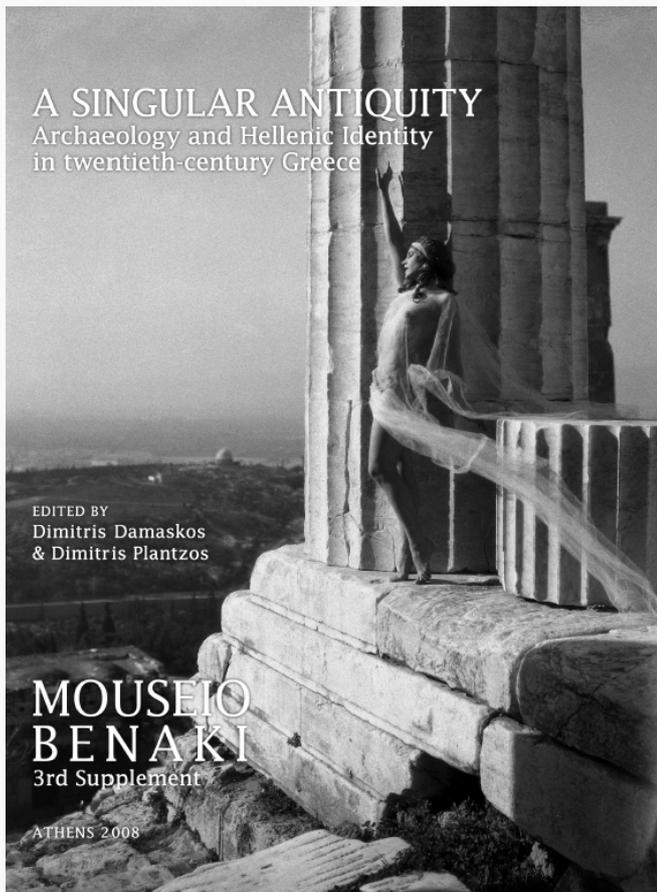


## Μουσείο Μπενάκη

A Singular Antiquity: Archaeology and Hellenic Identity in Twentieth-Century Greece



**The uses of Antiquity in photographs by Nelly: imported modernism and home-grown ancestor worship in inter-war Greece**

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### Βιβλιογραφική αναφορά:

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## The uses of Antiquity in photographs by Nelly: imported modernism and home-grown ancestor worship in inter-war Greece

‘**THE CAMERA RECORD** justifies. A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what’s in the picture.’

This is what Susan Sontag concluded in her influential essay ‘On Photography’.<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes came to the same conclusion in *Camera lucida*: ‘the photograph’s essence is to ratify what it represents’.<sup>2</sup> Something captured on film can subsequently be offered as evidence of innocence or guilt, put at the disposal of the authorities or go to make up a family chronology and personal mementoes.

Thanks to the multitude of ways in which it can work or be used, it was impossible for photography to avoid becoming mixed up with wider cultural, artistic and socio-political phenomena. This being the case and given the questions posed by this volume, one might consider to what extent photography has played a role in shaping Hellenism or creating the conditions required to fan the flames of patriotic sentiment. It is worth noting that Sontag recognizes the value of the photograph as a record or partial record useful to certain professional groups including ‘spies, meteorologists, coroners, archaeologists’.<sup>3</sup> This is not surprising, given that, from the moment it became widely available, photography has been an indispensable tool in archaeological research. What is interesting in this case is, of course, those photographs which transcend their basic function as records of evidence and offer themselves up to more complex interpretation.

And perhaps the example which most readily springs

to mind in this context comes from the artistic career of one of the most important figures in Greek photography, Elli Souyioultzoglou-Seraïdari, known as Nelly.<sup>4</sup> Born in Aidini in Asia Minor in 1899 of wealthy parents, Nelly went to Dresden in 1920 initially to study art and later photography with two of the greatest photographers of the age, Hugo Erfurth<sup>5</sup> and Franz Fiedler. In 1924 she returned to Greece and opened a photographic studio in Athens, on Ermou Street. The years between 1924 and 1939, the year she went to New York for the International Expo and stayed for a quarter of a century, are justly considered the most interesting in her artistic career. Part of her work from those years forms a very particular category in her multifaceted career. I am referring to the famous photographs of naked and semi-naked dancers and athletes taken at archaeological sites and the collages with subjects from antiquity, Byzantium and modern Greece, to which I shall return. First, let us take a brief look at another thematic unit in her work.

In those years Nelly was engaged in photographing antiquities, architecture and sculpture, on behalf of the Greek Archaeological Service. In the same period the German photographer Walter Hege, who had also studied with Hugo Erfurth, was recording the most important ancient monuments on behalf of the German Archaeological Institute, following to some extent a parallel artistic career for some years.<sup>6</sup>

But to return to Nelly’s photographs: individual works of sculpture are placed against a black background and lit evocatively, in an intensely theatrical fashion, in order to highlight the details. The photographing of a fragment of



Fig. 1. Hermes from Olympia.

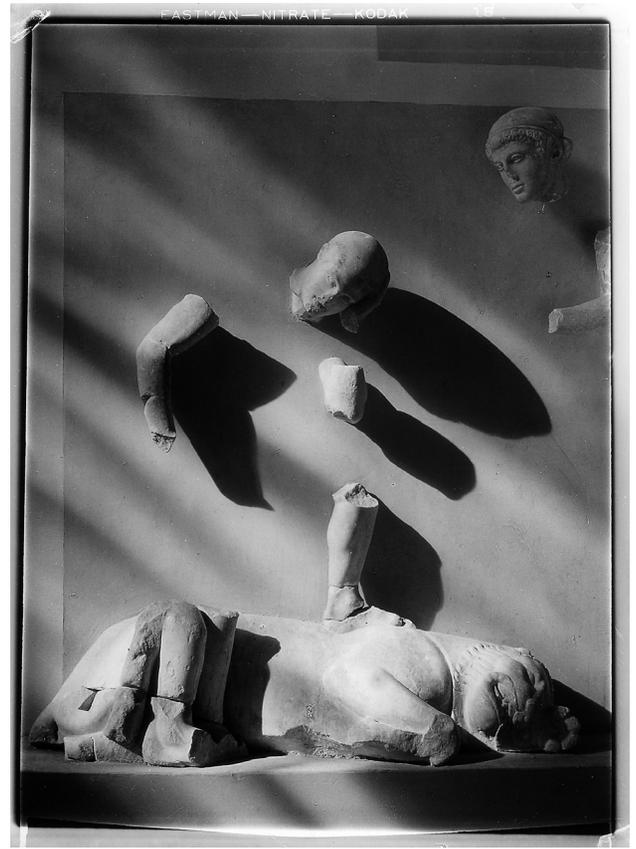
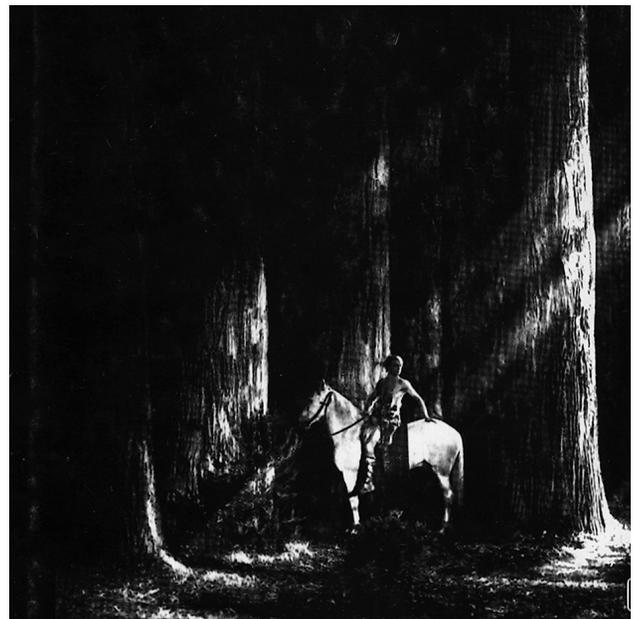


