Visibility as an Aspect of the Class Signification of Certain Early 20th Century Athenian Intellectuals

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I

Both Baudelaire and Marx and Engels discuss, each for a different reason, class drop-outs of a specific historical kind. Baudelaire distinguishes a group of "déclassés", men beyond or below class. Aristocrats in the mid-nineteenth century abandoned their class, as they had in the French Revolution, to ally themselves with the bourgeoisie, and in the mean time, the bourgeois were dropping out and joining forces with the proletariat. For Marx and Engels, it is the people who have managed to understand the whole of the historical process who are most likely to join the proletariat in its historical mission (Noutsos 1998; Marx [1846] 1965), while Baudelaire asserts that "perhaps the future belongs to them" (Mouquet 45).

For Georg Lukacs, less than a century later, "[b]ourgeoisie and proletariat are the only pure classes in bourgeois society. They are the only classes whose e-xistence and development are entirely dependent on the course taken up by the modern evolution of production and only from the vantage point of these classes can a plan for the total organization of society even be imagined" (Lukacs 59), since the aim of the petty bourgeois and the peasants is neither to reverse, nor to transcend capitalism.

This idea originates in Marx's analyses on French history (Meszaros 126fn) and has often been associated with the class consciousness of intellectuals. In principle, one problématique has inquired whether the role of intellectuals is to articulate bourgeois ideology or to "drop out" of the bourgeoisie and join the proletarian class, and another, assuming a distinct position for intellectuals, has been concerned with whether they belong to a separate class, or are basically *déclassés* or supra-class. Historically, there is proof for all purely socioeconomic scenarios (Charle 1990).

In the modern period there have been instances where intellectuals have been united in romantic alienation, or in socially transcendental superiority. For

brief periods of time, notably during the Dreyfus affair in France, they even felt like members of a politico-professional community, a community with a mission and a medium, which amounted to an intense group consciousness and to the taking up of collective action towards a common goal. This is what happened for a short period just before the First World War in Athens, where the linguistic struggle, the support of the Liberal Party and a series of cultural activities were undertaken with the common aim of enhancing and strengthening national culture.

In general, the Athenian intellectual scene of the beginning of the twentieth century, or rather of the period of the "renascence of Letters", between 1897 and 1912 (Gounelas 1981, 15), who frequented the literary cafés and contributed to the cultural journals, were very much a sociological mixture. They were not just a group of bourgeois offspring seeking to enlighten the masses through their experience in European universities (Kordatos 426), such as the "Sociologists" or the "Japonists", nor were they just scatterings of proletarian bohemians from the provinces or the underprivileged quarters of Athens. Some were appointed to the University, others worked in the government or for newspapers, some were students, while others remained unemployed for long periods. What they all shared was the common medium of their profession and their common interest in culture. Within the limits and solitude of this interest, their passion was filtered into the notion of a national culture that was intellectually viable, socially convenient and psychologically productive.

A distinct ideology of "hard work" emerged, which was both a defense mechanism against accusations of bohemian laziness, and a compensation for the lack of set standards for the exchange value of intellectual production, the lack, in other words, of proof that the plethora of poems and paintings could be constructively absorbed by the newly modernized urban market or, indeed, that it had anything to contribute to European culture.

Furthermore, the varying degrees of attachment to institutions and paid posts, as well as the differing levels of wealth amongst intellectuals (Alexiou 1997) produced a hierarchy which sustained itself by encouraging the masking of individual disagreement through moralistic rhetoric. This unevenness in background and experience, as well as a shared sense of underachievement by European standards, seems to have led intellectual discussions to elevate the versatile and ethically abstract notion of "sincerity", as a qualitative suffix to artworks, artists, or ideological positions, to the highest regulating value of symbolic production. (Yoka 1999)

