

Art censorship as art criticism: fighting the sacrilegious and protecting the “shell”

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Art censorship in Greece since the establishment of the new Greek state in 1830 has been formulated in relation to the ideological patterns of national identity. The influence of Romanticism intensified references to ancient ancestors, legitimised the focus on tradition, and corresponded to the need of the newly formed Greek society to establish the country's position as a cultural equal of the other European countries. Ever since, the constant calling of Greek society upon the symbols of national identity have created rigid ideological barriers in the country.

The fine arts were expected to express higher values; sculpture in particular, owing to its public and monumental character, was connected to the concept of “nation” and assumed the role of helping to visualise its constituent elements. On the part of the audience, art critics included, censorship took the form of art criticism. Sculptors, on the other hand, had to self-censor their work by adapting themselves to the requirements of their environment. Modernity became an obvious target of animosity during the 20th century. The imminent danger supposedly posed involved contaminating the authenticity of “Greekness”. During the seven-year dictatorship (1967–1974) modernity was for the first time understood as protecting — instead of violating — the essence of national identity, because of its connection to political art revolting against the regime. During the past three decades, despite the radical changes the country has undergone, a peculiar kind of self-censorship exercised by the state — on the occasion of prominent official and public cultural events — has proved the use of culture as leverage for broader political views and resulted in an ongoing introversion.

Introduction

Deriving from the Latin verb *censere*, which means to assess, censorship is identified with the senses of suppression, restriction and banning; it implies control and supervision; it is always combined with the questions “Who decides, why and for whom?”; it is connected to all forms of authority — political, social, or religious; it alerts people to a perceived danger or a threat on a public or private level; and it is justified as a form

of protection. Regardless of its form, intensity or means of expression, censorship has been interwoven with social structures throughout human history. It also calls upon significant national, religious or social symbols.

What will be demonstrated here is that art censorship in Greece since the establishment of the new Greek state in 1830 has been formulated in relation to the ideological patterns of national identity. During the 19th century, under the influence of Romanticism, the glory of antiquity haunted the new Greek state. Thenceforth, calling upon the legacy of the ancient ancestors on any given occasion — whether political, social or cultural — has become commonplace. The need of the newly emergent Greek society to establish the country’s position as a cultural equal of the other European countries intensified the focus on the past. It will be argued here that the change of Greek identity — which concerned Greek-speaking orthodox populations — into a national one in the 19th century intensified the association with tradition because of the influence of Romantic nationalism. Attention will be paid to the concept of “genius” as developed by German Romanticism because of its long-lasting effect on the ways artistic creation in modern Greece developed its relationship with religious concepts. It will be demonstrated that sculpture in particular, being a public art, was directly affected by the rigid ideological barriers that were raised. From the mid 19th century up to the 1960s it was connected to the concept of “nation” and assumed the role of helping to visualise its constituent elements. Thus it was formed by the subtle but decisive erosive influence of censorship in its guise as art criticism. The special focus on distinct incidents of the past three decades aims to demonstrate that, despite the radical changes the country has undergone since the 1970s, Greek society is still dependent on traditional stereotypes and focused on the past. It will be suggested that the most prominent official and public cultural events since the 1980s have been the outcome of a peculiar form of self-censorship on the part of the state, in order to use culture as leverage for broader political views. It will be contended that a stance of cultural introversion has been intentionally maintained by the state; it was based on a presumed, ever-present threat to the nation deriving from western cultural erosion; and it has been the result of a long-lasting phobic syndrome that has plagued Greek society.

