

BOOK REVIEW

Camera Graeca: Photographs, Narratives, Materialities

edited by

**Philip Carabott, Yannis Hamilakis and Eleni
Papargyriou**

**Centre for Hellenic Studies, King's College
London,**

Farnham: Ashgate, 2015

Maria Oikonomou

Department of Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, University of Vienna

Niklas Danninger

Department of Comparative Literature, University of Vienna

"A country founded in 1830, modern Greece grew hand in hand with photographic modernity" (p. 3). This very first sentence of the introduction to *Camera Graeca: Photographs, Narratives, Materialities* indicates, almost programmatically, the scope and aim of the volume that assembles the papers from a conference held in 2011 at the Centre for Hellenic Studies at King's College. The opening phrase defines the time and place at which both the new medium and the new state, now beginning the process of nation-building at the margins of Europe, reflect and inform each other. Beyond that establishment of a parallel development and rapport between imaging technique and political founding act, the book explicitly begins with a statement of "origins." It is from this point onward that the volume unfolds its meticulous historical account. It identifies the *first* person who photographed the Acropolis in October 1839 (the Canadian Pierre-Gustave Joly de Lotbinière); it dates previously undated images; it determines *termini post* and *ante quem* of certain photographic practices (as in the case of Pascal Sébah), and it lists the conceptual and aesthetic features of "generations" (the "New Greek photography of the 1980s"). In doing so, the volume remains indebted to, or—as Walter Benjamin would have it—"haunted" by history. Almost everywhere one finds historical landmarks, dates and turning points, major

events or caesurae that structure the general narrative of a “photography in and of Greece” as well as of “Greek photography,” that is to say, the country as “a material reality and as virtual locus” and also the “auteurs of photographic discourses” (p. 3).

And while the historian’s gaze prevails, shedding ever more light on all those photographic plates and exposing all the material that has been waiting for years to leave the obscurity of its academic darkroom, the volume seems scarcely to allow for shadows, haze or darkness. If Benjamin (1931/1999: 507) claims that the beginnings of the medium and every photographic image are shrouded in fog—a fog that inhibits both knowledge and vision—*Camera Graeca* knows nothing of this fog. It uses fast lenses and leaves nothing in the gloom. In fact, one might say that the theory of photography is constantly plagued by the unclear and the absent: for Roland Barthes (1981), it is precisely the alleged documentary vision of the photograph (merging reality and past) that is responsible for its complex and paradox temporality; Susan Sontag (1973) states that no photograph will ever hold meaning without the symbolic realm of language, without a caption that saves it from falling back into semantic nothingness; and Jacques Derrida (2010) sees the “presence” of the picture undercut by the impossibility of fixing the photographic moment in time—somewhere between the first gaze and the last print—and connects the image to an absolute deferral and unknown which is death. The various articles of this book may well touch upon all these aspects of fogginess, untimeliness, aphasia, non-presence, spectrality, interruption or suspension. However, since it largely renders the photograph an object of historical transparency, it seems at times to possess a blind spot—which, paradoxically, is exactly that peculiar absence, the blind spot of photography itself.

Having said that, the numerous texts brought together in Carabott, Hamilakis, and Papargyriou’s book give rich and manifold insights into the interactions of the photographic medium and the cultural and political constitution of Greece. They form a frame through which we can rethink the close entanglement of photography with colonial and national imaginings. Indeed, many of the texts seem, directly or indirectly, to reflect on Adorno’s (1992) question about the relation of art and politics: when politics uses photography to exhibit and manipulate bodies and faces, does this make politics a politics of the technical reproduction of images, or a politics of art? The volume’s correlation of technical image and political imagination may sometimes even come close to what Avital Ronell (1989) or Eduardo Cadava (1997: XXIII) have claimed, namely that politics and history can no longer be considered prior to technology. On the contrary: “Politics and history are now to be understood as secondary, derivative forms of technical media” (ibid: XXIII). In other words, there is no event that is not brought to us, or rather, that is not “born” in the explosion of a flashbulb, that is not produced, circulated and then recirculated through the apparatus. While Yannis Hamilakis defines the

“photographic field” as the widest possible range of technologies, apparatuses, processes, agents, aesthetics and politics—“the camera, the photographer, chemicals and materials, the after-image, the photographed person, object, thing or landscape, light, the field of vision in all its synaesthetic and multi-sensorial dimensions, and the emotive, mnemonic and political effects that photographic acts, events and outcomes generate” (p. 8)—the book certainly places the medial production of history at its centre.

The volume is divided into four parts. The first, “Imag(in)ing the Nation,” focuses on photographic images of Modern Greece that confirm the western gaze of philhellenism, cultural imperialism and middle-class tourist imagination. As the respective chapters demonstrate, such representations show that what is called “national identity” is not only tied to the imaginary discourses of the territorial nation-state, but also inseparable from technical iconicity. Whether the 19th century depicts Greece as “the eternal Arcadia and a seemingly uninhabited land of great monuments and ancient stones” (Alexandra Moschovi, p. 55); whether it is staged as a modern European country that rapidly develops urban and infrastructure projects (Heather E. Grossman); whether the whole nation is mediated metonymically through images of the Acropolis, photographed from all possible angles and in every light until every stone, every piece of graffiti, the pediment or freeze have been subjected to the camera’s eye (Frederick N. Bohrer)—all these cases turn Greece into a primarily photographic object. They document, among other things, how concepts of nation and space are not given, but endlessly changeable, how identity is a matter of fabrication, something that is negotiated as it belongs to many possible pasts and can open up into various futures.