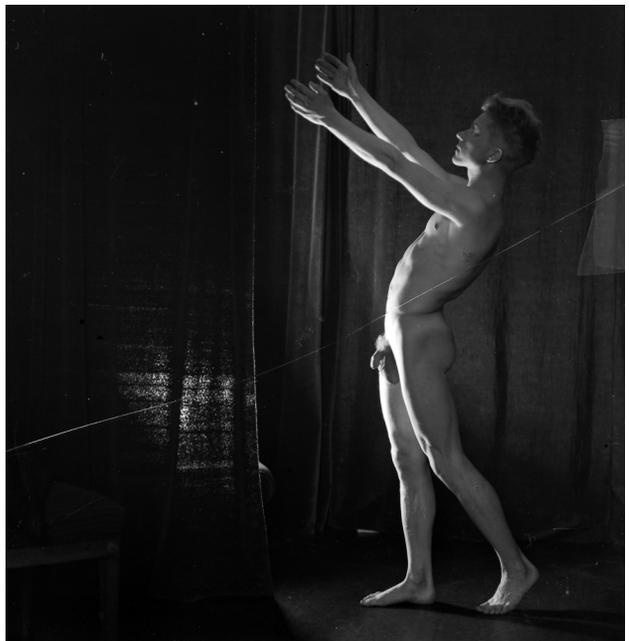
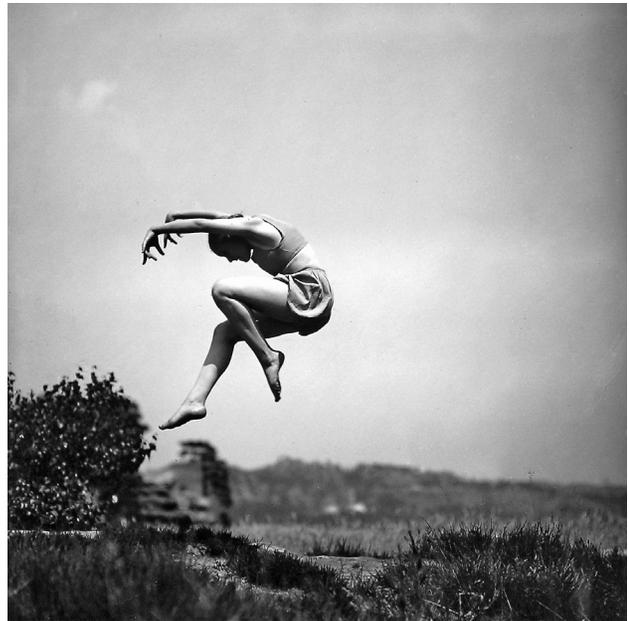
Fig. 2. A metope from the temple of Zeus at Olympia representing Herakles, Athena and the Nemean lion.

a funerary stele in the National Archaeological Museum ends up as a play on light and shade in the drapery folds,<sup>7</sup> the curly locks carved on the Apollo from Olympia acquire mass and plasticity,<sup>8</sup> while the Hermes from Olympia conversing with the child Dionysos, emerges from the darkness in a blaze of light (fig. 1).<sup>9</sup> It may be worth spending a little longer on the metope of Herakles killing the Nemean lion from the Temple of Zeus at Olympia (fig. 2).<sup>10</sup>

The fragmentary figures in relief against the ground of the metope, Herakles, Athena and the lion, are lit in such a way as to create a carefully constructed composition of deep shadows in a parallel arrangement, dominating the image. Multiple axes are created: the dead lion marks the horizontal axis, Herakles' head and his leg the vertical in the centre of the panel; and there are four transverse lines, one going through the figure of Athena to Herakles' left hand and three others, at different angles, which are defined by parallel shadows.

Fig. 3. Still from the film *Die Nibelungen* by Fritz Lang (1924).

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Figs 4-7. Nelly's photos from her study years in Dresden (1923-24).

Herakles and Athena are the principals in a silent drama; the mutilated Herakles communicates to us the strain of the feat, intended to transfigure the hero into a demi-god. The metope conveys the dramatic character of the myth, the carrying out of an obligation in exchange for immortality. The expressive nature of the picture suggests the dramatic tension inherent in the labour, a tension which is un-

derpinned by the geometrically constructed picture plane and a similarly interpretative approach to the depiction.

This material betrays the various influences on the photographer's work and places her squarely in the *Zeitgeist* of her age. Indeed, given that we are talking about the early phase of her career, immediately after the completion of her studies, it is easy to recognize the influence on her of

contemporary artistic trends in the country where she had studied as well as of the teachers who had taught her. And it was not only the avant-garde movements in photography but also in other related pictorial arts. One could, for example, explore the influence of German cinema on her photographs. One might trace this shot back to the expressionistic works of Friedrich Murnau or Fritz Lang, film directors who were displaying their considerable talents in the early twenties. A typical example is the shot from Lang's 1924 film *Die Nibelungen* (fig. 3) in which a horseman emerges into a clearing in a forest. The picture is lit with diagonal bands of light which, together with the tall trees which provide the verticals, are the dominant feature of the shot. The structure is similar to that of Nelly's photographs.

But it was not only her style which was affected by the pervasive artistic climate of the inter-war period in Germany, but also her subject matter. Nelly had already begun photographing male and female nudes both in the open air and in the studio in her Dresden years, using dancers from the Mary Wigman School, which was famous at the time for its expressive approach to dance (figs 4-7). This fact has not been sufficiently emphasized in interpreting the photographs which she went on to take in Greece by previous students of her work.