Historical and ideological background

When the European philhellenes and the Greek intelligentsia of the Diaspora introduced Romanticism into Greece in the 19th century, it was met with an impressively familiar and compatible blend of hopes, fears, frustrations, and a hoard of suppressed sentiments that absorbed the new values to the benefit of the local needs. As a reaction to the rationalism of the Enlightenment, Romanticism turned to the past, to the authenticity of the rural communities and their ways of living. People were defined as the custodians of tradition owing to the Romantics’ firm belief that only direct contact with their cultural roots ensures peoples’ existence (Greenfeld, 1992; Hobsbawm,

2005). Thus, tradition was regarded as “sacred” (Kohn, 1950) and led to the notion of “national tradition” which was identified with the nation and the state (Gellner, 1992; Hobsbawm, 1994). On the other hand, Romanticism’s ideal function of the nation state in close relationship with a unified and powerful Christendom (Greenfeld, 1992; Hobsbawm, 2005; Kohn, 1950) vindicated the position which the Orthodox Church held in the minds of modern Greeks as the guardian of Greek tradition. The direct association between intense emotions and religious faith elevated all intense feelings to the level of sacred and religious, in the sense of absolute dedication to a higher goal (Greenfeld, 1992). Additionally, the notion of “genius” legitimated extreme sensibility and abundance of emotions as signs of original and ultimate creativity; it turned the possessor into a “small God”, and affected the understanding of artistic creativity and art on the whole as divine. According to F. Schlegel, “To mediate [between God and man, for instance, like Jesus Christ] and to be mediated are the whole higher life of man and every artist is a mediator for all other men” (quoted in Greenfeld, 1992:337).

Since the establishment of the new Greek state in 1830 the above matrix of notions has nourished Greek society by creating symbolisms which became constituent elements of its national identity. In Greece, tradition was already perceived as a sacred legacy of the ancestors. The additional specific references of the Romantics to ancient Greece enhanced among contemporary Greeks the feeling of uniqueness (Greenfeld, 1992) and, as K. Paparrigopoulos notes (1932:391), “...the image of [Ancient Greece] also contributed in no small measure to the European concept of the emergent new [Greek] state”. The idealistic nature of Romanticism, along with the exaggeration and embellishment of the past it brought, led to the mystification of ancient Greek origin within the Greek society. Its view as a reassuring, abstract concept and the unavoidable paraphrasing of reality resulted as direct outcomes (Veremis & Koliopoulos, 2006; Gavriilidis, 2006). Dedication to the principles of “enlightened Europe” (*Pandora*, 1861:524) was mentioned in Greek texts at every opportunity. As K. Tsoukalas (1977:537) notes, “...the glory of classical antiquity, hymned and lauded by the entire European urban population... flattered the feelings of national dignity in the extreme. It is quite natural that the newly-aroused nationalism would have recourse to embellishing the organ around which the glory of the past had been assembled and with which it was identified”. Additionally, respect for the ideas of the Greek intelligentsia, who had contributed to awakening the “nation” before the revolution of 1821, led to a prolonged conservative intellectual climate which endured until after the first half of the 20th century (Burns, 1983; Dakin, 1984; Said, 1996; Tsoukalas, 2001). Innumerable articles in the press since the mid 19th century or essays published during the 20th century refer to the “worship of antiquity” (Mihailidis, 1908–1909:235), the ancestral art (Kaftanzoglou, 1853), and the call that Greeks must live up to the glory of their ancestors (Dimaras, 1948; Kordatos, 1958).

The view of art in general as an activity of a higher status was widespread among Greek intellectuals of the 19th and 20th centuries and further complicated the peculiar stratification of Greek national ideology. The need to “follow folk tradition...”