Part two, “Photographic Narratives, Alternative Histories”, deals with “a multi-sensorial, tactile and mostly kinaesthetic visuality” (p. 14), exemplified, inter alia, in an analysis of an almost forgotten 19th-century variant of photography, stereoscopy. By means of a stereoscope (viewing apparatus) a slightly different image is presented to each eye, and this tricks the brain into perceiving the image as having three-dimensional depth. The viewing apparatus also serves to block out the viewer’s surroundings and this, together with the ‘more realistic’ conception of space that stereoscopy offers, strengthens his/her sensation of re-experiencing the situation in which the photograph was taken. Consideration of these distinguishing attributes, which set stereoscopy apart from conventional photography, contribute to the examination of the image and the discourse surrounding it (Kostas Ioannidis and Eleni Mouzakiti). In its spatial qualities, stereoscopy exhibits striking similarities to modern 3-D technologies and, on that account, might arguably, be considered a “proto-3D environment” (p. 14)

Part three, “Photographic Matter-Realities: Photography as Propaganda”, examines the use of photographic narratives for propagandistic means as, for instance, in the works of Elli Sougioultzoglou-Seraidari, also known as Nelly’s (Katerina

Zacharia). The account reveals the photographer's work as the product of an ideological agenda that can be used and misused for specific purposes. Although there is no comprehensive analysis of Nelly's photographs in the article, the mostly biographical report on Nelly's points to the photographer's agency and responsibility and exposes the manipulation occurring in the photographic event and its constant re-evaluation. When photographs are considered thus, in their historical context, the ideological motivation of their photographers becomes quite apparent. In the case of Greece, it demonstrates how the Metaxas dictatorship tried to establish a distinctive form of Greekness. How this may be relevant to the construction and re-construction of historical events then becomes evident through an examination of the photographic material at the Museum of the Battle of Sarandaporo (Eleni Kouki). The—common—perception of photography as an objective means of documentation is seriously challenged by the seemingly random display of photographs, which often have no actual connection to the Battle of Sarandaporo. The photographic collection thus manipulates historical facts in order to convey a political message. Although only lightly touched upon, a comparison with the depiction of battles in paintings before the advent of photography underscores the need to further examine the relationship between painting and photography so as to better understand how visual perceptions have changed along with the technological progress of our times. Although part three provides valuable insights into the propagandistic use of photography, it focuses mostly on historical aspects, and therefore sometimes neglects detailed analyses of photographs and a thorough theoretical discussion of the photographic medium.

Part four, "Photographic Ethnographies: The Dispersal of Photographic Objects" seems enlightening and especially innovative in its methodology, as it affords the photographic subjects a voice. With a focus on Sfakia, Crete, for instance, it testifies to the colonial set-up of the relationship between the urban photographer and the local Sfakians photographed (Konstantinos Kalantzis). One comes to understand how the photographed subjects negotiate their own photographic representations in a process whereby the oft-photographed Sfakians are shown portraits of themselves (and their relatives). Thereby, the "cyclical synergy" (p. 326) involved in photography, in which photographer and photographed engage in a continuous active relation with one another, becomes evident. The perception of a picture is mediated through a practice which is socially anchored, influenced by the photographer's aesthetic frame, its impact on the photographed and vice versa. However, the Sfakians' own interpretations of the photographs, based on their personal knowledge of the photographed, often contradict the aesthetic or official narrative. Whilst Nelly's work, for example, may well manifest the photographer's intentions, such a narrative can be appropriated to serve different ends. Nelly's staging of Cretan uniqueness as a way to propagate her nationalistic mo-

tifs is exploited by the villagers of Sfakia in order to foster a sense of their own uniqueness as Sfakians vis-à-vis other Cretans.

How photographs may define identity is also evinced in the depiction of migration and its mediation in photographs among Albanian and Bulgarian immigrants in Greece (Penelope Papailias). Taking pictures, compiling a photo-album and sending it home are performative acts, through which migrants mediate their experiences and individually form their own photographic projections, which they communicate to their families and friends in their home countries. In this process, the multiple identifications and the migrants' feeling of belonging or their desire for the absent are revealed in their personal photographic life narratives.

Camera Graeca is a rich and multifaceted book. It offers clear insights into various fields of research, points to the many features of photography and highlights the relevance of photographic narratives for the political formation of Greece. Although the volume does hardly provide in-depth analyses or theoretical explorations of the medium (and although the book did not have the chance to also address more topical issues like the so-called 'refugee crisis' unfolding across Greece) it nonetheless opens up the ground for a discussion of Greek 'image politics' and raises many questions for future research. By pointing to the possibility of a sensorial and material history, by discussing our general notions of 'reality' and its representation, by proposing a certain agency of the image-object itself and partly reconfiguring dualities such as event-depiction, self-other, or concrete-imaginary, the volume challenges many ideas concerning the relation between gaze and world. Above all, it shows how photography contributes to the sphere of human awareness, action, and politics. It is not only for this reason that *Camera Graeca* invites us to rethink our ordinary ways of looking at a photograph.

REFERENCES

- Adorno, T. (1992), 'Commitment', in R. Tiedemann (ed.), *Notes to Literature 11*, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 76-94.
- Barthes, R. (1981), *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Benjamin, W. (1931/1999), 'Little History of Photography', in M. W. Jennings et. al (eds), *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings 2 (1927-1934)*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, pp. 507-530
- Derrida, J. (2010), *Athens, Still Remains: The Photographs of Jean-François Bonhomme*, New York: Fordham University Press.
- Sontag, S. (1973), *On Photography*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Ronell, A. (1989), *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Cadava E. (1997), *Words of Light. Theses on the Photography of History*, Princeton:
Princeton University Press