Modernism set the pace in inter-war Europe, both for art and life. 'Healthy body culture' was one of the emblems of the new age.<sup>11</sup> According to this movement, the young people who had gone through the whirlwind of World War I emerged into the new age with the principal aim of looking after their body and their lifestyle. Modernist architects placed special weight on spaces associated with personal hygiene and on building sanatoriums for treating tuberculosis, creating a socio-architectural model better adapted to the requirements of modern man. One of these requirements was exercising the body, individually or in groups in swimming pools, gymnasia or in the open air. The need for closer physical contact with the outdoors, clean air and sunshine, factors which contributed to achieving and maintaining good health, led to a break with social convention as regards dress. Germany was in the vanguard of this movement. Even a few years before the outbreak of World War I, and thanks to the strong classical tradition inherited from J. J. Winckelmann,<sup>12</sup> displaying the healthy naked body was acclaimed with great enthusiasm. Both in Germany and

other central European countries people began pouring out *en masse* into lakes and meadows, throwing off their clothes in order to enjoy the great outdoors, to exercise and sunbathe. Naturist groups published magazines for enthusiasts with great success. As aids to keeping in good physical condition the naked body, gymnastics and even dance were part of the agenda of the modern citizen, who did not consider complete nakedness indecent.

This was the period in which Nelly came of age as an artist. In photographing naked people in the countryside around Dresden or in the studio, she was simply adapting to the spirit of the age and familiarizing herself with the naked body. This was a freedom which she would have been less likely to acquire had she remained in her homeland, instead of going to Germany to study.

For Nelly photographing the naked dancers Mona Paiva (fig. 8) and Nikolska<sup>13</sup> as well as half-naked athletes on the Acropolis (fig. 9) was a natural progression from her work in Dresden. She herself implies as much in her autobiography. Writing of Mona Paiva, prima ballerina at the Opera Comique, she says:

'I was extremely enthusiastic about her dancing, her figure and her grace [...] I asked her [...] to come to the studio to pose for me for some portrait photographs and dance shots [...] the limited space of my workshop was ill adapted to movement on a grand scale. [...] Then it occurred to me that, if I were to photograph her on the Acropolis, between the columns of the Parthenon, I would not only have plenty of space but also a magnificent backdrop.'<sup>14</sup>

She goes on to describe how she got the permit for the photo-shoot:

'They let us have the custodian's hut for the artiste's changing room. When she disrobed and I saw her naked body, I was stunned. The sun's rays were falling across her body, her skin was rosy and transparent, and she looked just like one of those Saxon bibelots.'<sup>15</sup>

Nelly's experiences from her earlier shoots are made clear in the second quote. The dancer's naked body reminds her of a 'Saxon bibelot', that is the sort of trinket which she would have seen *ad nauseam* in the home town of the famous Meissen china. As for the antiquities, given that her studio was too small, they simply acted as a backdrop,

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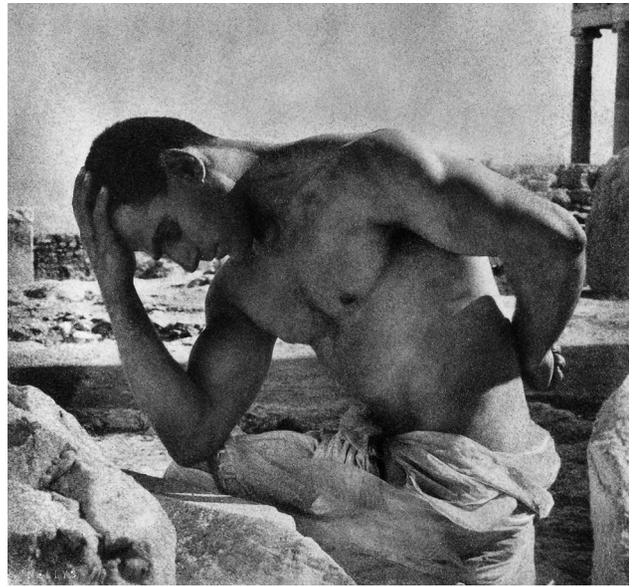


Fig. 8. Mona Paiva in the Parthenon (1927).

Fig. 9. Dimitris Karabatis, an athlete of the twenties, photographed on the Acropolis.



Figs 10-11. The Acropolis as backdrop in Greek pop culture: Zoi Laskari and the Broyer sisters, three sex symbols from musical films of the sixties.

having no close connection to the main object of the photograph, the dancer.

So, seen in this light, one could say that Nelly's nudes are examples of imported, 'German-bred' Modernism as well as representing a new departure in terms of subject matter in the history of Greek photography. However, there is one distinctive difference between the nudes in the Saxon countryside and the dancers on the Acropolis. The former had an objective, in that they were part of a modernist manifesto. To return to Sontag, the nude has

a very specific *raison d'être*: it is in the picture in order to justify, to attest to man's liberation from the convention of wearing clothes.<sup>16</sup> The dancers on the Acropolis, by contrast, are simply beautiful photographs; the aesthetic of the well balanced picture outweighs what may be the corresponding message due to the lack of semantic importance given to the nude in inter-war Greece. The background loses its particular significance, the Acropolis is being used in the conventional way: as a symbol of ageless Hellas, somewhere everyone must visit to acquire the