(Yiannios, 1914:148) in order to manifest “Greekness” in artistic creation (Yiannopoulos, 1935) was enhanced by the supposed implicit mission of the visual arts to “fortify the heroes” (Dimitriadis, 1940:1387) and “...the epic-making spiritual path of a people” (Tombros, 1940:1391). The fact that art criticism till the mid 20th century was exercised by “formal and informal” (Nirvanas, 1899) “art critics”, to a large extent writers and poets steeped in Romantic notions and familiar with eloquent descriptions, further complicated the views on art. Although Realism gradually emerged in Greek prose at the beginning of the 20th century, it was mostly symbolism and the aesthetics of poetry that formulated art concepts. The equation of art, religion, heroism and morality (Daniilidis, 1934; Dimitriou, 1903; Dimitriadis, 1940; Michailidis, 1902) as well as the firm belief that art is nothing but sublime, immutable, divine beauty (Matsakis, 1936; Technocritis, 1910) narrowed even more the artistic ability to freely express subjective ideas and beliefs. H. Taine (1879:546) claimed that “A work of art is the product of the sum total of the spiritual and moral condition of the race...”. At the beginning of the 20th century Th. Dimitriou (1903:254–55) noted that “Art and God are both religions, the religion of immortal Beauty and the religion of the dying God!...”. For many decades to come, art in Greece — and especially sculpture — was expected to produce “noble emotions” (Makris, 1907–1908:191) and was reserved for “the refinement of all the other senses” (Polemis, 1902:366) with the aim to “redeem human mind” (“State and Art”, 1945:1) while searching for “absolute beauty and truth” (Makris, 1902–1903:89).

Public art as a national symbol

Because of its public and monumental character, in the 19th century and for the better part of the 20th, sculpture evolved in direct conjunction with historical conditions. On the part of the audience, art critics included, censorship took the form of art criticism, disguising the doctrines of national ideology behind the guise of aesthetic comments (Karaïskou, 2011). Sculptors, on the other hand, had to self-censor their work and adapt to the requirements of their society (Axos, 1886; Kalligas, 1977; Roujon, 1907; Unknown, 1914; Xenopoulos, 1894).

The ideological inertia and rigidity of the modern Greek state were created in such subtle and erosive ways that they almost felt natural to the social body. Almost a hundred and fifty years afterwards they ended up in what was described as a “stone-dead” intellectual and artistic environment (Xidis, 1976:139). Archaeological excavations of the 18th and 19th centuries and their findings, along with J.J. Winckelmann’s studies, had highlighted ancient Greek sculpture as the most important domain of ancient Greek art. The emotional and intellectual influence this connection exerted on the newly formed Greek State determined the aesthetic course of Greek art in general (Dimaras, 1948). The notion that “sculpture is the central Greek art; all the others refer to it, accompany it or imitate it. No other art has expressed national life so well” (Taine, 1879:546) was widespread and acted as an intellectual compass for Greece. The reasons

why Greek artists turned uncritically to neoclassicism seem to have arisen precisely from the need to “...prove that the divine spark of high art had not been extinguished among us and to glorify our forefathers in this way...” (Hadzidakis, 1934:447). The public character of sculpture contributed decisively to its role in reminding, teaching, or self-asserting within the Greek society. Being the “keeper of national conscience” (Thomopoulos, 1903:348) it was handled within the narrow context defined by its “national mission” to preserve social cohesion.

The continued adherence to the ancestral past “[b]ecause the immortal prototypes are a legacy from antiquity...” (Lazaridis, 1952:637) excluded any differentiation or aesthetic innovation. The fear of anything “new” was the inevitable consequence of such an intellectual environment (Iliadis, 1978; Petridis, 1923; Thomopoulos, 1910–1911). As Lyotard (2008) notes, the inherited knowledge is based on the “Do not forget” rule; it implies repetition of actions and models of thought, presupposes adherence to them and exclusion of questioning, and leads to introspection. The effort to eliminate aesthetic innovations in sculpture along with the corresponding artistic tenets, which were understood as an ideological contamination of “Greekness”, was believed to protect Greek society, instead of violating the artists’ rights of free expression.

Handling the “new demons”

Modern art of any aesthetic nature became the prime target for animosity during the 20th century in Greece. A theme that ran through all texts commenting on the social danger posed by the “new demons” (D.I.K., 1904:55) was the attempt to strip heretic artwork of its identity as such, and treat it with total contempt.

