

University Seminar #703: Modern Greek Studies

March 12, 2009

Speaker: Gerasimus Katsan

Topic: The Sheep and the Shepherds: Censorship, Morality and Contemporary Social Criticism

Presiding Chair: Vangelis Calotychos, Columbia University

Rapporteur: Karen Emmerich, Columbia University

Attendees: Constanze Guthekne (Princeton), George Fragopoulos (CUNY), Christos Romanos, Lissi Athanasiou (CUNY), Christine Philliou (Columbia), Christos Tsiamis, Nikki Leger (Columbia)

Summary of presentation:

Katsan's presentation focused on the recent controversy over Ersi Sotiropoulos's novel *Zigzag Through the Bitter-Orange Trees* (2000), a controversy that sparked heated debate about censorship, morality, and freedom of expression in Greece and beyond. In the spring of 2007, conservative lawyer Konstantinos Plevris applied to the courts to have the novel banned from school libraries on the grounds that it was immoral and pornographic. The ban was granted pending a hearing by the conservative judge Dimitris Gavalas, whose August 1, 2007 ruling focused on moral, spiritual and pedagogical objections to the book. In the end, the court overturned the ban and reinstated the book on January 28, 2009.

When Gavalas's decision to ban the book came to light in early 2008, it sparked a public debate on television, in the popular press, and in the blogosphere. Commentary took all sides of the debate, from op-ed pieces denouncing the backwards 'fascist' motivations of the court's ban and petitions against the court order signed by intellectuals, authors, academics and readers; to impassioned criticism of the book by Plevris and other conservative pundits and enthusiastic support of the Gavalas decision by extremist right-wing groups. Katsan noted that the discussions often degenerated into attacks both on the novel and on Sotiropoulos herself, in language that was far more coarse than the passages in the novel that were being criticized.

Katsan argued that while it might be tempting to separate supporters and critics of the book into easy categories (liberals/conservatives, readers/non-readers, intellectuals/reactionary extremist fanatics), much of the commentary actually suggested that "average," "rational" people were being caught between the principles of a free democracy, including freedom of thought and expression, and concern over the degeneration of the fabric of society. Another common thread was the willingness of commentators to proclaim concerning a book that they had not themselves read, making judgments largely on the basis of selected passages taken out of context. Phrases such as "double-headed penis," "masturbation," and "wild sex in the operating room," for instance, were carefully chosen by Plevris during his television appearances, and formed the basis for much of the discussion of the book.

Meanwhile, as Katsan pointed out, Sotiropoulos's book is interested in exploring and thematizing the very same moral decay that her conservative critics accused her of contributing to: the novel, he argued, can be considered both a reflection and a

postmodern critique of contemporary Greek society. Katsan offered a summary of the novel and an overview of its main characters, focusing on the way in which it undoes “grand narratives” of nationalism by presenting pointedly “un-Greek” aspects of contemporary Greek life and by ironizing any kind of nationalist sentiment. The book also criticizes the values that the traditional family is supposed to represent; none of the three main families in the book provides any kind of meaningful relationship or stability for its members. Katsan also emphasized the importance of sickness as a major trope in the novel, with the character Lia, hospitalized for a mysterious disease described as the “anti-AIDS.”

Katsan suggested that Sotiropoulos’s take on all this—from the numbness and indifference towards human suffering, the vapidness of everyday life, and the generic nature of global culture that surrounds the characters in the novel and also structures the various narrative strands of the novel itself—is a metafictional one that allows for a kind of moral relativism: Sotiropoulos doesn’t offer a moral resolution to these problems, but leaves it up to the reader to make up his or her mind about the society she describes. He concluded his talk by referencing the closing words of the novel, spoken in the voice of the 12-year-old Nina: “I can write what I like,” as a powerful statement of artistic freedom.

Summary of discussion:

Q: I want to come back at some point to the question of decontextualization, how you say Plevris wants to decontextualize these things in order to condemn them, but I was thinking that this line of attack is very similar to what went on with the dictionaries ten years earlier with Babiniotis, which was again a very philological argument, that you take a single word or a number of them from the dictionary and make a case around the moral outrage that those words could evoke. The reason I ask is because I was wondering if Plevris got into the issue of funding of the books in schools, paying citizens’ money for putting the books in schools. That’s a version of the argument that has occurred in the US as well, using public funding for things that don’t meet local mores.

A: Whether it’s an outrage that tax dollars are being used for this trash.

