

## Socialist Realism and Its Nuances in Greece after World War II: Influences, Conflicts, and Contradictions. The Role of Abstraction

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### ABSTRACT

Greece was liberated from German occupation in October 1944. Immediately afterwards, there followed the national division between pro-Western and pro-Soviet organisations. This division had already existed during the Greek resistance, but it was reinforced in 1946, upon the start of the Civil War that lasted until 1949. The Greek Civil War was the result and the dramatic culmination of the Cold War. Following the victory of the national forces on the communist guerrilla groups, Greece remained under the umbrella of the West, as represented at that time by the United States, which had succeeded the British influence. The Truman Doctrine was implemented immediately afterwards and, through the Marshall Plan, Greece secured significant financial aid which contributed to restoring its economy that had been severely hit in the 1940s. Nonetheless, the communist ideology was strong in Greece, exerting its influence not only on politics but also on culture. Culture also suffered the consequences of national division. Socialist realism, as an artistic and ideological movement, made a comeback on the Greek artistic scene and exerted significant influence on Greek artists. Conflicts occurred on a daily basis. Abstraction, adopted by many new artists, served as a means to counterbalance socialist realism. This is the general picture of Greek art in the 1950s, the period covered in the paper.

**Keywords:** Socialist realism, Abstraction, Cold War, Marshall Plan, Civil War, National Division, Greek post-war art.

### INTRODUCTION

Already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, modern Greek art had been on good terms with realism. The artists' preference for realistic expression and naturalistic morphological aspects, including in themes having idealistic contents, had been an undeniable fact. The well-known "School of Munich", the first important group of artists with academic background and practical training, having studied in the Academy of Fine Arts in the Bavarian capital, determined for the most part the type of art cultivated in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and up to the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Lydakis, 1976). Although the themes selected varied, the artistic style chosen relied on realism and naturalistic expression, taking the term "realism" (much like the term "idealism") to be a reference to the contents of the works, whereas the term "naturalism" referred to the artistic medium (Schmidt, 1966: 29, Eisenman, 1994). The most important Greek painter in this period, Nikolaos Gyzis (1842-1901), professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich since 1888, has been

considered a model of artistic expression, a combination of realistic style and poetic representation, showcasing "Greekness" and the "Greek colour", as affirmed by author and intellectual Pericles Giannopoulos (1869-1910), terms that would appear in various forms and at different times, including in the post-war period (Giannopoulos, 1961).

For decades, including during the period of modernism, which made a somewhat delayed appearance in Greece, namely through the so-called "Generation of the 1930s", Greek art expressed itself along those two axes: realism and naturalism. Indeed, this period coincided with dramatic historic national circumstances for Greece, as a result of the National Schism, namely the Catastrophe in Asia Minor (1922) and the ensuing population exchange between Greece and Turkey, by virtue of the Treaty of Lausanne (1923). This was the painful result of the conflict between King Constantine I and Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos regarding the campaign of Greece in Asia Minor to protect

the Greek population that used to live there (Koliopoulos, 2014: 536 ff).

Those historic events have had a strong impact on intellectuals in Greece, including visual artists, and, in terms of art, it initiated a trend to “revisit the past” (in French, *rappel à l'ordre*) or to seek “Greekness”, ideological devices referring to the long history of Hellenism as well as to versions of European modernism (Kotidis, 1993: 101 ff, Papanikolaou, 1999: 130 ff).

This trend also persisted in the aftermath of World War II, including after the appearance of abstraction, which was embraced by several Greek artists, in particular those who had studied abroad. The new trend gained the support of several art critics. Others have supported a kind of “Hellenocentrism” that brought back ideas and views from the past by arguing that art should be intelligible to the general public and that Greek culture would provide the means for an authentic art (Kotidis, 2011: 38 ff).

The problem was further exacerbated in the 1950s with the manifestation of socialist realism, as a result of the national division, and its use as an expression of the ideological conflicts of that period, i.e. the Cold War, and as an artistic weapon to fight the models of Western civilisation. It is worth noting that the cultural perception of the left was in strongly contrast to abstract expressionism, whereas, on the political level, the communist left of that time, which had triggered the Civil War, also opposed the financial aid provided to Greece by the United States, through the Marshall Plan, to allow it to deal with the destruction caused by World War II (Vakalopoulos, 1993: 438 ff).