One should hardly imagine Greek class "drop-outs" offering their services to the revolutionary proletariat. More typical were educated and enterprizing intellectuals like Constandinos Hadjopoulos or G. Skliros, who at the end of the 1900s joined Eleftherios Venizelos' Party in hope of forwarding the socialist cause, or traditionalists like Papadiamandis, "the hellenic Tolstoy", who rejected material wealth for a life of asceticism, following Greek Orthodox teachings, maintaining social ties with people of the "lower orders" in search of a feeling

of union with the popular soul. In other cases, the hereditary wealth of intellectuals such as Dimitrios Vikelas or Costas Michailidis poured into cultural initiatives. Conversely, using the intellectual profession as a means of social ascension was a widespread phenomenon.

In theory, the fundamental concept of class interest works in a unique way in the case of intellectuals. If their role is to articulate bourgeois ideology, it must be because their economic-speculative interests lie with the bourgeois. If, however, they drop out, it is because they believe their historical-moral interests do not lie with the bourgeoisie. However, in many cases, the very ideologies of creativity and culturalism that intellectuals nurture are based on the refutation of material or political interest. The intellectuals' idealism has a lot to do with a practical abstinence from middle-class comfort, and indifference to material gains or public recognition. It is historically inaccurate to dismiss such ideologies as being simply a matter of rhetoric masking the reality of calculated career moves. Social antagonism is not only related to access to material wealth or other readily recognizable gains, like fame and widespread respectability. The social units within which each individual functions and seeks recognition cannot always be reduced to some general notion of the public sphere, and the reasons they do so are often hard to distinguish. Still, the self-fashioning of intellectuals involved a specific suppression of class.

In any case, the social force of legitimization of the dominance of a certain class, as well as that of the potential dropout with a cause, are embodied in the notion of the intellectual. It is the modern intellectual who symbolizes the uncertainty and instability of class, the wide gap between the socioeconomic and the political, as well as the metaphysical moot point at the core of the concept of ideology. On the other hand, it is again the intellectual who stands up for the importance of political choice over social background.

As a mediator between being and consciousness, created at the point where the objective and subjective aspects of social identity converge, the intellectual, as conceived in the mid-nineteenth century and at least until the First World War, is granted a privileged status. He (and much rarely she) is allowed a class allegiance by choice, where the Marxian "subjective" element of class (class consciousness), becomes more important than the position within the relations of production, that is to say, the "objective" aspect.

II

From different perspectives, a number of studies, ranging from the works of the early Baudrillard to more recent comments by Jonathan Crary, have coped with the remaking of the observer in modernity and the construction of a certain way of seeing that included an awareness of the act of seeing itself, based mainly on Baudelaire's *flâneurism,* as well as Simmel's and Benjamin's writing on the city, and then Foucault's *Order of Things*. Crary, interpreting Adorno's notion of *An-*

schaulichkeit, has explained how a new scopic regime in the nineteenth century was established. It created those sense-perceptual conditions that reified the act of seeing through constructing a voyeuristic observer operating within sign systems which were visual both in construction and in effect.[1] (What one sees, *is*, and meaningful *being* derives from its being seen.)

The re-creation of the observer and the redefinition of vision, in other words, the establishment of new codes of visuality, are related to modes of seeing invited by the modern media of communication, by the built environment of the city, by the new means of transport, the density of stimuli created by the flow of commodities, and crucially, through a need for new conventions to come to terms with metropolitan anonymity. The early twentieth-century examples below hint at how an important part of building a group identity of progressive national intellectuals relied on a discourse on the *visibility* of intellectuals in the public spaces of Athens. The visualization of their socio-professional functions served to rationalize their ambiguous relationship to work and leisure in opposition to a notion of the "profit-making bourgeois".