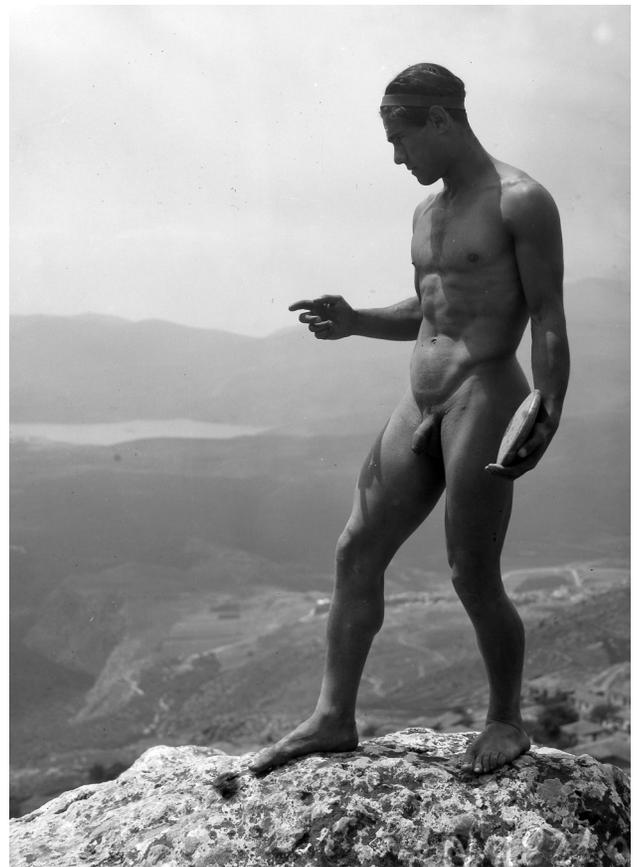
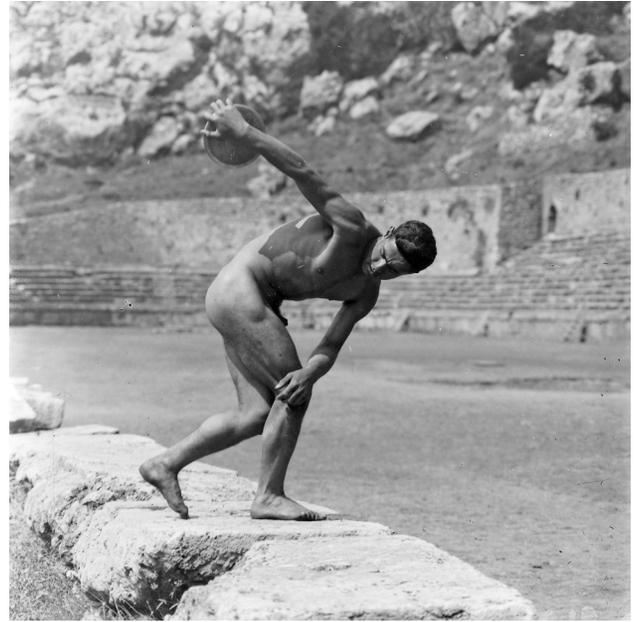


Fig. 12. The 1930 Delphic Games photographed by Nelly.  
Fig. 13. A Greek athlete in the pose of the Doryphoros by the 5th c. BC sculptor Polykleitos.

Fig. 14. A Greek athlete in the pose of the Discus-thrower by the 5th c. BC sculptor Myron.

Fig. 15. A Greek athlete in the pose of the Discus-thrower by the 4th c. BC sculptor Naukydes.

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intuitive experience of participation and of familiarity with the classical monument.<sup>17</sup> There would be similar images in the future, with artists from both high art and popular culture using the Acropolis as the most appropriate stage setting (figs 10-11).

The reactions of the Greek public are also interesting, given that Nelly's modernist gaze did not meet with a very favourable reception in the conservative and introverted climate of Athenian society. Her only supporter was Pavlos Nirvanas. Among other things he wrote in the newspaper *Estia* in 1929: 'I protest in the name of the Olympian deities, who, as is well known, not only walked in the open air unclothed, both male and female, but were worshipped stark naked in their temples'.<sup>18</sup> His 'protest' seems naive nowadays. Nirvanas' view of an antiquity in which the gods went around naked may not stand up to further inspection, but it is perhaps indicative of the misunderstandings which can arise in relation to antiquity and especially the way in which the latter inhabits the writer's imagination.

Nelly's photographing of nudes was to continue. In 1920 she undertook to cover the Delphic Festivals (fig. 12). Among the resulting photographs were pictures of naked athletes in the poses of well known ancient statues from the classical period, such as the Doryphoros ('Spear-bearer') by Polykleitos from the mid fifth century BC (fig. 13),<sup>19</sup> the Diskobolos ('Discus-thrower') by Myron from the mid fifth century BC (fig. 14),<sup>20</sup> or the Discus-thrower by the sculptor Naukydes from the first half of the fourth century BC (fig. 15).<sup>21</sup>

The photographing of completely naked athletes at the Delphic Festivals began a new chapter in Nelly's relationship with antiquity. First of all, we can once again make out the project's Germanic roots, given that naked men were being depicted in the poses of ancient statuary in the German magazine *Schönheit* ('Beauty') from as early as the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>22</sup>

Apart from this, however, there is no doubt that Nelly had a romantic attachment to the ancient monuments, which made her take to photographing naked athletes in the poses of ancient statues. But the romantic ancestor worship, which can be seen in the photographing of the dancers on the Acropolis (albeit used as a simple backdrop), took on a different form in the Delphic photographs, one more directly linked with the ideological and political climate of the thirties.

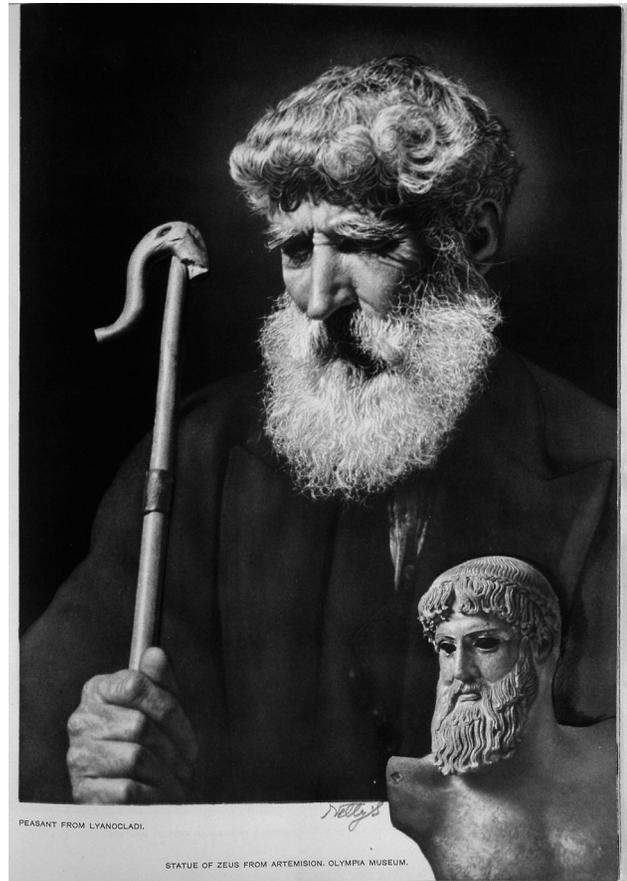


Fig. 16. The Artemision Zeus next to an old shepherd, as a proof of the continuity of the Greek race from antiquity to modern times.