The pretext of protecting the “confused masses” from the “decline and fall...” (Nikolas, 1952:32) that modern art brings about is constantly repeated until the late 1960s. George Bouzianis’ expressionistic figures, “...which were different from all the known ones” (Ziogas et al., 2008:193), were the reason why the artist was interrogated by the police while preparing his exhibition at the Parnassos art gallery in November 1949. Prokopiou’s comment in the newspaper *Kathimerini* emphasised the link of his work to the German environment before the Second World War, thereby removing any association with the then tense — because of the Civil War — political atmosphere in Greece, as the initial decision to close the exhibition was taken on the grounds that the artworks “...were a danger to public order” (quoted in Ziogas et al., 2008:193). The definition of modernity as an “art of ugliness” (Papanoutsos, 1938:585) which is “...struggling to enslave humanity...” with an aim to “deprive [the people] of their principal cultural and spiritual nourishment” (Avyeris, 1945) was still expressed by a broad spectrum of Greek intellectuals.

The fear-inspiring effect that the above-quoted warnings and attitudes had on the social body was directly connected with the fear of extermination which Greek-speaking, Orthodox populations had experienced as a minority group within the Ottoman Empire during the four hundred years of occupation. Throughout the lifetime

of the modern Greek state the political discourse intentionally preserved the fear that the nation was under some kind of siege, or constantly facing impending dangers. That constant reminder justified introversion, nourished behaviours of self-victimisation, idealised tradition once more and attributed to it — for the umpteenth time — the role of a protective shell (Diamantouros, 2000; Rosakis, 2001; Tsaousis, 2001; Tsoukalas, 2001). A hidden fear towards a presumed expansive cultural policy of the Northern European countries and their “cultural dominance” was evident in a speech by Melina Merkouri, then Greece’s Minister of Culture, in Thessaloniki in 1986 (quoted in Zafiris, 1986:21). Her comment, made during the opening of the 2nd Biennial of Young Artists from Europe and the Mediterranean, openly contradicted her political positions at international official meetings, where an extroverted and receptive face of the modern Greek state was presented.

The superficiality of aesthetic discourse along with the unexpected shifts that the relationship between artistic creation and issues of national identity can bring about, became apparent during the period of the dictatorship (1967–1974) in Greece. It was then, for the first time, that the hostility of the regime towards avant-garde aesthetic tastes and, in contrast, its support of classic, academic, Byzantine and folk art were considered as violating the natural rights of free artistic expression. Contrary to what was happening until the 1960s, modern aesthetic expressions and opinions were now, for the first time, understood as a revolt against any form of repressive authority and were considered as protecting — instead of violating — the essence of “Greekness”. The additional fact that subject matters would almost always criticise current political issues was behind their acceptance by the wider populace. Vlasis Kaniaris’ constructions with wires, plaster, carnations and cheap materials presented in 1969 at the New Gallery in Athens and Maria Karavela’s installation presented in the Athens Hilton Gallery in May 1971 (Vakalo, 1985), fascinated the Athenian public. The destruction of Karavela’s installation only a day after the opening, because it indirectly but unmistakably referred to the regime’s abuse of authority (Ziogas et al., 2008), made it even more appealing. Although the structures and the aesthetics of installations or constructions were complicated and extreme for the artistically uneducated Greek society, the symbolic power of the artworks was enough to justify any aesthetic “audacity”.

Cultural introversion and politics

The conservatism that still characterises Greek society seems incompatible with the modernisation the country has undergone since the 1980s (Clogg, 1995; Close, 2006; Repousi, 2003). Nevertheless, the continued constant emphasis on tradition and the presumed inherited superiority of the nation on the part of all political parties, especially whenever they are faced with sensitive political issues (Diamantouros, 2000; Liritzis, 2000; Tsaousis, 2001; Veremis & Koliopoulos, 2006; Voulgaris, 2002), has maintained the confusion surrounding the meaning of “culture”, and of artistic creation as a consequence.

