

University Seminar #703: Modern Greek Studies

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Speaker: Eleni Papargyriou

Topic: Selective and Distant Images: George Seferis's photographs of Cyprus

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Attendees: Artemis Schnebel, Bianca Isaias (Columbia), Karen Van Dyck (Columbia), Mark Mazower (Columbia)

Summary of Presentation:

Papargyriou's presentation discussed the 288 photographs Seferis took during the cumulative 78 days he spent on Cyprus in the early 1950s; in the course of the presentation she specifically mentioned a number of these photographs, which she showed to the audience. For the most part, Seferis's photography can be seen as a complementary medium to his keeping of diaries: the photographs, too, capture isolated moments to which Seferis returns, often reworking the scenes, figures, and places they represent in his poetry. With the photographs of Cyprus, taken at a time of intense political activity, Seferis's choices concerning what to represent and how accords with a "specific ideological and aesthetic program," commensurate with his pro-Enosis stance.

According to Papargyriou, the ideological program involved an attempt to provide "a visual argument for the continuity of this Greek civilization and its traces in the Cypriot landscape." The "selective repository of images" we see in this photographic oeuvre is heavily weighted toward ancient and Byzantine monuments, with a much lesser representation of the Frankish and Venetian periods, and virtually no hint of the three centuries of Ottoman rule. His understanding of the Hellenic, which involves a truncating of the past into time periods of which the ancient and the Byzantine dominate, is thus "not textured" and lacking a sense of cultural exchange. His focus on Byzantine art also serves to bridge the gap between classical imagery and popular and folk art. One series of shots taken of the damned in the frescoes of the Panayia Forvriotissa monastery in Asinou is later revisited in his poem "Details on Cyprus": a monk carves these figures onto a gourd (koloka), in accordance with a traditional Cypriot method of folk art. Seferis's poem also seeks to bridge the divide between antiquity and folk art by using Homeric vocabulary to describe this monk's act of craftsmanship, thus also tying folk art to the act of poetic creation.

Seferis's photographs also represent Cyprus as a place that is immune to external, and particularly Western, influences; he privileges the past over the present, and nowhere documents the struggle between tradition and modernity that the island was experiencing. Instead, in addition to monuments from the past, Seferis presents primarily craftsmen and children. He thus projects an understanding that the present is built on the foundations of the past, with traditional activities like spinning, wood-carving and pottery-making, and that the future, represented by his barefoot, peasant children, will continue to unfold along the same lines. Seferis's photography, then, presents Cyprus "as an organic entity

that has the ability to be reborn and to grow on its own resources of history and tradition.” Today, they have become “an allegory for a world that has become extinct.”

Summary of Discussion:

Q: Could you say something about the kinds of cameras Seferis used and whether the specific technology of his chosen cameras had any impact on the aesthetic makeup of his photographs?

A. Seferis used a variety of cameras, none of which have survived, because his wife Maro gave them all away to his friends after his death. Kasdaglis mentions a few in his book, but I’m not very much aware of the technical capacities of the cameras he was using. I can say that Seferis wasn’t interested in the kind of visual experimentation Embeirikos pursued—he would have used cameras that would provide clarity, he was interested in producing a well-defined image.

Q: These last two images you showed are the most visually striking. I was almost bored in the beginning; the photograph of the potter was the first one that grabbed me visually. But in these last two, he has a real visual poetics that is free, is speaking, that doesn’t have anything to do with cameras, but feels more in line with painting.

Q: The photographs you showed of the damned reminded me of images from churches of Catalonia from the 12th to the 14th century, bordering on demonology.

A: Images like this entered Eastern iconography from the West. In the beginning you could only find them in the narthex, they weren’t allowed to enter the main body of the church, weren’t allowed in the room where the mystery was to take place. But Seferis is not concerned with the origin of these images, that doesn’t come into play at all, just as when he photographs churches he doesn’t seem to mind if there are gothic elements or anything else. His knowledge about the subjects of these photographs is not textured, the influences bear no significance for him: he photographs them as Greek buildings.

Q: I’m interested in what you think Seferis’s photography tells us about a visual poetics, how that works in his poetry. My first impression is that the photographs are so static, whereas the way he uses images in his poetry is much more cinematographic, there’s a sense of movement—you almost feel seasick reading some of the poems. So what is it about the visual poetics of his photography, which of course doesn’t have to be like this, he could have shot these some other way.