In her autobiography Nelly mentions meeting a farmer on an outing to Loutra Ipatis, on the Greek mainland, and describes what a great impression his appearance made on her, comparing him with an Olympian god. She writes: 'This man gave me the idea of making comparisons, and later I extended my thinking to other comparisons'.<sup>23</sup> What does she mean by these 'comparisons'? Probably Nelly, inspired by love of her homeland's past, was attempting – for the most part by means of photographing people and ancient Greek statues – to stress the modern Greeks' line of descent from the ancients. Thus she puts the farmer from the fieldtrip to the countryside and the bronze head of Zeus from Artemision side by side (fig. 16). A superficial similarity based on certain facial features such as the straight nose, the beard and hair style, are sufficient evidence for a photograph to demonstrate that

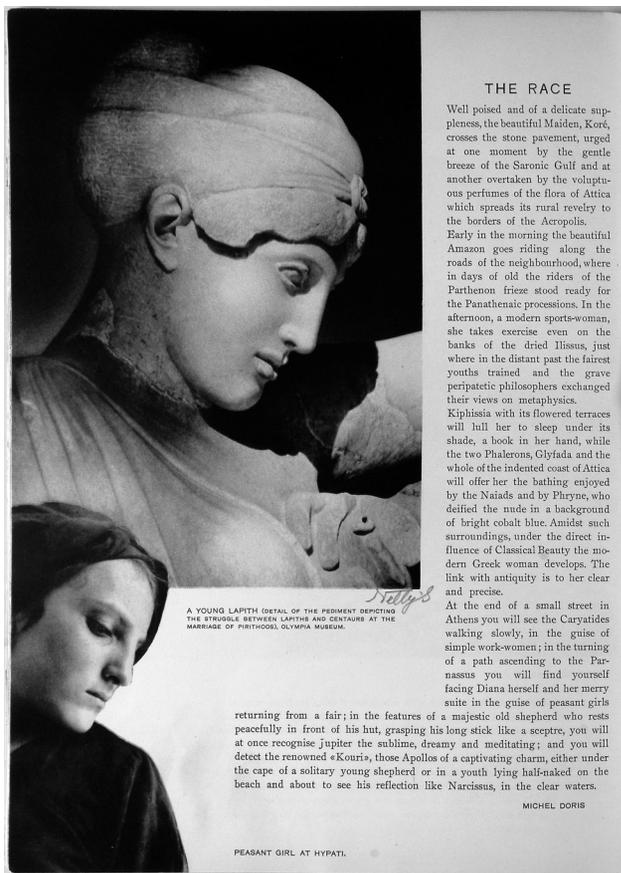


Fig. 17. The Minoan 'Parisienne' and a young woman face to face.

Fig. 18. Page from the magazine *Hellas* (1937).

modern Greeks are the direct descendants of the ancient Greeks, apparently denying any intermingling with other ethnic groups. She does the same thing with photographs of a young woman and the Minoan 'Parisienne' (fig. 17) and a young herdsman and the Agias from Delphi by Lysippos.<sup>24</sup> The Benaki Museum's Photographic Archives have the original prints of these photographs which have been stuck onto boards in pairs by Nelly herself, in order to make the facial similarities obvious.

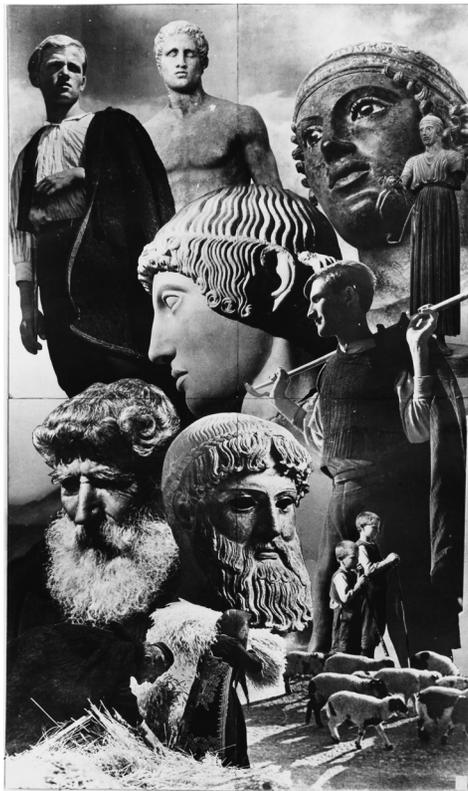
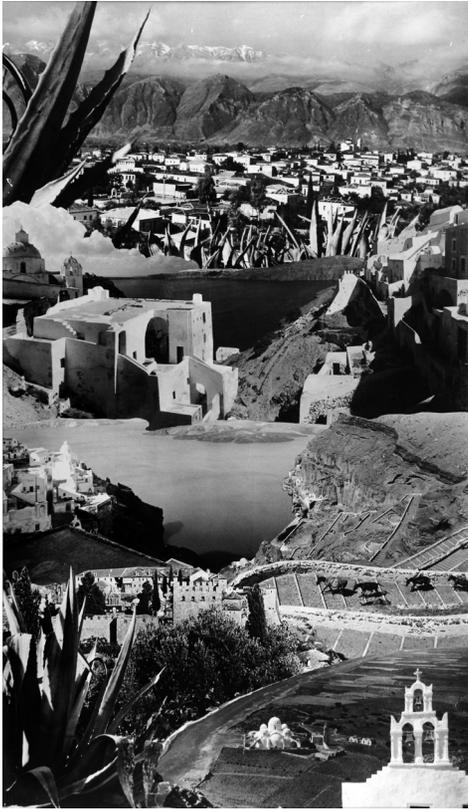
Nowadays one can only wonder at the naivety with which Nelly attempted to do her bit towards the 'Holy Grail' of demonstrating the continuity in Greek civilization. It is not just that her comparisons do not stand up to criticism, nor simply that she ignores basic principles of Greek art, making indiscriminate comparisons between Minoan art, ancient Greek sculpture in the Severe style or from the late Classical period and contemporary figures, as if the artists of those early periods had intended to depict specific facial characteristics in their work. In her efforts in this respect Nelly was embracing the ideology concerning the purity of the Greek race through the centuries, ideas which were circulating widely in inter-war Europe in regard to other peoples as well.

Her parallels fell on fertile ground in the Ministry for Press and Tourism of the Metaxas government, which was under the directorship of Theologos Nikoloudis. It reprinted some of the photographs in a periodical, published in three languages and aimed at the tourist industry, called *Greece*. One 1937 issue contained a section entitled 'The Race' illustrated with her photographs. At one point the author of this text writes: 'The modern Greek woman develops in just such an environment, under the direct influence of classical beauty. The bond with antiquity is evident and exact' (fig. 18).