During the past thirty years, the distance between the supposedly modern and extroverted political discourse and people's real actions proved the dangerous repercussions of the perception of culture and tradition as abstract, idealised concepts. In 1983, Melina Merkouri, as Greek Minister of Culture, highlighted the significance of a common cultural background among the European countries and of a better knowledge and understanding of history and culture among them ("Athens 1985", 1992). The institution of "European City of Culture" which resulted from the above initiative was introduced in 1985 and echoed Unesco's older similar positions as expressed in Article I of its Constitution (Eliot, 1979). Nevertheless, during the institution's first implementation in Athens, the cultural events within the country emphasised Greek culture and tradition rather than that of other European countries. Furthermore, the slight change of name to "Athens, Cultural Capital of Europe" put forward a qualitative distinction corresponding to the deep conviction of Greek society about its cultural superiority. That verbal change would, at the same time, appease the worries regarding issues of national identity raised by the accession of the country to the European Community in 1981. This constant focus of the Greek state on the nation's past had deprived the society of the recognition of its own achievements and doomed it into a state of infancy deprived of an independent identity. The predominant position attributed to Greek culture was also evident in the comments of the President of the Republic during the opening ceremony, in 1985, when he noted the "undeniable precedence of Athens' cultural presence within the European world" (*Ta Nea*, 1985:12) and the reference of the Prime Minister to "the Sacred Rock of Creativity, Spirit and Art" (*Ta Nea*, 1985:12). Twenty years later, the official name of the newly formed "International Cultural Olympic Foundation", abbreviated as "Cultural Olympiad" or "first Cultural Olympiad" (Cultural Olympiad 2000–2004, 1998:Annex I, p. 2), was slightly changed in Greece to "Cultural Olympiad 2000–2004". Again the change laid the emphasis on the upcoming Games of 2004 in Athens, indirectly attributed the whole initiative to Greece, and completely disregarded the cultural events accompanying previous Olympiads, especially that of Barcelona (Garcia, 2002).

The *Outlook* exhibition as a censorship case study

The "...faith of the state in the morally uplifting role of art..." (Matsakis, 1936:1446) seemed to be equally valid in 2003 as during the past almost two hundred years. Both official and popular reaction during a prominent exhibition under the auspices of the Cultural Olympiad 2001–2004, establishes the enduring nature of Greek tradition and the collective insecurities of Greek society. Holding the Olympic Games in Greece was an undeniable achievement for the country, but, as expected, it accentuated the sterilised view of cultural identity.

On 10th December 2003 the board of the Cultural Olympiad 2001–2004 decided to remove Thierry de Cordier's painting — titled *Asperges Me* and depicting part of a fully erect penis facing a cross propped against a wall — from the *Outlook* exhibition.

A second work of art, made by the Greek artist Thanasis Totsikas, was the target of a violent attack and vandalism by a visitor. *Outlook* was intended to be the Cultural Olympiad’s crowning event: it had an unprecedented, for Greece, budget of approximately 330 million euros, took place in three prestigious venues in Athens, hosted two hundred works of art by a total of eighty-five international artists including ten Greeks, and had a curator of Greek origins who is known and respected worldwide. The exhibition’s explicit aims were to establish Greece as a dynamic up-and-coming player in the international art scene and to create genuine interest among the wider public in order to familiarise them with contemporary artistic creation (Smith, 2003; Tsikouta, 2004). In the words of its curator, Christos Ioakimidis, it aspired to present the full range of different expressions and orientations of art at the beginning of the new century, applying rigorously selective aesthetic criteria (Sarilaki, 2003; Tsigoglou, 2003). In the words of the Minister of Culture and Education, “restrictions on artistic creativity have no place in this important exhibition. The invited artists [...] act freely and their inspiration, talent and choices are the only limiting factors” (quoted in Katsounaki, 2003). The website of the Greek Embassy in Washington in September 2003 emphasised the importance of organising cultural events as “...a bridge that would bring world peace and reconciliation”. The official website of the Greek Presidency of the EU in 2003 claimed that a key concept of the Cultural Olympiad was the universality of culture. The same commitment, “...to be open and meet the international artistic trends”, was expressed in the memorandum signed between Greece and Unesco in September 1998 in Paris (Cultural Olympiad 2000–2004, 1998).