A: It’s a very interesting question. I think with Seferis, the camera trains his eye to see more precisely, and yet what he does with the finished image of the photograph is not as interesting as what he does in the poems. He uses photography as a medium to train his eye to see more precisely. I think that my conclusion is that Seferis does not regard photography to be an art: he uses it as a way to acquire images that he wants to retain in his memory, and again to train his eye.

Q: Generally speaking, at the time he was working I think it was too early for photography to be called an art form. Photographers still had very little control over what they were doing, so there was much less room for experimentation.

Q: I wanted to bring up what you said earlier about the gourds and the pottery, that he's thematizing craft there. He's almost using photography as a kind of pictorial dictionary, catching an image of the Cypriot word, bringing it in as something he can use.

A: Yes, particularly with this photograph of the *alakatin*, the well-wheel, which then appears in "Details on Cyprus." There are all of these moments when the photographs enter the poetry. Again I don't think the picture of it is as important as what he does with the language later on.

Q: Around this time he took a trip to Skala, outside of Smyrna. Did he take photographs there?

A: He did take one of the well with the mulberry tree, but in general he didn't take as many photographs there as in other places, which might be interesting—the fact that he didn't see what he expected to see there, so visually it was a disappointment, and he didn't want to take those images with him when he left.

Q: How did you pick these photographs to present from among the ones you saw in the archive?

A: I chose the ones that were more closely related to the themes I wanted to discuss. About 120 of these images are published in Kasdaglis's book, which is a very good sample of them. The archive doesn't differ very much, it just has numerous versions of many of the shots, and the editors chose the best ones.

Q: When I was doing my masters on Seferis and Eliot's criticism, I had to come up with a committee, and found someone in the English department who read some of Seferis's criticism and poetry. He said that the criticism is very ideologically driven and makes his thought much more synthetic, but by reading the poetry you get much more of a sense of texture, of things being disassembled, of a processural form. So when you were talking about how his photography is driven by certain ideological coordinates, it made me think that the photography might have more in common with his criticism than with his poetry. Also, "Details on Cyprus" came up in our seminar last week, too, in which we were talking about how this collection that came out of his trip to Cyprus, *Logbook III*, is his most sensual, with lots of texture. You see some of these rather aestheticized images, and then read the poetry, which is very sensual and material in a way, even anti-idealizing. I don't know where we see that in the photography at all.

A: Do we see it? I don't think we do. I think that confirms what I was suggesting was happening here. The image has to be invested with so much more before it enters the poetry, it's only one factor in the creative process.

Q: What you're describing is this notion of photography as the handmaiden of poetry, which may be his view and ours, but this is also a time when photography is playing a very important role in Greece in its own right. You have private photography agencies, photographs in newspapers, the arrival of cheaper cameras on the market, the nascent organization of state tourism, which involves the professional photographing of a certain kind of Greek landscape for exportation abroad. I'm wondering whether you want to historicize your argument. For instance, what Seferis is doing bears many important similarities but also differences from Voula Papaioannou's attempts to document a certain kind of folk art. I'm wondering if you know anything about what Seferis was thinking concerning what was happening in photography in his day.

A; The only reference I've found is to Boissonnat. Seferis had seen some images, but doesn't comment on them. In general in his diaries he is very cryptic on this visual culture, which perhaps relates to this relationship to technology: he didn't think something that was technologically produced could be art.

Q: Some of the pictures of poverty and nobility reminds me of some of these leftist portraits from the mountain, of raggedy but noble kids, of the sort taken by Spyros Meletzis or Papaioannou.

Q: These kids might look ragged to us but that may not be how he thought of them. After all, they have shoes, they're not too thin, in comparison to some of the children he might have been seeing elsewhere they might not have been so badly off.

A: Yes, that's a good point. It was certainly my interpretation of it. But I am struck by the frequency with which children appear in the images, I think that must bear some kind of meaning.