Consequently Greek women of the inter-war years are the direct descendants of the ancient Greeks, with no inter-breeding, as indeed is demonstrated by the photographs which, in Barthes' words, ratify what they represent. According to Barthes: 'The past is as certain as the present'.<sup>25</sup> Thus, as soon as her photographs demonstrate the similarity between a Minoan wall-painting and a smiling girl with the same profile, then the image is no longer there just to back up the text it illustrates, but to monumentalize its own content and 'ratify' it, denying the reader any shadow of doubt.

Nelly's involvement in the propaganda machinery of

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Figs 19-22. The four collages which were decorating the Greek Pavillion at the New York International Expo of 1939.



Fig. 23. The Archaic pedimental figure ('Blue-beard') from the Acropolis and some Cretan farmers.

Fig. 24. The 'Harvest vase' (detail) and smiling farmers.

Fig. 25. Greek folk dances and a Minoan terracotta group depicting a ritual dance.

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the Metaxas regime did not stop there, but found its consummation in the New York International Expo of 1939, when she agreed to decorate the Greek pavilion with her photographs and four collages. The subject matter of these compositions, apart from the paired comparisons, consisted of images referring to Byzantine history (the Meteora monasteries), Greek landscapes and scenes from rural life.<sup>26</sup>

Looking at the four collages we cannot help but notice certain details which add up to a very polished and well designed ideological programme. The way in which the continuity of Hellenism is extolled, combined with the promotion, both in Greece and abroad, of the fundamentals of Metaxas's propaganda bring to mind the words of a great theoretician of nationalism, Ernest Gellner: 'In a nationalist age, societies worship themselves brazenly and openly, spurning the camouflage'.<sup>27</sup>

The first collage is made up for the most part of scenes from the Cyclades (fig. 19). It sings the praises of the Greek landscape and the light from which the so-called 'Greek miracle' emerged. The second one shows ancient architecture (fig. 20). The third is composed of the paired comparisons, but with the addition of scenes of harvest and of young peasant children with a herd of animals (fig. 21). This detail, together with another from the fourth collage, is indicative of the organized ideology of the Metaxas regime, as we shall see below. The fourth collage presents scenes from Meteora and the monastic life. In the centre of the composition a girl, wearing local traditional dress, is lighting a candle in church (fig. 22), a clear reference to the religious sensibility of the Greeks.

The subjects of these collages coincide completely with the regime's concerns. They do not just tell of the continuity of Hellenism but extol the virtues of rural life, which was promoted in every possible way by Metaxas, in order to 'promote himself as the "national leader" who embraces every section of society'.<sup>28</sup> To what extent these collages were thought up by Nelly herself or made at Nikoloudis' suggestion, we cannot tell; her autobiography at least gives no indication.

Theoreticians of nationalism stress the way it uses cultural capital, inventing traditions and restoring primitive purities in the name of a supposed folk culture and the concurrent discovering of a high culture with links to local traditions. This is what has been described as a nation's 'self-worship', with songs and dances from some

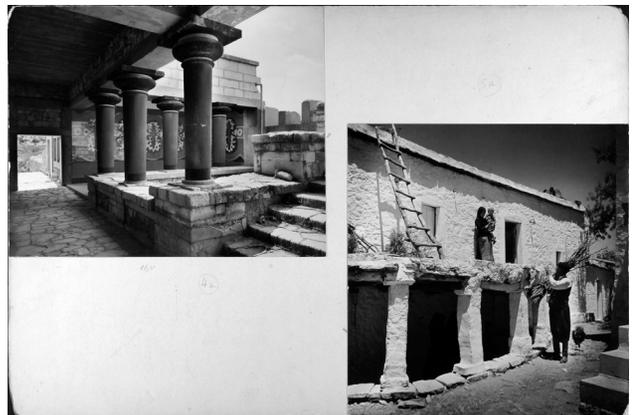


Fig. 26. Red-figure vase with a dionysiac scene and vine-harvest.

Fig. 27. Youths with water jars from the Parthenon frieze and peasants carrying jars on their shoulders.

Fig. 28. According to Nelly, Cretan folk architecture came from Minoan palaces.

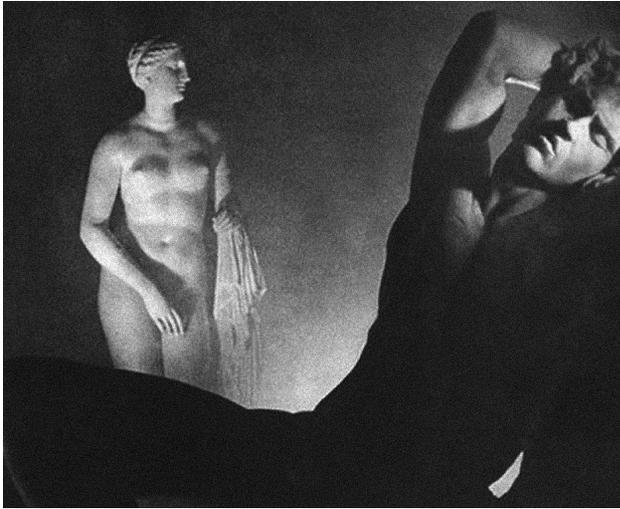


Fig. 29. Venus de Milo and the Barberini Faun from Leni Riefenstahl's film *Olympia* (1937) (source: private collection).

traditional culture 'which it fondly believes itself to be perpetuating, defending, and reaffirming'.<sup>29</sup>

These observations are confirmed by the ambivalent role of folklore studies in Greece from the time of Spyridon Zambelios onwards.<sup>30</sup> This is not the place to expand at any length on this issue on which so much has already been written, just as it is not within my remit to examine once again the involvement of so many intellectuals, mainly from the generation of the thirties, with the Metaxas regime. What might be said here is that, in Nelly's photographs, the purity of the Greek race and the direct connection between ancient and modern Greeks has been preserved by farmers and herdsmen as individuals and as a class (figs 23-26).<sup>31</sup> And this is apparent in other comparisons which Nelly made, stressing the link and the dialectical relationship between the ancient and the modern. The Moschophoros ('Calf-bearer') from the Acropolis was recognized by the photographer in the face of a shepherd carrying a lamb on his shoulders<sup>32</sup> (who knows whether this was a spur-of-the-moment snapshot or staged?); the youths bearing water jugs on their shoulders jar set alongside village girls and peasants (fig. 27). Only the modern 'Parisienne' appears to be an urbanite, perhaps because the stylization and the delicate appearance of the Minoan version are in no way suited to a rustic environment. As for the humble architecture of a house in a Cretan village, it is obvious to the photographer that it

goes back to the largely reconstructed architecture of the Minoan palace at Knossos (fig. 28).