Forty-five days after the opening of the exhibition and only twelve hours after the first protests on 9th December it was unanimously decided by the Board to withdraw Cordier’s work. The decision stated that “Because of the way it was treated throughout the media, the specific work has become emotionally charged [...] and will distract the public from the exhibition’s main role, which is the contact with contemporary art” (Ziogas et al., 2008:282). The removal was the outcome of the prolonged application of censorship as art criticism. It is worth noting that in the *Outlook* case the fierce reactions were orchestrated by members of the Parliament. The presumably “provocative”, “perverted”, “vile”, “insulting” and, *inter alia*, “obscene” object, which was expected to create public unrest, was denied its actual identity as a work of art because it did not comply with the traditional understanding of art’s role.¹ Although the constitutional reform of 1975 explicitly stressed the freedom of artistic expression in Article 16, Paragraph 1 (Tsakirakis, 2010), the eagerness of all political parties to concur with the decision, the descriptions mentioned above and, in fact, the questioning of whether that object could be a work of art or not, verifies the use of culture and tradition as means of political manipulation. The expressed objective of the Cultural Olympiad

¹ “‘Artwork’ causes prosecutor’s interference”, *Naftemporiki*, 2003; “Political hatreds and passions for an artwork”, *Imerisia*, 2003; “Unambiguous reaction”, *Rizospastis*, 2003; “Vulgarity does not produce culture”, *Eleftheros Tipos*, 2003.

2001–2004 to organise “large-scale events” capable of broadcasting “clear messages” (Vrontos, 2001:66) and the semantics attached to the exhibition, owing to its association with the upcoming Olympic Games of 2004, encouraged the transformation of the whole project into an ideological construct. The application of the familiar policy of invoking a threat to the nation in order to justify political choices or to seek approval and support came, in the *Outlook* case, as a natural consequence of the long-lasting equation of cultural matters with national ones: Fifteen years ago the quest for the return of the Parthenon marbles to Greece was promoted on the part of the Greek state as a matter of “national importance” (*Ta Nea*, 1988:29), thus weakening the reasoning behind the initiative. In the same way, in December 2004 the Board of the Cultural Olympiad 2000–2004 commented that “[*Outlook*]...made part of the official programme of the Cultural Olympiad 2001–2004 and as such it was not just any exhibition [...] especially during a moment in time crucial for Greece, as in December 2003 the country was subjected to the notorious and violent attacks from abroad regarding the supposed delays in the Olympic preparations and the country’s inability to ensure the safety and quality of the Games” (Ziogas et al., 2008:335).

In the *Outlook* case openness and intellectual flexibility obviously did not manage to flourish despite all initial statements. On the contrary, the exhibition revealed the deep cultural issues that Modern Greek society still faces. More impressive, though, have been the rather lukewarm reactions on the part of artists and key personalities of the Greek art world. Surprisingly enough, the statements that justified the censorship and the public outcry outnumbered those condemning the removal of the work from the exhibition (Adamopoulou, 2003a; Adamopoulou, 2003b; Tzirzilakis, 2003; Tzonos, 2004; Zenakos, 2003; Ziogas et al., 2008). The deafening silence on the part of the rest of the Greek art community and public clashes with the fact that since the 1980s, owing to private initiative among galleries, art institutions and other cultural entities, international contemporary art has made part of the local artistic scene. The increasing numbers of audiences, the direct contact of the younger generations of Greek artists with the international art scene, and the growing infrastructure in the country aiming to enhance artistic creativity, when contrasted with events such as the *Outlook* case, seem to constitute rather superficial changes in Greek society. Regardless of the power of new social values which consider participation in cultural events as proof of social status, the power exercised by the authority of tradition and the consequent risk of exclusion from the social body in the case of radical personal differentiation, seem to prevail in contemporary Greece.

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