Review of Artemis Yagou's Fragile Innovation: Episodes in Greek Design History

Dimitris Plantzos

Artemis Yagou

Fragile Innovation: Episodes in Greek Design History

North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2011. 230 pp.

By Dimitris Plantzos
University of Athens

During the summer sales of 2010, a Greek furniture maker advertised his merchandise with a series of posters showing a girl sprawled on an Ikea-style couch ("20–50%; true sales for true people") under the rubric *Taste–Quality–Greekness* ("*ellinikotita*").[1] Whatever "Greekness" could have meant for the passing onlookers in Athens under the scorching August sun coming across the image of a young lady in thoroughly westernised dress lying on a generic, modern-looking piece of furniture, it was certainly thought by both the advertisers and their client to suggest a special sort of authenticity, only to be found in truly "Hellenic" couch makers…

The author of *Fragile Innovation* does not seem to have been aware of this particular street ad; her book, however, to a great extent explains what "Greekness" may have meant for both this couch maker and his clientele. For as in the visual or performing arts in Greece, especially since the interwar period and up to the late twentieth century, as well as in literature or even music, so in design, the phantasm of Greekness often stood as the guarantor of both authenticity and the country's successful modernisation at the same time. Described at best as "a half-hearted and controversial phenomenon" (153), Greek design strove to assert and express national identity as a unique, exceptional ontology navigating through the perilous waters of backwardness and stagnation on the one hand and excessive modern-/westernisation on the other. As Artemis Yagou is quick to point out in her thorough, well-informed and extremely informative study, "nowhere is the controversial character of Greek design more evident than in the visual expressions of the ideology of Greekness", whose "master narrative… incorporates other sub-narratives, such as the dichotomies of craft versus industrialisation, and tradition versus modernity, each of these dipoles corresponding to a local and a European dimension respectively" (10). As Stathis Gourgouris, among others, has shown, cultural insularity, an ambivalence towards "Europe" that comes across as at once xenophobic and xenomanic, serves modern Greeks as a weapon against the injustices of modernity and its ensuing perils – from the nationalism of others to globalisation.[2]

Fragile Innovation traces the dichotomy of tradition versus modernity in the very first effort of Greece to showcase itself as a bona fide European nation, modern as well as historic, namely the participation of the fledgling nation-state in the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London's Crystal Palace (chapter one). Greece's modest appearance, in an event otherwise stressing industrialisation and technological breakthrough, was mostly limited to raw materials (from marble and various minerals to honey, figs and sponges). Ironically enough, and at a time when Greece was going through a rigorous Europeanisation process, the most distinguished among the Greek exhibits was a traditional embroidered men's costume, an utterly Oriental-looking garment ostensibly expressing "Greek individuality", though in fact confirming Greece's tenuous standing as one of the "Europeans". For many of its critics, however, "Poor Greece", with its "very sad" performance in its debut as a free nation, was but a faint shadow of its classical

predecessor who had been "the mother of this infinite world" (22)!

This oscillation between modernisation and tradition is rightly considered by the author as the driving force behind any progress Greek design appears to have made since the nineteenth century (chapter two). What for many in Greek society appeared as the only way forward, namely the Europeanisation, however shallow or contrived, of the nation's way of life, others viewed as indefensible *xenomania* and aping of things foreign (*pithikismos*). Dress, both as individual as well as collective expression, soon became the most significant field whereon the modernisation process became most visible: as "Frankish" clothes were becoming more widespread, urban modernity was fast displacing Greece's rural past. According to the author, such negotiations over a new national identity "foregrounded the troubled relationship between past and present and underpinned attempts to reconcile the heritage of ancient Greek civilisation with the need to create a sovereign, modern local culture that would be able to sustain a creative dialogue with imported cultures" (39).

The interwar period, a time when "some of the necessary preconditions for the emergence of industrial design activities in Greece were realised" (7), is the book's next stop. National and social identities are negotiated anew, at a time of intensive industrialisation of the economy, in the shadow of the Asia Minor catastrophe and the challenges posed by the refugee populations arriving in Greece. As Greek society became at the same time urbanised and Europeanised, so as to accommodate newly introduced attitudes towards consumption, style and fashion, the perennial strife between the xenomaniacs and the xenophobes seems to reach unprecedented heights. The inherent archaeolatry of the

Greek educational system, however, proved a formidable hurdle, especially in a society where manual work was treated beneath one's dignity on the grounds that it was inferior to intellectual or artistic "creation". As a result, technical and vocational education in Greece was all but neglected. Trapped between the "superior" disciplines of fine arts and engineering, the so-called "decorative" or "applied" arts fought for their existence in what the author convincingly presents as a "Scylla and Charybdis" situation (chapter four). However promising or ambitious, design education in interwar Greece "did not reach fruition" (83).

As the author is right to contend, however, the desire to "appear Greek", or indeed "Hellenic", has left its intelligible mark on Greek design. Be it as a "stimulus" or a "stumbling block", as the title of chapter seven suggests (the answer the author seems to promote, rightly, is "the latter"), the call for *ellinikotita* in all expressions of Greek cultural, creative or even day-to-day existence has marked the effort for the forging of a suitable modern Greek identity. The idea that Greek national identity emanates from the very soil occupied by us, modern Greeks, since time immemorial, long before Greece itself even existed as a political and cultural, let alone a national, entity, grew out of nineteenth-century romantic notions of race and nationalism and their offspring of environmental determinism, extremely popular in Greece to the present day. Artists, novelists and poets have long tried to endow their creations with the aura of Greekness as a necessary step in order to claim authenticity as well as national significance. As many of the country's intellectuals would also claim, this recycling of motifs and styles traced in Greece's classical past – or often enough merely invented *à l'antique* – was a veritable expression of the nation's moder-

nity, a gambling chip of sorts cashable in all major bond markets, and the European ones in particular. In Greek design, as for much of contemporary Greek art, "combinations of stylistic loans from the past led to an aesthetic which may be described as eclectic at best to chaotic at worst" (137–8).

