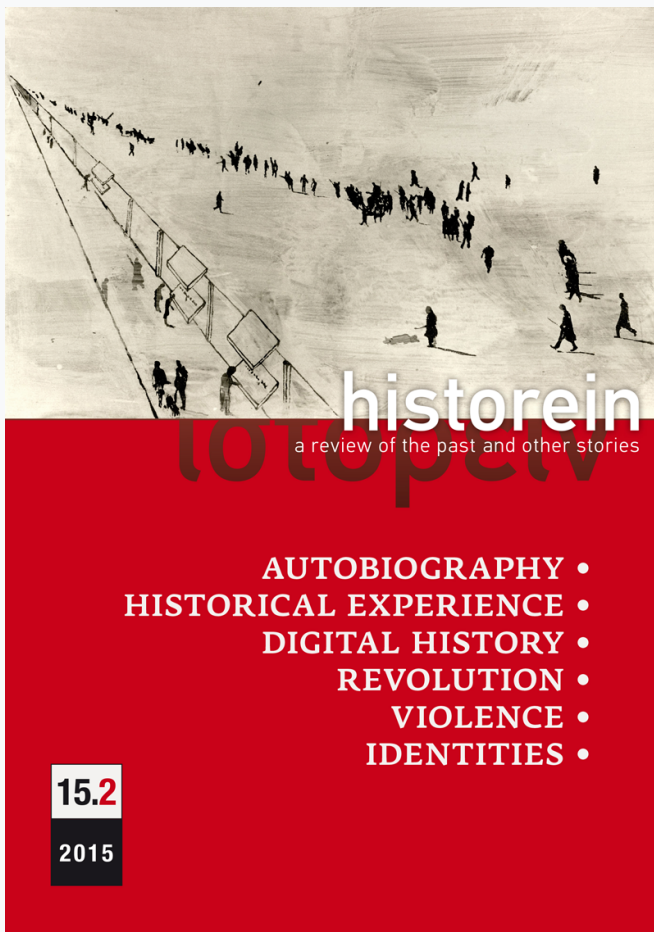


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Review of Philip Carabott's, Yannis Hamilakis and Eleni Papargyriou (eds), *Camera Graeca: Photographs, Narratives, Materialities*

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**Philip Carabott, Yannis Hamilakis
and Eleni Papargyriou (eds)**

*Camera Graeca: Photographs,
Narratives, Materialities*

Farnham: Ashgate, 2015. 375 pp.

Penelope Petsini

The study of Greek photography has gained momentum in recent years, revealing new insights not only from photography scholars but also those of other disciplines such as archaeologists, sociologists, anthropologists and so forth. For a long period, Greek photography was a field that was not subjected to systematic research, and international bibliographies made little reference to it. In view of this absence, and given the strikingly limited number of theoretical texts available in Greek, the volume *Camera Graeca: Photographs, Narratives, Materialities* is an effort to add something new and significant to the field.

This edited volume emerged from an international conference held in 2011 at the Centre for Hellenic Studies at King's College London, entitled "Greek (Hi)stories through the lens: photographs, photographers and their testimonies". A number of scholars working on different areas of the humanities, arts and social sciences responded to the call for papers of the conference, which purported "to offer an initial contribution to the understanding of aspects of the entanglement of Greece with photography critically and in a theorised manner". The plurality of the research topics presented in the papers is indeed reflected in *Camera Graeca*, making it one of the first volumes on the issue which, in contrast to previous attempts, does not frame the representation of Greece in a narrow history of photography or-

ganised around the tenets of art history, but in a broader genealogy that takes the historical, social and cultural context into account.

The approach follows the politicised concept of culture that emerged in the 1970s that came to be known as critical postmodernism. The radical history movements of the era brought different ways of understanding history, more sensitive to ordinary people's accounts that were previously hidden from dominant history. This approach appreciates the type of information contained in everyday documents, including snapshots, embracing those formerly non-legitimated forms such as personal and family photographs, as a means to examine past experiences and retell history. However, those critical enquiries took some decades to resonate with Greek photography, hence most curatorial projects and histories¹ approached photography almost exclusively in terms of art history and aesthetics. At the same time, these approaches denied recognition to photojournalism or vernacular photographs. The hegemony of a modernist belief system in Greek photography determined that any critical discourse would eventually find itself firmly premised on an aesthetic of the "exclusively photographic", an emphasis on the medium itself and its autonomy and an overestimation of a category described as "creative photography".