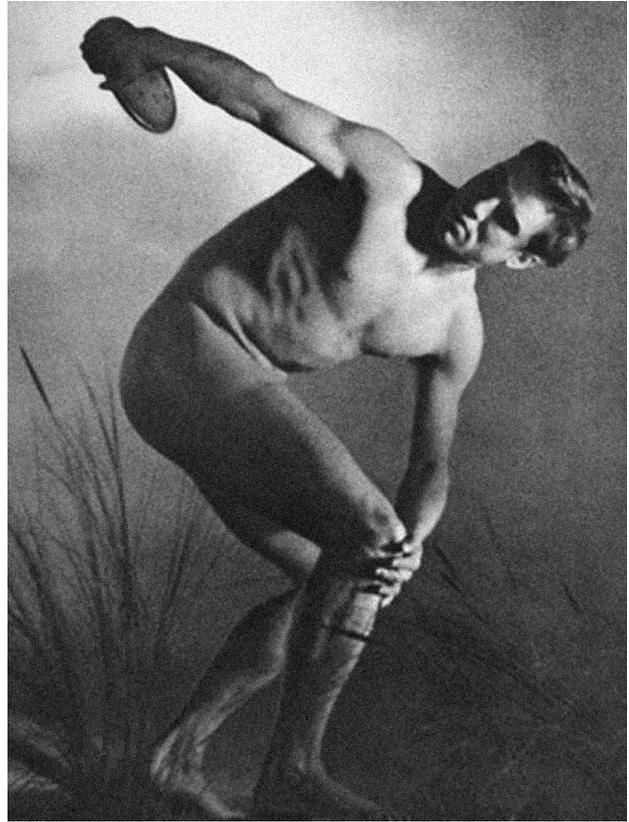
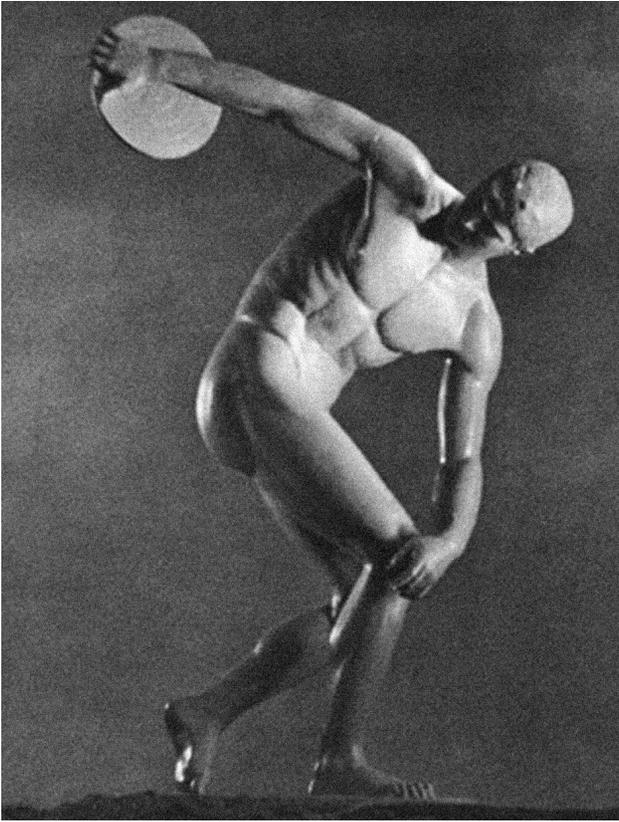
Nelly was not the only one to use antiquity and above all ancient statuary to illustrate a direct connection between the ancient and the modern eras. In Nazi Germany Leni Riefenstahl, dancer, actress and film director, had been commissioned to film the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, resulting in a four-hour epic in two parts entitled *Olympia*, simultaneously a record of and a paean to the physical prowess of the Olympic athletes.

Though it may seem paradoxical initially, the careers of the two women are linked by certain common elements. In her monumental autobiography Riefenstahl tells us that in the period 1923-24, i.e. the time when Nelly was studying in Dresden, she was a student at the Mary Wigman School, some of whose students had posed for Nelly.<sup>33</sup> It is not possible for the moment to say whether the two women knew each other at that time, unless the negatives of Nelly's photographs which are stored in the Benaki Museum's Photographic Archive should happen to reveal some historical treasure. Nelly herself maintained that they met during the Olympic Games when she visited Berlin, but this may not be completely accurate. Riefenstahl, at any rate, was photographed many times in the style of Nelly's photographs and was filmed naked at Olympia when, according to the extra material on a DVD now on the market, her face was not shown.<sup>34</sup>

*Olympia* was an important stage in Riefenstahl's career, both as regards pioneering cinematography and the solutions she found to immortalizing the athletic events. At the outset of the film she attempts to give a brief overview of the Games from their beginnings up to the opening of the 1936 Games. Riefenstahl and her crew came to Greece for the filming in order to shoot scenes at ancient sites. But rather than going to Olympia, she preferred to film the Acropolis and, starting with a portrait of Alexander, she presented, against an almost dreamlike, misty background, various pieces of sculpture, mostly from the Hellenistic and Roman periods among them the head of Alexander from the Athenian acropolis, Venus de Milo or the Barberini Faun (fig. 29).<sup>35</sup> This first section made it clear that the material had nothing to do with the Olympic Games, but was simply a succession of images of antiquity designed to depict the beginnings of the Games.

The next section is of particular interest. After a shot of Myron's Diskobolos ('Discus-thrower'), its place is taken

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Figs 30-31. Leni Riefenstahl's film *Olympia* (1937): Myron's 'Discus-thrower' is transformed into a naked athlete in the same pose (source: private collection).

by a naked athlete in the same pose, who continues the movement of the discus-thrower (figs 30-31). After that we see many shots of athletes, exercising almost naked *all'antica*.

Riefenstahl also went to Olympia, to film the lighting of the Olympic torch. She wrote on the subject: 'The altar, from which the torch was to be lit, seemed terribly ugly. Even the young Greek in sportswear was ill suited to the atmosphere, as I had imagined it. I was deeply disappointed.'<sup>36</sup> She goes on to describe how she filmed the ceremony with the torch-bearers. She was unhappy about the whole thing, as it was at odds with the material in her introduction. She wrote: 'Only the fourth runner resembled what I had imagined; a young, dark-complexioned Greek.'<sup>37</sup> She managed to communicate with him by pantomime gestures, and learnt that the 'young Greek' was not Greek at all but a Russian emigré named Anatol. She shot the scenes of the carrying of the torch from Olympia to Delphi using him. The description of her journey to Greece

covers only two pages of her massive autobiography, which suggests that she could not have been very impressed with the Greece she found, and preferred to keep the image of antiquity she had already formed by herself.