In more recent years, the Greekness master-narrative seems to have overshadowed any vital signs in Greek design – from furniture makers, like the one in our initial example, claiming to continue an (invented) tradition in furniture-making going back to classical Greece through Byzantium and folk art, to the designer of the torch for the 2004 Athens Olympics relay who had to improvise a source of inspiration from Greek nature for his design in order to counter claims that his work was of "a frugal and modern form" (147; he was in fact copying Brâncuși). In this sense, Greekness seems to have become frightfully stereotypical though this does not seem to perturb its enthusiasts. The author attributes this to Greek designers' seemingly "lack of confidence" which would allow them "to create new forms and develop novel products for contemporary needs without resorting to aesthetic clichés and without expressing idealistic, Greekness-based justifications for their designs" (143). I would have thought that this phenomenon is primarily a spinoff of Greek nationalism, which in recent years has acquired tremendous appeal, especially in its almost invisible, "banal" versions. Claiming, as furniture company Neo Katoikein does in as late as 1993, that the Aegean has been "a Greek sea for four thousand years" where "craftsmen ... turn objects of daily use into works of artistic value ... keeping thus alive the 'Aegean conscience' and the 'Aegean Sea aesthetics'" (143) is not the random result, but an active element of a widely diffused nationalist strategy which strives to obliterate from public conscience the fact that there are parts of the Aegean that are not Greek at all.

In that respect, projects like the Athens-based "Greece is for Lovers" series of merchandise heavily parodying artistic stereotypes of Greekness – from candles shaped as Ionic capitals and classical torsos to folk-artsy embroideries serving as cases for external hard-disk drives[3] – represent significantly more than "a more creative re-thinking and re-imagining of the past" (149). I would see their statements as deeply political, in that they dare question the sacredness of the images they unabashedly play with: through constant word/image play and candid, even sexual double entendre (their very name suggests a tongue-in-cheek, and hardly innocent reference to "Greek love", a notion thoroughly distasteful for anyone taking their Greek identity seriously enough), they are able to undermine the banalities of Greekness as well as its underlying nationalist convictions. In that, the designers of "Greece is for Lovers" bring to mind the extremely successful project of "Anna Goula", conceived by performance artist Hara Kolaiti in 2008.[4] Through the persona of Anna Goula (a fictitious name which in Greek sounds like "being sick"), Kolaiti was able to deconstruct the contemporary Greek tendency of performing national identity through the regurgitation of dead stereotypes involving classical or folk-art motifs, hypothetically traditional cultural norms as well as an invented "true" Greek self, at once authentic and antimodern. As Artemis Yagou is right to suggest, a history of Greek design as the result of its comparison to its European counterparts would come perilously close to be read as a "non-history" (153). Her valuable study is an important first step towards understanding Greek modernity in its own terms.

NOTES

1   Cf. "Μάγκυ, Τζούλια, ελληνικότητα" [Maggie,

Julia, Greekness], *Athensville* blog, 2 Aug 2010 [*athensville.blogspot.gr/2010/08/blog/blog-post.html*], accessed 31 Oct 2012.

2   Stathis Gourgouris, *Dream Nation: Enlightenment, Colonization and the Institution of Modern Greece*, Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996, 267-82.

3   See *Greece is for Lovers* blog, [greeceisforlovers.com], accessed 31 Oct 2012.

4   See, for example, "Anna Goula: Galazio kai Leuko", *YouTube* [youtu.be/UQBX3iU1WiQ], accessed 31 Oct 2012.

Vicky Karafoulidou

Η γλώσσα του σοσιαλισμού: ταξική προοπτική και εθνική ιδεολογία στον ελληνικό 19ο αιώνα

[The language of socialism: the perspective of class and national ideology in the Greek 19th century]

Athens: Vivliorama, 2011. 476 pp.

By Konstantinos Karpozilos
Columbia University

Visiting Athens in 1912, Avraam Benaroya, the Thessaloniki-based labour activist and ardent socialist, was astonished to see an image of Jesus Christ among the figureheads decorating the headquarters of the Socialist Party. This anecdotal incident seemed to encompass the gap between the interethnic, militant and radical Federation of Thessaloniki and the conservatism of socialists in the Greek state. For decades, Benaroya's scornful attitude characterised historiographical accounts of the Greek labour and socialist movement; groupings and organisations of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were seen as peculiar offspring of a distorted ideological framework, while thinkers and leading figures as mere individualists with personal agendas.[1] This evaluative outlook reflected the fact that the study of socialism was confined to the movement itself, ousted from the conservative state institutions, while it corresponded to the popular tradition of discrediting "utopian" as compared to "scientific" socialism. Even though these simplistic dichotomies have been challenged,[2] the early world of "social critique" remains an issue on the margins of Greek historiography, since the nineteenth century is often perceived as a period of minimal class antagonism. One cannot but notice the connection between the