Q: Yes, I was wondering if he actually went through those steps in the argument

A: I don’t think Plevris did, I’m trying to remember if the judge did in his decision, which I have here. I don’t think even the judge himself framed it in that way, but rather in the more general sense of moral outrage, and in terms of what the proper function of education is, and that there’s a certain moral rectitude about how we educate our children in Greece that should promote a healthy nationalist version of things.

Q: I’d be interested to know if he used the word “nationalist” or not.

A: Well, he refers to the constitution specifically.

Q: He refers to the *ethnos* quite a lot.

Q: Is the school library project, funding school libraries, is that a very recent project? Because when you said it has this educational angle, I'm thinking back to the case of Sykoutris in the early 1930s, a very different case, an edition of Plato's *Symposium*, but it does bring in the same situation of all these off-the-wall accusations about everything where one as an outside observer would think, What? But part of the issue was that this was part of a series that was instituted with a degree of fanfare as a part of public education, an accessible edition of the great classics. So I wonder whether this project of bringing books to school libraries is a recent one, and whether the outrage has something to do with that status conferred.

Q: I think it goes deeper than that. This wasn't the first time the book had been attacked, it had been so by a member of parliament who eventually became the Minister of Culture, Tatoulis, who went on to apologize. So Plevris stood on solid foundations when he did this. But I should say that the response of Greeks, and Greek men in particular, to Ersi's books puzzles me. I remember the first response from a non-critic, Alexis Ziras, whose mainly a poetic reader, who wrote somewhere about the book *Trimerasta Iannina*, the book is quite graphic, and in defense he felt compelled to write that it is a "deeply ethical book," which I found a very puzzling statement, I don't think that's something Ersi would say. But on the other hand Plevris's response is equally off. I think there's also an issue, beside the political, of Greek men dealing with women writing about these issues.

Q: That reminds me of a critique of Maronites of Galanake or Karapanou, a similarly moral criticism, which was a very vitriolic and strained criticism of her work, of either *Kassandra and the Wolf* or some of the early poetry of Galanake. It's very clear that Plevris knows he's not going to win, this occurs in the courts of the first instance, this is a kind of provocative tactic which gets reported in the press. All the discourse of the right is a language of effect, heavily metaphorical, this TV language that Plevris deploys so well—it's a kind of tactic, and at that level and perhaps for reasons of training and of micropolitical interest, these judges go along at the first level knowing very well that the second level will overturn it. Take Berlusconi, this thing takes journalists to court so they don't pursue things against him, it's kind of a scare tactic and a way in an impressionistic response, because a lot of people don't read Ersi Sotiropoulou's novel, but they have a sense of the kinds of literature that are coming out just from debates like this, people who skim the culture pages.

A: And even people who had never read a word of Sotiropoulou suddenly had an opinion about all this. I found a couple of relevant passages if you don't mind me reading them. I think in Galanakis, Plevris really found the right judge. This decision starts with Sotiropoulou but it really goes on to talk about how great it was in the old days, it sounds like he wants the junta back. So here it is [read in Greek]: "Literature addresses itself to mature adults, while children's literature addresses itself to the pure souls of children, whom CHRIST, God incarnate, offered as models to adults with his divine dictum, "unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. School libraries should not just contain literary books, but pedagogical books that will contribute to children's moral and spiritual education rather than simply giving them dry knowledge..."

The Constitution of Greece declares that the goal of education is “the moral and spiritual edification of Greeks and the development of national and religious consciousness.”... School books should inspire children with moral purity and love for their religion and nation, but should be free from the political and party ideologies and prejudices mentioned above, since religion concerns all people regardless of political beliefs, just as patriotism makes no political distinctions.”

Q: How much did Plevris and company help Sotiropoulou achieve her goal?

A: To sell books?

Q: No, the active participation of the reader.

A: I don't know, that's an interesting question.

Q: I thought of this in reference to Kazantzakis, in which Judas helps Christ, was necessary for him. And another comment is, did Sotiropoulou write a short story in which there is half of a telephone conversation? In which she provides only the dialogue of one person speaking and she leaves the blanks for the other?

Q: *I farsa?*

Q: I wonder if you could see that as a commentary on this novel, because she left it up to the reader to fill in the gaps or make the criticism.

A: Obviously she's not making any conclusions on the part of the reader, she's just saying, here's this story, this society, and she's provoking the reader to respond to this shallow, youth-oriented society. She's not interested in telling people what to think.

Q: Though the way you were describing the book, and definitely the way we were talking about the attempt to call her books ethical as a backlash against this other thing, I think there is a strain in your paper of trying to recuperate the book with some kind of moral understanding of it, some critique on that society, as if she's actually agreeing with Gavalas in some sense..

A: Well, it occurred to me to say that if in fact Plevris and Gavalas actually read the novel, they might say, Look at this great example of how horrible our society is, let's fix something here, let's do something.

