

Photography and Cyprus: Time, Place and Identity

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Fictive Gazes and Interpretive Frames

Photography and Cyprus is a collection of ideological critiques of photographs in various public and private contexts of Cyprus by academics and photographers. This is an interesting and unique contribution to scholarship on Cyprus, as well as a useful case study in critically approaching ideologies revealed in images, in a country where distinctions between experienced and constructed realities are particularly blurry; it will be of considerable interest to readers in the fields of art, communication, history, politics, sociology and social anthropology.

The eleven essays are organised in four sections, each suggesting an ideological or aesthetic lens through which photographers, artists, governments or the general public have represented or viewed Cyprus, its peoples and its landscape: colonial and postcolonial, political, gendered, and artistic. The essays themselves, thoughtful, well written, and generally jargon-free, deal with the conditions of production and, more problematically, reception of images of Cyprus; and the editors' introduction suggests that since photography 'shapes how places are seen ... [and] influences subjectivity, understanding such processes can contribute to revealing how we came to be who we are' (p. 10). What is missing, although this level of self-reflectiveness is variously placed in brackets, masked, or staged as critical distance in some of the essays, is a metacritical look at what the essays do and do not say about the cryptic 'we' of the introduction that encompasses Cypriots, the essays' authors, and readers of the collection.

The first section ('The Colonial Gaze') opens with Hercules Papaioannou's reading of John Thomson's 1878 photographs and captions as romantic-mythological constructs of Cyprus viewed through a British/Western colonial and exploitative gaze, and as expressions of the photographer's personal commercial and artistic aspirations. This kind of analysis has its own merits, but the essay avoids a critical question: what reality was there in Cyprus that could be set against, as an alternative to Thomson's constructs, which might invalidate them? Nicos Philippou's piece broadens the argument through an

analysis of *National Geographic* travelogues on Cyprus from 1928 and 1952, arguing, for example, that the former 'spelled out what Thomson implied through his ambiguous gaze and parallel narratives: Cyprus is "Half-oriental"' (p. 28). The analysis focuses on the cultural ambivalence of the texts accompanying the photographs, their writers' constructions of 'types' rather than individual Cypriots, and their Rousseauistic production, often through artificially costumed and posed photographs, of images of a naive, beautiful and 'unspoiled' Cyprus. Yet paradoxically, as an alternative 'real' to these constructs, Philippou points to the island's urbanisation, the growth of transport technology, and the local population's view of infrastructure projects 'as signifiers of progress, modernization and Europeanization' (p. 36), as well as how Cypriots during this period enjoyed 'the adoption of modern identities, lifestyle and technology and never celebrations of tradition' (p. 36). Philippou does not register the irony, but it is implicit: on the one hand the postcolonial approach critiques and exposes a Western gaze that values 'tradition', however romanticised; on the other, the alternative, supposedly authentic Cypriot gaze is revealed as a rejection of the 'primitive' past in favour of celebrating 'modernity' and 'progress', understood as Europeanisation.

This exteriorisation of ideology is also characteristic in the section on 'The Political Gaze'. Taking its cue from Benedict Anderson's definition of nations as 'imagined communities', Iro Katsaridou's chapter on photography exhibitions during the 1950s–1980s argues that Greek reviewers interpreted images of Cyprus stereotypically as representing imagined aspects of Greekness shared with the 'motherland' that supported an ideology of a suffering, oppressed Greek Cypriot 'nation'. Katsaridou's analysis parallels Philippou's; however, here the purveyors of ideology are the Greek press and government, in the service of Greek political aspirations. Absent from Katsaridou's argument are the imagined communities themselves: Anderson does attribute the spread of national consciousness largely to the dissemination of print media, but *imagining* the nation is not limited to press and official discourses; it is something that happens 'in the minds of each [of the members of even the smallest nation]' (*Imagined Communities* [London: Verso, 1983], p. 49).