Riefenstahl's career intersects with Nelly's in the inter-war years, despite the important differences in their biographies, and they appear – up to a certain point – to be following a common path. Riefenstahl's work has been explored in ideological and political terms. But as regards this particular part of Nelly's oeuvre, students of her work have limited themselves to examining her techniques, stressing the innovations she introduced and the power of the images, giving no importance to its ideological content.<sup>38</sup> Both women are linked by their passion for what they were doing and their determination to remain in the professional arena come what may, turning a blind eye to what, given the unstable political conditions of the times, was bound to turn out to involve them in dubious projects.<sup>39</sup> Riefenstahl had direct access to Hitler, who

granted her every wish, in order to carry out her artistic dreams without impediment. Nelly was on friendly terms with the whole spectrum of the Greek political scene, even though she might have been expected to be a Venizelos supporter given her roots in Asia Minor.

The question which arises from studying her meagre autobiography in conjunction with the plentiful photographic material is whether today – in the light of hindsight – the strong ideological and political message which, intentionally or otherwise, is expressed through her images, should be ascribed to her. Or was her ancestor worship just the product of the naivety of an ignorant romantic, exploited by the machinery of the Metaxas regime?<sup>40</sup>

It may not be a coincidence that in a recent biography of Riefenstahl by J. Trimborn we read judgements which could be applied to the Greek photographer. Analyzing her work in a political context the biographer notes:

‘Looking at Riefenstahl’s complete oeuvre, which many find fascinating, one recognizes definite and recurring tendencies that characterize her work before, during, and after the Nazi era: her fascination with the beautiful and the strong, her mythologizing of nature, a concentration on purely positive messages, and an avoidance of the negative. Viewed through her lens, Riefenstahl’s subjects take on a new artistic and strongly stylized significance. However, her fanaticism regarding beauty, her quest for beautiful, stylized images, and her aesthetic of the human body, all of which are palpable in her work, belong to a long tradition that developed independently of fascism and that fascism absorbed for a time.’<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps Nelly’s photographs and related activities should be interpreted in this light. The worship of beauty, of the muscular body and its corresponding insertion into stylized images existed before the authoritarian regimes of

the inter-war period, developed during their tenure and served their ideology,<sup>42</sup> while at the same time expressing the views of a larger group of intellectuals who saw in these images what they wanted to see. The starting point for these people may have been a different nationalistic or fascist ideology, ancestor worship or even sexual desire for the subject depicted.

Apart from the ideological components of her photography, there are also other elements, which transcend her work and pose more general questions relating directly to the reception of her work by posterity. How do we regard these photographs today?

We judge her work in its historical context, just as we do for all artistic work regardless of period, in this case the inter-war period. However, do we separate out the particular ideological content of her work (above all the ‘comparisons’), which is directly connected with the political situation in Greece and in Europe in the inter-war period, in order to remain detached? Or are antiquity and the images of the continuity of Hellenism perhaps untouchable, precisely because this dogma of continuity is still a moving force in the modern Greek state?

Though this is certainly a rhetorical question, it carries special weight with the realization that Nelly’s comparisons are still used for the promotion of the nationalist and racist agenda: in the world of YouTube.com there is a video entitled ‘the Greek DNA’.<sup>43</sup> Its producers are using, between other iconographic materials, Nelly’s photos to illustrate what they define as ‘the purity of the Greek race’ through history. Is it a paradox?

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## NOTES

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1. Sontag 1977, 5.
2. Barthes 1982, 85.
3. Sontag 1977, 22.
4. The literature on the work of the photographer is quite considerable. It consists mostly of themed monographs published from the nineties onwards (see typically Fotopoulos 1990; Boudouri 2003), and exhibition catalogues (typical examples are Harder 2001; *Nelly's Body and Dance* 1997; Koskina 1992).
5. Beckmann 1991, 72-85.
6. Harder 2003, 180-83.
7. Boudouri 2003, 117 fig. 7.
8. Boudouri 2003, 171 fig. 121.
9. Boudouri 2003, 147 fig. 201.
10. Boudouri 2003, 196 fig. 143.
11. Wilk 2006, 249-95.
12. How much Winckelmann's theories and their reception in Germany at that time contrast/conflict with Modernism is a subject which cannot be dealt with in this text (for details on this see Sünderhauf 2004, 257-67).
13. Cf. the cover photo of this volume.
14. Nelly's 1989, 99-100.
15. Nelly's 1989, 100.
16. Sontag 1977, 5.
17. See also Yalouri 2001, 161-64.
18. Nelly's 1989, 103-4.
19. Bol 2004b, II fig. 80b.
20. Boardman 1985, fig. 60; Bol 2004a, II fig. 32.
21. Fuchs 1983, 99 fig. 91.
22. Sünderhauf 2004, 181 fig. 70 (photograph from 1910), 71 (photograph from 1913). See also the photographs (by an unknown photographer) from 1925, Sünderhauf 2004, 180 fig. 69, in which a naked youth is seated on a rock in the attitude of the Resting Hermes from Herculaneum.
23. Nelly's 1989, 112.
24. *Greece* May-July 1937; Boudouri 2003, 23 fig. 29; see also Boudouri 2006, 62-67.
25. Barthes 1982, 88.
26. Harder 2001, figs 48-51.
27. Gellner 1983, 56.
28. Petraki 2006, 96-104.
29. Gellner 1983, 58. Cf. also Hobsbawm & Ranger 1982, 1-14.
30. Herzfeld 1986, 39-52; Skopetea 1988, 175-89; Tziovas 1989, 146-49; Kayialis 2007, 210-34.
31. See also the article in *Life* Magazine from the forties entitled 'Speaking of pictures ... Greeks still look like their forebearers' with photos by Nelly; Nelly's 1989, 276-77.
32. Nelly's 1989, 277.
33. Riefenstahl 2000, 58-59.
34. From the arthaus/arte Edition publication of the DVD (2004).
35. See some stills from *Olympia* in the photographic album Riefenstahl 2002.
36. Riefenstahl 2000, 262.
37. Riefenstahl 2000, 263.
38. As far as I know the only exception is the passage in Sünderhauf 2004 (190-96), which acknowledges the German influences on her work.
39. See Trimborn 2007, 72-75; 80-82.
40. But see the comment made by N. Dimou: 'Nelly's political and social naivety is worth noting. As is her snobbery [...] She was mad about the Greek monarchy [...]. She was annoyed when Kostas Kotzias – a minister and close colleague of Metaxas' – was called a fascist. I do not know if her opinions, combined with her German past (she also photographed the 1936 Olympics) and her latent anti-semitism (the 'Jewish clique'), point to a particular ideology' (Dimou 2005, 18).
41. Trimborn 2007, 260.
42. See, for example, Wildmann 1998.
43. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FY-yJTDcOmc>, last accessed 10 May 2008.

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