Q: Because the things he's talking about in the decisions, apart from the things you mentioned in terms of pedagogical literature, are things like kids eating “plastic food” because their moms are working, the disintegration of the family—

A: The general moral decay of the country.

Q: Yes, and it seemed like in the way you were pitching her novel, even though you say she leaves it up to the reader to decide in the end, there's definitely a recuperation of that point of view.

A; Yes, because ultimately I don't think you choose to portray this kind of society and this shallowness in society if you don't see something wrong with it. And maybe I'm ascribing too much to her intentions, but I can't read this novel without thinking that there's an implicit critique. She's not valorizing this at all. But she doesn't flinch from the ugliness of it. In that sense it's a very realistic novel. She portrays the unseemliness especially of the male characters' actions.

Q: What did the critics make of the title?

A: I don't know that anybody's made an issue of the title.

Q: Some people in the American press talk about the zigzag as a way of thinking about the narrative shifts in point of view.

Q: I would like to include the reader in this setup, the reader is going in and out of the novel in that sense.

A: I think that's definitely the case, the whole novel is structured in this way, it goes quite quickly from one perspective to another. In that sense it's really quite hard to follow. Suddenly you're in the first person and you can't tell whose voice you're in.

Q: And this seems like a very powerful way of actively involving the reader in the novel.

Q: I noticed the same thing, that she and the critics seem to be two sides of the same coin. Isn't she in some sense mourning the loss of the same national culture they're actively—

A: I wouldn't go that far, I don't think she mourns that loss, though she is documenting it. It's not *itbografia* or realism in that sense, she's interested in the phenomenon, and probably wants us to ask why this national culture dies, or is it dying, is it the influx of globalization. One of the questions that interests me here is what is the impact of global culture on the national, does national culture really disappear in the face of global culture. The simple answer is yes and no. You can't completely destroy a national culture in its entirety, there will be quintessentially Greek things, but to what extent people participate in them is another story. In this novel people do not participate in Greek culture in that nationalistic, folkloric sense. We go to the village and these people sit around and watch TV and play cards, it's a vapid and unfulfilling life. But that's part of the critique, that this global culture provides nothing to inspire the soul, there's nothing to sustain us in this moment of living.

Q: But at the same time she's suggesting that if there is an interaction between the reader and the novel it would generate something, a new form.

A: Or at least making a more moderate argument that art will transcend, that when Nina decides at the end of the novel that she's going to write, it's that act of writing itself that's going to transcend the shallowness and baseness of society.

Q: You were talking about this sickness that's an anti-sickness, and everything's empty, and one thing is affecting another. You could go back to the debate and start thinking about how

this proliferation of talk about a book people haven't actually read is a similar kind of empty sickness. And if then you want to say that at the end of the book there's a moment of writing, the thing that kicks in is petitions, a community of writers coming together and defending this book, and the project of writing itself.

A: And I think it's significant that it's all happening in the blogosphere, and is deeply personal and yet impersonal in the way that people communicate.

Q: Yes, and in a sense the whole debate is performing a lot of what the novel is about.

A: And that's why the really vile people I mentioned could get away with talking this trash, in the safety of the blog space.

Q: This is a postmodern phenomenon, at least in Ersi's experience. I've been there in her house when people were calling anonymously, saying the same things. The reaction to her hasn't changed, but the form of the reaction has. I would also say that I'm quite familiar with her work, and this book is a combination of her writing history, it has all the elements she was using before in different books. The writer, the sex, the family relationship, the farce or joke. Critics in Greece saw this, and that's why it got the two awards. And in terms of the explicitness of the sex scenes, it's nothing compared to previous work.

A: Even if you haven't read her, with the overabundance of pornography and sex everywhere in Greece, why would they be shocked by this?

Q: But isn't it partly to do with the issue of context and contextualization? No one's going to complain about swearing or rudeness in a blog, people accept that's the kind of excess that goes on in a blog. That's why I was asking about the argument around the viability of this particular novel in a school library. When you use the word decontextualization, even for something like *dikefalo peos*, I'm not sure if Plevris is misreading the connotations of the word at a certain level. Some of the effect that's being produced is one that you can subconsciously read this as wrong about. And Plevris has his own reasons for making a political issue out of it. He's certainly not interested in making an accurate reading. But at certain points you're saying there's this visceral response to an author who's trying to be visceral. Something I think we take a liberal position to this, we have a sacredness for the novel and the freedom of expression therein. I considered the issue with something like Valtinos and the civil war, when he was attacked for saying certain things, he said, well I'm interested in the persuasiveness of the text, which for me was unconvincing, he was taking a step back, hiding behind the aesthetic when the whole point was to push the borders and to provoke people politically, and it's a good thing that he used literature in this way.