Yiannis Toumazis' essay on historical representations of Cyprus, in museums in Athens, Istanbul and Cyprus as well as local monuments, takes a step towards addressing this by looking at how the exhibits are designed to generate questions with emotional associations in the minds of viewers: 'Through focusing on the traumatic memory and the aestheticization of the notion of death, these spaces activate nationalist mechanisms' (p. 94). Toumazis' experiential approach to exhibits dedicated to 'national struggles' stops just short of taking the next turn, to the trope of transference which in trauma theory informs the viewer's response – in Dominick LaCapra's formulation, 'All history ... must more or less blindly encounter the problem of a transferential relation to the past whereby the

processes at work in the object of study acquire their displaced analogues in the historian's account' (*History and Criticism* [Cornell University Press, 1985], p. 11). What this means is that a critical essay, through its methodology, 'works through' the trauma associated with its subject matter; it enacts through its own gaze, however subtly, an allegory of the gaze it is critiquing – and this can be seen regardless of the 'distanced observer' stance adopted by several of the authors here, or Toumazis' studiously neutral voice ('I paid another visit to the Istanbul Military Museum on 18 August 2010' [p. 87]; 'In the context of the research, I came across other reproductions ...' [p. 92]).

At this point, the book's structural categories ('political', 'gendered', and 'art' gazes) begin to overlap. Jennifer Way reads Tracey Emin's films, photographs and texts as indicative of a hybrid and ambivalent approach to Cypriot identity, but struggles with the paradox of trying to maintain a biographical conceit of 'authentic' as opposed to fictive, constructed identity: on the one hand, for example, she argues that 'features of [the 1996 short film] *Emin & Emin, Cyprus* correspond to ... mainstays of Cypriot tourism's promotional material' (p. 208) and 'Emin omits signs of modernity and contemporaneity. In this respect she shares company with ... John Thomson' (p. 209); but on the other hand, she concludes by contriving to salvage the artist's 'authentic' self and sense of place: '... in regard to Turkey and Cyprus, Emin accessed if not processed material *that may have felt extremely authentic to her*' (p. 213; italics added).

Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert's study of representations of the 'Rock of Aphrodite' runs into a similar difficulty, and reconfigures the tenuous distinction between fictive and authentic identity as a separation between the public and the private: photographs 'produced *for* tourists ... have a public ... orientation' while those 'produced *by* tourists ... have a private orientation (p. 162) [... they] contain personal narratives and meanings and *are intended for private consumption, even if they appear to have global circulation* as in the case of online photographic albums [... they] *assume a life of their own which is independent of promotional imagery* when viewed, printed, shared, discussed and saved' (p. 163; italics added).

The issues of individual identity and authenticity follow a different trajectory in Stavros Karayanni's critique of 'constructed notions of gender embodiment and sexuality' in the works of Thomson and two Greek Cypriot photographers. Karayanni focuses on the system of 'auto-exoticism and ... self-possessed autoethnography' through which, in Mary Louise Pratt's terms, 'colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer's own terms' (p. 124). This 'gestural system' is re-enacted throughout the analysis, and particularly clearly in Karayanni's conclusion, where he speaks of 'the compelling need to reconcile the gap between the Cyprus of my childhood and of the present. [...] The Cyprus I remember is "oriental" while that of the present fiercely and defensively advocates its Western affiliation and Hellenic/European heritage'

(p. 139). Karayanni's personalised 'anxiety' is historiographical, and, in addition to critiquing gender issues, unravels two threads in the fabric of 'Cypriot' identity: first, it understands culture and identity – the Cypriot 'we' and 'Cypriotness' – as dynamic, unstable and evolving rather than static; and second, it recognises, without reducing, the textual nature of both memory and experience – the constantly shifting and 'complex transaction between art and truth' (p. 140).

These, I would suggest, are unacknowledged truisms of the movement of history: that *lived experiences* are transformed, through mental recording and distorting processes, into *memories* (stories and images that frame identity and perception), which in turn, when expressed verbally or visually, become *literature or art* – that is, texts open to ideological manipulation, to being imbued with or emptied of signification.