III

In September 1912, one 'Letter from an Athenian' to the cultural journal *Καλλιτέχνης* (*The Artist*, 1910-1912, 1914), signed by "The Stranger", who was possibly Efstratios Efstratiadis, in the column "The Fine Letters and the Arts", gives an account of the author's summer holidays at Faliron, "the fashionable drive in Athens...which the king t[ook] almost daily" (Miller, 293). Faliron, today part of Piraeus, was one of the first summer resorts very close to the city and had become accessible by train in 1880:[2]

> Faliron has been beautiful this year, exactly because it has not been too crowded. A certain public that belongs to the jours fixes [sic] people, has been visiting it three times a week. The rest of the nights, attendance has been very scarce, by people who are not of the kind who go down to Faliron just to see and be seen, or to comment and be commented on. (*Καλλιτέχνης* 1912, 204)

The article continued with a brief catalogue of "dear" or "beloved" people who frequented Faliron during the summer: a military officer, some novelists and poets, a businessman's family, the famous editor, writer and president of the "Lyceum of Greek Women" Kallirroi Parren, "a woman responsible for many a female activity" (*ibid*). The presentation of each person was embellished with remarks based on passing, external features such as items of their clothing, a friendly gesture towards a dog, the loudness of a voice during intervals in the playing of the Italian orchestra. On one girl, the author noticed "the most beautiful feminine hands [he had] ever seen" (*ibid)*.

These "chosen" people were in Faliron simply because "they loved [it]" and not to "see or to be seen". Among them was "the owner of the newspaper *Ακρόπολις*, Mr. [Vlassis] Gavriilides, always alone, strolling down the platform, listening to the music and attuning it to his exalted dreams for Greece..."

> ...Sometimes, [the writer] M. Hadjopoulos arrives, who has no time even to breathe, he writes and translates under the electric lamps amidst the crowd, paying no attention to it....
>
> ...And then comes the public, the large public, with many familiar and amiable faces, but also many parvenus [sic]. All these people have learnt to do is how to dress. They are boisterous and act as if the train belongs to them, their conversation is idle, no kindheartedness can be heard in it. In no society in the world does such hideousness reign. People everywhere [else] are bound to find a chance to get away from their narrow selfishness and bring their soul closer to the beauty of nature and the love of their equals (ibid.)

It is interesting that, while his whole commentary describes his brief glimpses of people and the way they behave in an engaged and also voyeuristic manner, 'the Stranger' ends like this:

> But Faliron is not the people, and especially not these people, Faliron is nature, it is spectacle, and before its beauty withers the pettiness of human talk. *(ibid)*

The 'Letter from an Athenian' is an attempt to forge the style of a *flâneur*, yet it is not entirely successful. The misanthropic aphorisms, according to which Faliron was only important because of the landscape, did not prevent the author from offering to the readership an empathic gossip column.[3] Those intellectuals whom he was watching with intense interest, the "Athenian Stranger" praised exactly for their unawareness of or indifference to being watched. As a stranger, an observer with an ironically intentional alienation, he was claiming the same qualities for himself. While moving unnoticed through the crowd, he took it as his task to write about it from the advantageous position of a non-participant. He thus created a distance between himself and both the general public, and the intellectuals. But the distance is that of reverence, not of blasé aloofness, towards the intellectuals. A humble journalistic stance struggles with a pose of superiority and the result is a segmented, incoherent narrative flow.

There is an effort to legitimize the act of observing, to legitimize concern with outward appearances in the journalistic genre of the "urban chronicle" itself, which is exemplified in this particular column. This profound uneasiness notwithstanding, the genre offers a critique of bourgeois ways. If the *flâneur* is "a sort of voyeuristic observer and idle gossip" (Collier 26), the journalist could not afford to be idle. The identities of journalist and intellectual almost clash.

The ingredients that are significant for the creation of both attitudes are charged with the gentle tension of the relationship between intense unselfconscious concentration and scrutinizing observation. They are juxtaposed against the desire to talk, to see and be seen in a socially integrating way, in a play of rhetoric and appearances that annuls, in its supposed superficiality, any inner, individualistic involvement.