Q: Would this be the raciest thing you would find on a high school reading list?

Q: it's just in the library, doesn't necessarily appear on a reading list.

Q: And the issue is the canonicity, that someone is formally making canonical this work, not that there's any chance of too many kids reading the book. So someone like Tatoulis, who was at the time the Minister of Culture, or one of the under-ministers, felt like this kind of formalization was dangerous on his watch.

Q: Do you have any idea what the reaction was to the *Megas Anatolikos*?

Q: I'm guessing that it wasn't in too many school libraries. I think the issue was the policy of whatever won the national prize being put in school libraries, so it was a bureaucratic issue that it got in the first place.

Q: And there's also the gendered aspect, Embirikos was already canonized as a surrealist. And with women that's where the far right really jumps on this.

Q: The provocation here is also very subtle, the ethical categories aren't necessarily so clear, and she doesn't always make it clear when a perversion is a perversion. Young men having sexual fantasies isn't postmodern, but with some of the sexual acts in the novel, you can just as easily imagine a context where this is part of a normal growing-up novel. This isn't unspeakable. She constantly leaves it up to the reader when a moral act becomes an immoral one.

Q: And I think this has to do with how she writes, where she comes from. She started out as a poet, was influenced by poets, sees something, internalizes and writes it down. She's not analytical in that sense. She's not deciding for that reason.

A: And there's also a degree of introversion, that you can judge for yourself. The scene where a grown man is masturbating in front of a 12-year-old girl, that's obviously perverted. But when the same girl wants to French kiss her sister to practice kissing, that's just innocent.

Q: Perhaps the solution would be to teach these books. Usually at schools they give the teachers the analysis they should do, and if they were able to put this book as teachable material, kids are already discussing these issues with their friends, but if it appeared in a classroom so both parents and teachers and students would be able to approach it.

Q: But who's going to teach this? There are no sex education classes, and I don't think teachers are capable of approaching these issues.

A: I guess they would have to decide what level it would be taught at, presumably senior level. I don't think you could get away with this in an American high school. Even at Queens, my students are very uncomfortable with it, they're not necessarily ready to discuss these issues.

Q: Or at least not with their professor, but isn't that where we as educators should be accepting more responsibility? Are the teachers perhaps equally uncomfortable?

Q: Are there other categories of books the right wing wants to ban?

A: I'm sure there are, but I can't answer specifically as to what's on the right-wing agenda.

Q: I've had responses that are very uncomfortable teaching Dimitriou, this combination of violence and vulnerability where there aren't clear codes about how you're supposed to

respond causes tremendous problems for students, who feel very uncomfortable in the classroom.

Q: I just finished reading *2666* by Bolano, which has very explicit scenes of male-on-male violence, and I'll be very curious to see the reactions in Greece when it comes out. Probably there won't be any, because he's a foreigner, and there are different standards.

Q: But I'd be interested to know if sales of Sotiropoulou's book jumped at all as a result of this.

Q: Have you been following Plevris's court case at all? Did he argue freedom of expression, or historical accuracy, against the charges of racism in his book?

A: Both, I believe. And to be honest after the court case that reinstated *Zigzag* a lot of the commentators were writing in the blogs, Put Plevris's book in the school library, too, then, if it's all about freedom of expression. There's an argument to be made for that, of course.

Q: I think in the end even freedom of expression has to be contextualized, and I think we need to discuss it in those terms.

Q: And of course Ersi is in good company here. I don't think the debate will impact the literary merit of the book. Criticism has already formed an opinion about it, it was awarded the awards, and this all happened a long time afterwards, not at the time of publication.

A: And the church isn't playing an official role here, as it did with Roidis and Kazantzakis.

Q: So if we trace the development of banned books in Greece, we've made some progress.

A: And of course the fact that all of these people who are concerned about freedom of expression rushed into the breach is a positive sign for the health of Greek society, in the end. People for the most part didn't rush into the streets to burn the book, but to defend it.

Q: In the discussions on television, were there any women taking part?

A: No, actually, the only ones were the television presenters facilitating the debate.

Q: So even the debate was dominated by men.

A: But that might be a function of the usual suspects coming on to the talk show. Though mostly I was following things online, without too much access to Greek television.

Q: Do you have the decision of the second-degree court?

A: No, all I have is the statement of Ersi's lawyer. Gavalas released his decision on August 1. And it took six months for this to come to light, the controversy really starts in January, a year ago.