Q: What I found ironic listening to you talk about Seferis's selections in what to photograph is that it shows how a western modernist can be very similar to a Greek modernist, which is perhaps why Greek modernists were so well appreciated elsewhere. Durrell, the other figure associated with Cyprus at this time—who Seferis was trying to avoid because they had been buddies back in the 1940s but he was suspicious Durrell might be a spy for British—when you look at the ideology behind their work, it's very similar. There's this idea of a self-contained tradition, impervious to the West. Durrell's idea was, Hey, you Cypriots, why do you want to wake up? Stay sleepy, it's better this way. And his chief metaphor was the young and education. His point was that it's good that the Cypriots were uneducated in this way. In time, though, he began to realize that maybe the British should have done much more for the education of the Cypriots, that the uneducated Cypriot turn to EOKA in the end. And with Seferis too, you see this concern with this idealized childhood. When it started to seem like people were going to have to snap out of this, he reacts to say, I'm going to dig my heels in and not accept compromise, Cyprus is going to remain this idealized place. His last diary entry before he dies says, I was right in 1957. So the two of them, from completely different perspectives, conceive of childhood in the same way.

A: Yes, and I don't think his point in showing this kind of poverty was that they were miserable. In fact he wanted to show that there is some kind of endurance there, that they're happy in their poverty. It's that kind of idealization.

Q: Is there anything that strikes you as different in the photographs from the Middle East in their perspective or selection?

A: The photographs he takes in the Middle East are far less in number than the ones from Cyprus. There is also a total absence of any contemporary Arab element, he mostly photographs archaeological sites having to do with the Greek world. In a sense there is a coherence there, in the absence of contemporary images.

Q: At dinner you briefly mentioned a historical trajectory from the positioning of Greek literary figures in front of the camera to this moment where they pick up the camera themselves. Could you say something about that?

A: Yes, well this is really the second part of the project, which is about the high modernists. It is preoccupied with the fact that people like Seferis took the camera in their hands, whereas previously poets like Cavafy had a big concern with photography but they never actually took photographs themselves. Sikelianos, for instance—there was a big element of photography in the Delphic Festival. I think there is a shift here with Seferis and with Embeirikos after him, though what Embeirikos does is visually much more interesting from an aesthetic point of view.

Q: So you think it has something to do with how Seferis separates the public from the private persona in the diaries, that moment when he decides to separate out the personal from the political? Do you think that here, too, with the photography, he's putting forth a diplomatic kind of image-making, instead of using the photography for personal reasons, or even sensual ones?

A: No he isn't, you're right. Though I've heard rumors that there is much more in the archive than is publicly displayed, some traces of nudity, for example. But I don't know if that is true. I saw a large part of the archive and there are photos that are more personal, of friends and their girlfriends, but none of them is anything that could not be displayed publicly.

Q: There are also a few more mosques.

A: There are, in the photographs of Constantinople, but in that Cyprus collection the only one I saw is the one I mentioned of Saint Sofia which has been turned into a mosque. There, though, he only photographs Maro playing with a dog in front of it, not the building itself.

Q: If you go to the museum in Nicosia, the folk art, they have a number of these *alakatins* parked outside. I wonder how they became to be folk objects and how much Seferis's poem contributed to that.

Q: Could you tell us a few more words about what the overall project is, what this is a part of?

A: Well, not much has been written on the photographs, and most of what has is concerned with the fact that they accompanied his travels: the photographs are treated as visual annotations of the places he traveled to, or illustrations of the diaries. I definitely need to contextualize his work by comparing what Seferis did with what other amateur photographers did at the time, what other poets thought of photography, what position photography had as a fine art at that time. Pavlos Nirvanas took the first photograph, but Papadiamantis doesn't want to be photographed, so we have very few images of him. He also had this religious idea that you shouldn't make an idol of yourself. So there are all these dynamics in the first decades of the 20th century in Greece. The project will be much more historical, apart from the aesthetic side of it.

Q: Are you interested in how the medium itself allows poets to do a certain thing? You're at Princeton now, so I'm thinking of Eduardo Cadava's work on how photography rearranges the possibilities of what you can write. But you don't really seem interested in that part of it. So what's at stake here? What does looking at Seferis's photographs do for our reading of the poetry? What is the argument?

A: I think it has to do with the stages technology goes through in this world, the issues of realism and how the photograph is seen as a realist medium, if it is. The photograph produces all kinds of interesting dynamics, those issues of memory, how can you freeze a moment, which is a concern that poetry has already been displaying. So, if you suddenly have a way of doing that visually, how does poetry relate to this kind of ability to freeze the moment?