thousands and nearly two million online, epitomized this shift from grief to political mobilization, transforming a historic cultural site into a performative arena for civic resistance.

This study looks at how post-Tempi cultural traditions serve as both political mobilization and gestures of grief. Using Dietrich Heissenbüttel's concept of "protests everywhere" (2014) as a theoretical lens, the analysis interprets these cultural responses as instances of globalized artistic activism — forms of "citizen art" that blur boundaries between aesthetics, protest, and poli-

tics. According to Heissenbüttel, modern protest art is a component of a transnational language of dissent, occupying public space and redefining it as a location of participation and symbolic power. Second, cultural production is interpreted as a participatory process that redistributes authorship and voice in Steven Hadley and Eleonora Belfiore's (2018) theory of cultural democracy. By combining these frameworks, this study argues that the post-Tempi artistic movement — and the Panathenaic concert in particular — demonstrates how culture can act as a democratic infrastructure when institutional ones fail. Artistic activism transformed the concert into a civic ritual of accountability; collective participation turned the aesthetic into the political.

Theoretical Framework

In *Global Activism: Art and Conflict in the 21st Century* (2014), Heissenbüttel's publication "Protests Everywhere?" theorizes the growth of artistic activism as a characteristic of contemporary political culture. He argues that protest art is increasing, establishing hybrid spaces between art, media, and social movements as "the forms and gestures of protest have migrated into every domain of cultural production." This "everywhere" quality does not imply weakening but reflects a transformation of how disagreement is performed.

A performance activity that visualizes alternative kinds of citizenship, artistic protest transforms from representation to action. Heissenbüttel identifies several characteristics of this new activist art. It occupies public space by transforming streets, squares, and institutions into participatory stages. It demonstrates transnational resonance by connecting local struggles, such as those in Athens or Santiago, to global protest vocabularies like climate justice and anti-authoritarianism. This art also emphasizes symbolic visibility, using aesthetics to amplify political claims through emotion and imagery. Finally, it relies on networked dissemination, extending the reach of protest through digital platforms and media convergence [5].

An understanding of post-Tempi cultural activity as a component of a larger global activist continuum is made possible by this paradigm. Global movements that utilize culture to negotiate grief and justice are echoed by the Panathenaic Stadium memorial concert, the digital archive tempi2023.gr, and monuments throughout Thessaloniki and Athens. By reimagining the public sphere through shared feeling and involvement, these artistic forms "contest the monopoly of official discourse," as Heissenbüttel says. The paper also references the work of Steven Hadley and Eleonora Belfiore on cultural democracy, which argues that cultural policy should acknowledge citizens as co-producers of meaning rather than passive consumers. Hadley and Belfiore highlight protest's democratic potential, or how cultural practices can promote communal empowerment, while Heissenbüttel emphasizes the performance aspect of protest. By bridging activism and participation, these frameworks enable us to examine post-Tempi art as a democratic activity as well as a political critique [6, 7].

By researching the meaning of social solidarity, one finds use-

ful articles have been printed analyzing human behavior amidst extreme political and social instability. In this sense, Özge Derman's "Stand-in as a performative repertoire of action" highlights the unusual Standing Man. In Turkey in 2010, when an activist artist decided to stand motionless for eight hours as a sign of protest, it sparked a domino effect of participation across the country. The event was broadcast via social media. 'They therefore propose an alternative acting and living together in the light of the equality of all individuals involved. The recreation of this new active citizenship, both individually and collectively, is also highly connected with the appropriation of a performative repertoire of action within everyday life.'

The Panathenaic Stadium Concert as Cultural Protest

Nearly one year after the Tempi catastrophe, on October 11 2024, hundreds of Greek people gathered at Athens' Panathenaic Stadium for a concert honoring the victims and the continuous need for justice. One of the biggest cultural protests in contemporary Greek history which was planned by a group of artists, journalists, and the relatives of the victims. The concert transformed a classical cultural monument into a space of solidarity, drawing audiences both in person and virtually through livestreams, according to Parallaxi Mag and other Greek sites.

The Panathenaic Stadium was chosen for symbolic reasons. It represents national pride as the location of the first modern Olympic Games.

The organizers altered the symbolic charge of this monument of official representation by seizing it for a protest memorial, turning it into a platform for citizens to express disappointment with state failure rather than celebrate state accomplishments. The staging itself represented mourning as a group responsibility, with huge projection screens displaying a visual of train rails and birds flying away. The attendees were holding signs saying 'Justice.' Generated what Heissenbüttel describes as "the performative intensity of protest art": a space where emotion becomes a political argument in itself. By mobilizing empathy and grief, participants enacted an inclusive form of citizenship that transcended party lines [8].

The performance functioned on two interconnected levels: engagement and mourning. Private grief and national awareness were connected by this contrast. Participants staged a collective narrative using sound, gesture, and location that transformed the Tempi tragedy from a singular event into a moral critique of infrastructure failure and government. Following Heissenbüttel's (2014) framework, this concert exemplifies the global grammar of protest art, where artistic performance becomes a social medium rather than a decorative accessory to politics.