This overdetermination and voiding of significations in images is the focus of Elizabeth Hoak-Doering's essay, which, taking its cue from Paul Sant Cassia's work, examines versions of the 'photographic Pietà' – quasi-religious images of older women demonstrating with photographs of their historically distant, much younger, missing male relatives – in terms of their 'embedded distance': on the one hand, '[p]hotographs of such demonstrations transform the individual voice – the person – into an acoustic generalization and a visual icon (pp. 187–188) [...] the space of a political demonstration conflates personal losses into the cause of missing persons' (p. 189); on the other hand, in new contexts, such as exhumations and identifications of remains which reify the missing as the deceased, 'burials change the value of the portrait photograph: the iconic embodiment of life seems to fade as existential ambiguity diminishes' (pp. 183–184).

The three remaining essays locate their subjects within the framework of borders or thresholds. Haris Pellapaisiotis considers the symbolic implications of the physical space of the UN buffer zone in Cyprus and the curatorial logic of art projects during 2005–2013 focused on this area, which is characterised variously as 'porous', 'suspended' or 'liminal'. Pellapaisiotis offers only two rather conservative options for this threshold in the event of a solution in Cyprus – erasure or institutionalisation: '[s]hould parts of the buffer zone be preserved in the form of a museum of conflict [...] Or, should disagreeable signs be erased?' (p. 237). However, noting that Cyprus has 'no history in avant-garde art [...] the historical legacy of art in Cyprus stems from ... [an] incestuous relation with state institutions and the causes of state' (p. 229), he does pose the question: 'Is it not the task of the avant-garde in art to redefine tradition and to offer alternative tropes and paradigms for talking about place?' (p. 238).

Elena Stylianou's analysis of works by Haris Epaminonda and Christodoulos Panayiotou seems to offer one such trope, arguing that archives can enable a 'postmodern understanding of "cosmopolitanism" ... which blurs the traditional categories of the inside and the outside by accepting both as existing and valid' – yet in these artists' work, she

argues, 'it also fails to neutralize those narratives that are relevant to the artists' locale' (p. 241). Paradoxically, postmodern cosmopolitanism turns out to be, in the context of the 'contemporary art world,' a 'Eurocentric and highly gendered project that ... leaves little space for optimism' (p. 258), an 'illusory term' (p. 259); and art to contain 'the artists' own convictions, biases, tastes and desires that could never possibly stay immune to their *localness*.' Stylianou concludes by arguing that 'any sense of "cosmopolitanism" or "worldliness" has always been infused with a sense of individualism and locality, and any attempt to defy *localness* can be misleading if not dangerous' (pp. 261–262).

Finally, and in contrast, Alev Adil's 'autoethnography' begins by exploring 'the relationship between memory, photography and identity in the context of *my Turkish Cypriot cultural identity* and photographic practice' (p. 98; italics added), but this identity soon migrates to the threshold – 'Mine is a border identity' (p. 100) – where it effaces itself: 'My Cypriot heritage is an unreadable palimpsest written in the margins and blank spaces of colonial identity' (p. 101); '[t]he border is the terrain where mutually incompatible competing myths become an illegible palimpsest, a failed space of Cypriot identity' (p. 115). Adil's resolution of identity is self-mythologisation, expressed as self-recognition – of 'oneself as one's own cultural intermediary' (p. 115); that the sense of the local, of 'authentic' personal emotions and connections comes, in Sara Ahmed's phrase, 'from without, the thickness of sociality itself' (p. 116); and that from this perspective of the *stranger*, identity is based on 'a labyrinth of psychic and social borders' – on a mythopoietic *jouissance* of fragmentation: 'I am Ariadne, I am the maze, I am the Minotaur. The Dead Zone is the very heart of my homeland' (p. 117).

In short, together with some sharp analyses of photographic representation, this collection reveals the struggle of its writers to define authenticity; and also, given the phthisic nature of Cypriot identity, the Sisyphean problem of separating ideologies from perceived 'realities', of producing a sense of self and place that might be socially transformative in Cyprus. If one could conceive (of) an identity that merged the local and the cosmopolitan, accounted for and refused to succumb to the *I-will-not-forget*s of both sides of the border, resisted simultaneously the erasure and institutionalisation of the threshold and at the same time both contained and released its space of forgetting, that might, at some point, be Cypriot.

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