IV

A similar perspective on the bourgeois is offered in "Beyond this World", a review of a play with the same title by Gerasimos Vokos, which had its première at the Variété Theatre on the 27th August 1910 with the Kyvele Adrianou theatre company. The playscript was published in *Καλλιτέχνης* during the period it was being performed. Though certain criticisms it received in the literary press were quite dismissive, the play ran for several months and had a high attendance rate.

In *Beyond this World*, a painter is in love with his best friend's wife. Deeply ashamed, the two confess their morally criminal feelings. When they realize that the victim-husband and best friend will not punish them for their betrayal, the painter follows the woman in suicide. During the course of his relationship, which is only given through innuendo to the audience, the painter's adulterous passion directly feeds into the conceptual and inspirational qualities of his art. He produces a masterpiece on the subject of social liberty.

There is an explicitly expressed conflict between the idealist husband (a Platonist, a socialist, an admirer of art and impoverished by choice) on the one hand, and an acquaintance of his, a family man and businessman, who is insensitive to culture and who has acquired his wealth in unscrupulous ways. The author is unambiguously identifying with the unsuccessful idealist. It is interesting to listen to the Platonist's wife, Zoe, who in many ways is the central tragic figure in the play, criticizing the behaviour of a merchant and his wife by referring to the larger social group to which they belong:

> "They don't live for themselves, everything they do, they do in order to show off. They move in rhythm, walk, sit and greet in rhythm. Woe to whomsoever does not have rhythm as their constant companion."4

The "Stranger's" observations on the visitors of Faliron and Zoe's defensive complaints share a discomfort with the desire to be seen and to show off a certain unspontaneous and uniform, calculated bodily disposition, that is to say, with certain traits of the mentality of the urban middle class. They both condemn self-consciousness and concern only for appearances.

The conflict that is fictionalized in the dynamics of the two characters in Vokos' play can be seen as a conflict within the bourgeois class, or even a moral

antagonism between mischievous industry and the aversion towards wealth. The social positions of the two men are defined through a difference in their perception and appearance rather than through a conflict between opposing kinds of "objective interest". The characters represent values that are opposed to each other but are also complementary. In "The Stranger's" account of the visitors at the holiday resort, the antithesis again is not of socioeconomic status, but of disposition, it entails a different use of the same space. In both cases, outward behaviour and the experience of space directly allude to an economic-moral stance.

The two texts belong to distinctly different genres. The "Ideological Theatre", to which Vokos' *Beyond this World* belongs, operated within the dramatic conventions of the Northern European theatre that were very often taken up uncritically by Greek playwrights.[5] The plots themselves in symbolist and naturalist drama were gleaned from foreign ones, the effect being that descriptions of urban and countryside social settings sometimes bore hardly any relationship to Greek social reality. (Puchner 95) However, both the first-person failed *flâneur* of journalism and the fictional anti-bourgeois are instances of an acute class competition. Intellectuals were trying to fend off certain elements of a class signification they felt was threatening them.

V

If, in urban chronicles and theatre dialogue, the desire to see and to be seen was dismissed as being bourgeois and unworthy of true intellectuals, there were moments, reserved for other literary genres, where seeing and being seen constituted the very conditions of sociability. Frequenting a "literary" café was one of the accepted, almost indispensable, features of intellectuals' everyday practice. The café was a space that made intellectuals into a concrete, visible and eponymous public group, and kept their ideological conflicts under social control.