On the political level, during the two decades that followed World War II, the situation in Greece had been difficult, although a clear trend of improvement could be noticed. National division was permanent and had adversely affected all sectors in the country’s public and private life. The United States’ involvement in Greece gave rise to reactions, but it cannot be denied that the financial aid, which had been requested by the Greek government, has contributed, together with the tireless effort of Greeks, in restoring the economy in the subsequent years (Vakalopoulos, 1993: 434 ff).

### **REALISM AND “GREEKNESS”**

Realism is actually an artistic movement from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, although the term has been

widely used irrespective of periods, to the extent that any image is described with verisimilitude and meticulously renders the details of the external world. Undoubtedly, the invention of photography has contributed to the development of the movement also because capturing the instantaneous nature of the photographic image and reproducing it required special knowledge and skills. On the other hand, painters, in competition with photographers, with the help of imagination and the sense organs, have strived to achieve visual accuracy as well as create multiple meanings (Arnason, 1986, Eisenman, 1994).

In Greek art, realism did not have a long past, other than in the interwar period, where it was linked to aspects of the Greek cultural heritage and, to the extent that artists were seeking their “ancestral roots”, has served as a gateway to history and art.

On the other hand, the concept of “Greekness”, which was essentially a vague and messy ideological device, was the predominant objective at the time, in order to express the classical analogy, the rationality, and the purity of the classical ideal. This cultivated a kind of academic classicism, recycling at the same time modernist styles and themes using a new expressive language (Pavlopoulos, 1994).

In the wake of World War II, the concept of “Greekness” found itself enriched with new experiences as a result of the new circumstances, which arose in Greece following the liberation from the German occupation, and of the tendency to provide ideological support to the new national situation. The artists at the forefront of this situation were those of the Generation of the 1930s, former advocates of “Greekness” with a strong presence in visual arts. The difference now lay in the fact that artists “returned” to realism to express their reaction to abstraction, with which they had not yet made peace. Another concept made its appearance, “Hellenocentrism”, which was more precise and with clearer contents. Indeed, several artists emerged who chose their themes from the Greek visual reality, as well as from aspects of everyday life, filling them with bright colours and limpid Mediterranean characteristics with the purpose of reaching a broader public. The theoretical advocate of this tendency was the then Director of the National Gallery, Marinos Kalligas, who never missed an opportunity to praise the painters who adhered to Greek tradition and were focused

on the object, in line with the requirements of realism (Stefanidis, 2003, *passim*).

Given these circumstances, in the early 1950s, artistic creation found itself at an impasse, at a time when abstract art took its first serious steps on the Greek artistic stage and when, on the other hand, for reasons to be addressed immediately below, socialist realism made its incursion into Greek art and unexpectedly politicised it.

### **SOCIALIST REALISM VS. ABSTRACTION**

Soon after the end of the German occupation, Greece found itself caught in the whirlwind of the Civil War (1946-1949), which resulted in a national division with immense adverse consequences on the Greek political scene. Indeed, it also drove a wedge between figures in the cultural field, since the Cold War created a constant confrontation (from an ideological and a political standpoint) between West and East, which extended in many areas of public life. Following the victory of the National Army, Greece adhered to the West; it was actually the only country in the Balkans to do so. To help it restore its economy, it was provided with significant aid from the United States under the “Marshall Plan” and the relevant resolution adopted by the US Congress in 1947 under the presidency of Harry Truman (Kalyvas & Marantzidis, 2015).

In spite of being the defeated side in the Greek Civil War, the communist left continued to exert considerable influence on the country’s intellectual life. A large part of artistic output took sides in the dilemma “realism or abstraction” which had a clear ideological connotation. The climate was polarised, in particular in the 1950s, including in visual arts. Abstraction, in the form of either abstract expressionism or *art informel*, was considered to represent the West, and in particular the United States, which had undertaken initiatives to promote abstract expressionism in Europe. On the other hand, the Soviet Union carried on its propaganda for socialist realism, which was a kind of “anti-modernist” movement brought back to life from the past, with the purpose of “awakening” Western societies (Foster et al, 2004: 280 ff).