In order to better comprehend Greek photography and its historical context, one must take a look at the 1980s when the construction of the domestic discourse took place. At the time, photography was still regarded as a transparent technological process of representation; it remained isolated from the rest of the visual arts, and it was still the subject of debates concerning its art status. Accordingly, museums and galleries ignored photographic production while the only kind of photography to describe itself as artistic was that being pro-

duced by amateurs. The domestic discourse was still struggling to typify a distinct category of “art photography”, apart from the functional practice of the professionals and the vernacular practice of the amateurs. The use of photographs with no apparent aesthetic value or quality was problematic since it contaminated the “purity” of local categories that desired to be separate, namely “art”, “professional” and “amateur” photography. The effort to establish the photographic medium as a discrete subject of study and practice led to an “embattled” discourse which regarded with suspicion any scholar from other disciplines who touched on photography, resulting in rather selective and limited accounts of histories and preventing the emergence of an all-pervasive one.

In contrast to the above, this volume examines art, documentary and anonymous people’s pictures through multidimensional approaches. *Camera Graeca* does this in 16 essays by leading and upcoming scholars in the fields of visual art, Greek studies, literature, anthropology, archaeology and the history of photography, reinforced with a coda by visual culture historian Ludmilla Jordanova. The result is a dialogue addressed to scholars from a range of disciplines. The volume is divided into four parts, entitled “Imag(in)ing the nation”; “Photographic narratives, alternative histories”; “Photographic matter-realities” and “Photographic ethnographies”. The editors provide a comprehensive overview of Greek and Greece-related photography, as well as its domestic theorisation, along with a relatively short discussion of the concepts that comprise the volume’s parts.

This overview is further elaborated in the first chapters, which look at nineteenth- and twentieth-century photography in Greece in a broad perspective. The first one, authored by John Stathatos, acclaimed curator of the 1997 *Image and Icon* exhibition, discusses how photogra-

phy provided “a record, a mirror, and a model” for national identity. To approach this huge and complicated subject, an ambitious aspiration in its own right, Stathatos revised and considerably reduced some of his recent articles and essays, which unfortunately produced a rather selective and unpersuasive account of photographic engagements with the issue of identity. For instance, there’s a lengthy discussion on Panagiotis Fatseas’ work yet only a small mention of Leonidas Papazoglou’s, though it’s arguably more intriguing in its representation of national identity. Similarly, he analyses Nelly’s Cretan portraits but ignores her far more relevant “Parallels” collection.

Stathatos’ discussion of the 1940s, in which he adopts the revisionist school of history that seeks to deconstruct the “heroic myths of the resistance”, is no less problematic. At times he is happy to take photographs and statements at face value and hush up the political implications of a particular work but he is prepared to see others as not so transparent, especially when it comes to the pro-left photographers. For example, Voula Papaioannou’s projects are presented as examples of a pure and innocent humanistic photography (45–47), ignoring the fact that her work was mainly commissioned by the Americans, whereas Kostas Balafas’ photographs of the same period are described as ambiguous and politically tinted due to his political beliefs (48–51). Perhaps the most exaggerated remark is that Spyros Meletzis’ resistance photographs “are taken at face value or read as an example of totalitarian kitsch not a million miles from North Korean painting”, depending “almost entirely on the viewer’s political sympathies” (50). This remark could also apply to Stathatos’ own analysis as well.

While Stathatos’ discussion is premised on a notion of “history”, “theory” and “photography”,

Alexandra Moschovi's subsequent chapter is about "histories, photographs, theories", which is consistent with the editors' theoretical framework. Focusing solely on examples deriving from the official Greek photography canon, Moschovi shows in a theorised way how postwar photographers embraced a preconceived and uniform model of national identity reflecting narratives of "home-grown nationalism" (71) while, in the late twentieth century, a Greek version of "thinking photography" challenged the very same narratives aiming to deconstruct them. Aliki Tsirgiolou, in turn, offers an overview of nineteenth-century photography of Greece, focusing on the uniformity of subject matter, namely archaeological sites and ancient ruins. She acknowledges that representations which do not conform to this pattern may well exist but still remain hidden in private collections or uncatalogued in archives.

These overviews, the only essays by photography specialists, are followed by several case studies. While many of them present topics that are worthwhile objects of study, quite a number display a certain inadequate grasp of photography history and theory itself. For example, Eleni Kouki's chapter on the photographic collection of the Museum of the Battle of Sarantaporo provides a stimulating discussion on how war photographs are recontextualised. In a lengthy (and probably unnecessary) discussion of the celebrated "Family of Man" exhibition, the analysis is descriptive throughout, showing no understanding of the long-standing criticism, as expressed in the equally famous criticisms by Roland Barthes and Allan Sekula. Subsequent references to "naïve snapshots with no artistic value compared to the masterpieces of Henri Cartier-Bresson" (267) allow the reader to presume that the writing of this chapter is not informed by contemporary photography theories in any substantial way,

thus undermining an otherwise very interesting piece of research.