These instances demonstrate how, in the absence of institutional mechanisms, culture may serve as a vehicle for democracy. Cultural democracy, according to Hadley and Belfiore (2018), includes the right of citizens to create and communicate meanings—to "own" culture as a site of shared authorship. One such instance of collaborative authorship was the Panathenaic con-

cert. The line-up featured amateur performers from the tragedy-affected regional areas, mainstream musicians, and choirs from nearby schools, with a length of four hours. In fact, one participating band named 'Kini Thiti' performed a song written for the cause. The song is called 'Tonight I will arrive late', a metaphor to the passengers that didn't arrive home that night of the crash. The participatory ethos of cultural democracy was reflected in the horizontal coordination of participation through civic networks and social media, rather than its curation through elite cultural organizations [9].

The "networked dissemination" that Heissenbüttel identifies with international movement is also demonstrated by this collectivity. By bringing together expatriate populations in Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East, livestreams and social media reposts expanded the concert's audience. This intersection of the local and global aligns with Heissenbüttel's observation that twenty-first-century protest art "translates global discontent into vernacular forms." In the Greek context, the Panathenaic concert did precisely that: it localized global democratic aspirations within a specifically Hellenic symbolic system. The result was a fusion of cosmopolitan activism and national self-reflection. Traditional Greek media honored the initiative and published articles about it for promotional purposes, but at the same time, the news focused on other negative events, diminishing the importance of the concert and making it easily forgotten.

Methodology

The analysis employs a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach informed by Teun A. van Dijk's foundational principles. CDA examines how language, visuals, and narratives construct power relations and social identities within discourse. In this case, the study investigates how government statements, media reports, protest slogans, and cultural performances articulate competing narratives of responsibility, grief, and justice [10].

Diverse original sources that document reactions to the Tempi disaster are incorporated into the corpus. These include Al Jazeera and CNN's coverage of the protests, which focused on the rhetorical framing of state accountability; the official memorial site tempi2023.gr's documentation and imagery; the Panathenaic Stadium concert recordings and reviews; the #JusticeForTempi (2023–2025) social media discourse; and a few artistic outputs, such as murals, installations, and online film projects. When taken as a whole, these resources document both official and grassroots forms of public grieving and criticism, providing a complex picture of how justice and communal memory are expressed in many media.

The analytical methodology blends visual, and textual methods. Key metaphors and terms that shape the moral story, such as "crime," "memory," and "justice," are found through textual analysis. While intercultural mapping tracks the intersections of artistic and protest discourses to create what Heissenbüttel refers to as "networked protest grammars," visual semiotic analysis looks at how visuals such as candles, railroads, and pictures actualize collective sorrow. In order to determine if these artistic

endeavors promote inclusive spaces of participation or continue to be largely symbolic gestures, the interpretive synthesis then connects these findings to ideas of cultural democracy.

Conclusion

When institutional accountability fails, art and culture can take on democratic roles, as seen by the aftermath of the Tempi train tragedy. The 2025 Panathenaic Stadium concert demonstrated how collective grief may become a kind of political agency by transforming national mourning into a performative demand for justice. According to Heissenbüttel's theory of "protests everywhere," the concert is a prime example of creative activism since it took over public space, transformed sorrow into civic expression, and linked a local tragedy to a global protest language. At the same time, the event exemplified Hadley and Belfiore's definition of cultural democracy. It allowed people to express common ideas and values by redistributing cultural authorship to individuals and artists outside of official organizations. The concert's interactive format made it difficult to distinguish between politics and ritual, performance and protest, and artist and audience. By doing this, it broadened the cultural sphere to become a democratic one, where people might envisage justice, empathy, and accountability together.

The concert had a wider democratic impact by redefining public discourse, even though it did not directly result in policy reform. Cultural actors reaffirmed the public sphere as a space of moral agency by converting the Panathenaic Stadium from a monument of national pride into a memorial of civic opposition. In this way, artistic activity turns into a form of grassroots governance—a "soft infrastructure" of civic engagement that upholds moral awareness and communal memory. In the end, the Tempi cultural mobilization shows that democracy is a continual cultural activity rather than just a set of institutions. The ability of art to unite, grieve, and demand may be one of the last remaining languages of public consciousness during times of political disillusionment.

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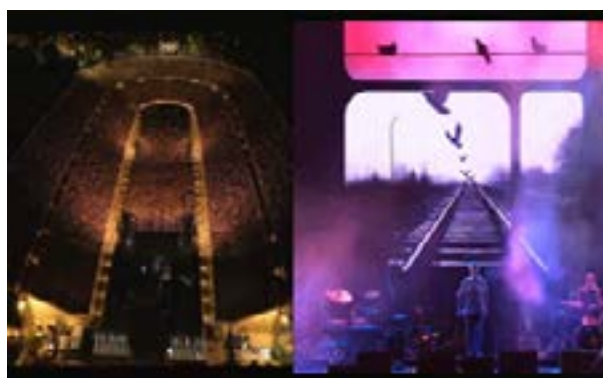
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Photo Gallery

- A total of 262 cities worldwide participated in the call for

justice on 28 February 2025.

- Syntagma Square, Athens, 28 February 2025: the largest public demonstration in modern Greek history.
- Panathenaic Stadium, Athens, 11 October 2024: Memorial concert.



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