In Greece, socialist realism had not exerted any particular influence in the past. The aforementioned Generation of the 1930s had used tradition and realism while searching for the “primeval” values of Greek culture as well as seeking to approach aspects of European modernism (Papanikolaou, 1999: 88 ff). On the

contrary, during the post-war period, socialist realism made an impressive entrance into the Greek artistic stage, taking advantage of the social and political contradictions which had emerged with intensity, immediately following the liberation of Greece from the Nazis, in October 1944. Those artists who embraced socialist realism did so for two reasons: (a) to counter abstraction, which represented the culture of the West at that time and which was the diametric opposite of the views of the Greek left, and (b) to confer a social message to their images, by selecting themes from everyday life and using the language of realism as understood by the general public. This was demonstrated by the great number of participations of realist artists in the “Panhellenic” Exhibition of 1948 (at the *Zappeion Megaron*), as compared to the minimal representation of abstract artists (Moschonas, 2010, Adamopoulou, 2019).

The spearhead for promoting Marxist ideas in the field of art, as – supposedly – expressed through the theory of socialist realism, was “*Epitheorisi Technis*” (1954), a magazine which was part of the propaganda publications of the Communist Party of Greece. According to Mathiopoulos (2008: 25), “one should also take into account the fact that, having the same convictions, i.e. being a propaganda publication for the party, *Epitheorisi Technis* was also controlled by all party members who considered themselves to be the genuine interpreters of the ideological purity of the Communist Party of Greece”. Indeed, the magazine promoted, through its contents, artists who were proponents of the Soviet-inspired socialist realism, while strongly criticising abstract artists.

In Greece, socialist realism reached its pinnacle after the Civil War, in a period where intellectuals and artists of the left “began expressing themselves and demonstrating that socialist realism with its anthropocentrism, its clear realistic outline, its positive and optimistic spirit, as well as other elements, was still alive and could once again be opposed to the formalism of modernism whose main form of expression in Greece, at that time, was abstraction” (Baroutas, 2006: 71). Some artists, such as Valias Semertzidis, Memos Makris, even Diamantis Diamantopoulos, have consciously made that choice.

Indeed, it is worth noting that when, in 1960, Giannis Spyropoulos, one of the most important representatives of abstraction in Greece, was

awarded a prize at the Venice Biennale, the publications of the left, including *Epitheorisi Technis*, disregarded or downplayed the importance of this award (Roumeliotis, 2006: 137-139). It is a fact that many artists, unable to make the association between artistic life and politics, went to live in countries abroad, where they created their own independent world in visual arts. Indeed, some have excelled in their field (Kounellis, Tsoklis, Kessanlis, Kaniaris).

Nevertheless, it was not possible to reverse the course of events. The 1960s are considered to be the culminating period for Greek abstraction, in spite of the polarising climate which prevailed on the political and cultural level in the aftermath of World War II.

## CONCLUSION

Greek modern art entered into the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century under the worst omens. The Cold War and the national division which culminated in the Civil War (1946-1949) had created adverse conditions for qualitative and quantitative output, given that the nature of the division was not only political and social, but also cultural. At first, art had used realism as a vehicle to promote ideological devices, such as

“Greekness” and “Hellenocentrism”, which conferred a specific character to its development. Thus, socialist realism found fertile ground for its development, also taking advantage of the general intellectual climate prevailing at that time in Greece. The conflict with abstraction, and, in broader terms, with the modernist movement, was inevitable. This has affected the development of art, as well as of the artists themselves, some of whom have looked for a new future in countries abroad. The politisation of artistic life has been a particularly negative phenomenon, because art has tended to serve selfish purposes, under the pretence of socialisation and participation of artists in the social process. In any event, the 1960s found Greek art moving towards abstraction and embracing aspects of European modernism, in spite of all the inherent difficulties still prevailing in the country.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research is co-financed by Greece and the European Union (European Social Fund- ESF) through the Operational Programme «Human Resources Development, Education and Lifelong Learning» in the context of the project “Reinforcement of Postdoctoral Researchers - 2nd Cycle” (MIS-5033021), implemented by the State Scholarships Foundation (IKY).



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**Citation:** Papanikolaou Panagiota, "Socialist Realism and Its Nuances in Greece after World War II: Influences, Conflicts, and Contradictions. The Role of Abstraction", *Journal of Fine Arts*, 3(2), 2020, pp. 12-16.

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