Nevertheless, there are essays worth noting because of the critical insights they bring forth relating to a wide range of contemporary issues, with clear directions and a closer engagement with relevant photographic theories. Yannis Hamilakis and Fotis Ifantidis' opening chapter of part two, for example, analyses the *Other Acropolis* project that proposes an alternative narrative of the monument, "not of the single universal Acropolis but of the various multifarious Acropolises" (14). On a different subject-matter and of similar interest is Penelope Papailias' "Projecting places", which discusses how photographs illustrate accounts of migration and how photographic practices mediate its experience (for example, the recasting of migration experience as tourism). Other chapters might prove useful for shedding light on hushed-up issues: Katerina Zacharia's "Nelly's iconography of Greece", for example, places emphasis on the photographer's work in the 1930s and her hitherto obliterated relations to the dictatorial regime of Ioannis Metaxas. Similarly, Georgios Giannakopoulos' "Once upon a time in Asia Minor" presents the unknown photographic archive of Arnold and Rosalind Toynbee, a record of the 1919–1922 Greco–Turkish war in Anatolia, which deconstructs the stereotype of the "bloodthirsty" and "barbaric" Turk and documents Greek "atrocities". Avoiding decorative and unnecessary photography theory, Giannakopoulos provides a stimulating historical analysis which apropos reflects on issues of embedded journalism and humanitarianism.

Overall, *Camera Graeca* is a stimulating publication whose shortcomings are counterbalanced by the plurality of accounts emphasising several diverse aspects of the issue. Had

the editors chosen to have an open call to embellish this undertaking with more papers, instead of limiting it to the ones delivered (or selected but never actually presented) at the conference (such as the extended researches by photography historian Hercules Papaioannou on the Greek landscape, and those of visual sociologists Gregory Paschalidis on Greek iconic photographs and Yannis Skarpelos on foreign photographers representing Greece), this volume would be an even more significant addition to the curriculum.

NOTE

- 1 See, for example, Alkis A. Xanthakis, *Ιστορία της ελληνικής φωτογραφίας 1839–1970* [History of Greek Photography, 1839–1960] (Athens: Kastaniotis, 1981); John Stathatos, *Image and Icon: The New Greek Photography, 1975–1995* (Thessaloniki: Hellenic Ministry of Culture/Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997); Kostas Ioannidis, *Σύγχρονη ελληνική φωτογραφία: Ένας αιώνας σε τριάντα χρόνια* [Contemporary Greek photography: a century in 30 years] (Athens: Futura, 2008).

Constantin Irodotou

Des utopies sadiennes

Paris: L’Harmattan, 2015. 133 pp.

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L’ouvrage de Constantin Irodotou, *Des utopies sadiennes*, version remaniée d’une partie de sa thèse de philosophie *Sade / Fourier: utopie et sexualité* (Paris VIII, 2014), s’emploie à repenser le rapport entre histoire et fiction à partir de certaines œuvres de Sade, notamment des deux fictions opposées que l’on trouve dans *Aline et Valcour*, roman épistolaire écrit à la Bastille avant la Révolution, et publié en 1795: «Butua» est un royaume qui promeut la sexualité extra-conjugale tous azimuts et le crime, «Tamoé» un île d’où le crime est absent et où la sexualité est confinée au cadre marital.¹ À Butua la population décroît, à Tamoé, elle croît. Or, il est étonnant de constater, avec Irodotou, que la relation de Butua est présentée comme une enquête et, partant, comme *historique*, tandis que celle de Tamoé est dite *chimérique*. Il y a là de quoi s’étonner, car l’une et l’autre relèvent bien de la fiction. Quel est le sens d’une telle «historicité»? *En quoi une fiction est-elle historique?* Telle est la question que se pose Irodotou (p. 68).² Il semble nous suggérer deux réponses, de valeur inégale. L’une serait que l’on peut désigner comme «historique» le récit de ce qui peut avoir existé, même si les événements décrits sont fictifs. L’autre consisterait à dire qu’est «historique» ce qui fait évoluer la nature, même sans pouvoir la changer. Si, selon la première réponse, une fiction historique est une fiction réaliste, ce qui réduit l’«historicité» à un avatar du «réalisme», le second type de réponse, à juste titre favorisé par Irodotou, est beaucoup plus riche d’enseignements.