In the pages of cultural journals like *Νουμάς*, *Παναθήναια*, or *Καλλιτέχνης*, cafés were frequently mentioned, in particular the "Neon Kendron" (Papakostas 140-1), one of the longest surviving cafés in Athens, second only to the legendary "Dexameni". So, not only would many people, active in the literary scene, spend several hours of their day there, but this activity was also systematically recorded. So in the obituary of the sculptor and professor at the School of Fine Arts Lazaros Sochos, for instance, it was mentioned that "his hours of leisure he passed at the Neon Kendron [café]. That was his only public appearance." (*Καλλιτέχνης 1911, 397)*

"Chrysakis" called itself a γαλακτοπωλείον (dairy-milkshop) or "Tearooms" to foreigners. It had marble tables and bamboo seats and, in the early part of the century, had foreign waitresses and many English clients (Kairofyllas 165). It was praised for its civilized atmosphere and interior decoration as well as for the exquisite taste and healthiness of its products. In an article on "Neon Kendron" on the occasion of the poet Stefanos Martzokis' birthday, the establish-

ment was called "a noisy and yet so civilized place", where intellectuals played billiards and staged their ideological quarrels on Platonism, Socialism and Christianity (Vokos, 'The Maestro' 200).

Cafés, then, and specifically the literary cafés in the centre of Athens, remained exempt from the rules of bourgeois massification. They seemed to resist the bourgeois vanity fair: the literary café scene bred mostly relations of mutual respect and recognition. Excess exposure could hardly harm an intellectual's public image. The cafés' livelihood remained beyond the "hypocrisy" and "vanity" of seeing and being seen, noisy talking was meaningful rather than "petty" or "vulgar", there was no annoying "living in rhythm". Places like the "Dexameni" and "Neon Kendron" retained the aura and *gravitas* yet not the malodorous oriental connotations of the older *καφενεία*, the sites of male political discussions and decision-making. But most significantly, they were protected from the contamination of easy material profit symbolized by the bourgeois-cum-merchant.

Not surprisingly, early nineteenth-century cafés were called "the central administration of the church of the people" [6] and until the second decade of the twentieth, C. Varnalis spoke of them as "the second university" (Papakostas 12)[7], and other clients as "the lower parliament"[8]. Educational, religious and political allusions were desirably appropriate, while market metaphors were dangerously explicit. They could easily remind of the fluidity and immeasurability of intellectual production.

VI

At this stage, the loose fraternity of the tens of intellectuals active in the cultural journals of early twentieth-century Athens were active viewers, but felt the historical necessity to be viewed. The well-known discussions on the role of the journalist, the poet, the painter, or the intellectual spanning a (much longer) period from Emmanouil Roidis to I. M. Panayotopoulos, show that on the one hand, intellectuals identified with the Baudelairian *flâneur* and subscribed to the myth of the penetrative observer of journalism, or the insightful, romantic *reclus* of a poet, able to fictionalize the real, to signify mere appearance, to symbolize the perceived, and name the meaningless void. On the other, these same intellectuals desired a passive portrayal of themselves: they had to be integrated within the real and to actually radiate readable signs, in order to fill the national ranks reserved for social respectability and political or educational institutions.

This passive visibility licensed a metaphysics of presence. In order for it to be established, presence had to have an immeasurable relationship to reality. It had to invoke more than it could ever prove. Visibility rhetorically regulated a real social conflict and was, at the same time, a first sign of a deeply ingrained social insecurity, an anathema of alienation. It obscured the innate inability of an intellectual "class" to take a position on what has been more clearly formu-

lated in the Marxian distinction between work and (waged) labour, exchange value and use value, in Kierkegaard's discussion of intellectual and manual work, in Nietzsche's dismissal (in *Gay Science*) of the modern working bodies and (in *Beyond Good and Evil*) of the secularization of work (Löwith 54-93). Not usable or exchangeable, but tangibly symbolic of a new idea of personality, visibility was the most concrete part of the foundation of public space as we know it.

The intellectual had to be seen working, fighting against the increasing removal of social signification from social practice at the beginnings of mass urban communication. Proof of labour did not reside stably within the exchange value of intellectual production. It was a matter of a visibly constructed semi-legible public space, with a code of seeing becoming more important than any other.

To put it schematically, for the proto-fascist work-worshipping primitivism that developed in the background of intellectual class consciousness, the humble performed their tasks in ritualized ways, were unselfconscious about these rituals, and valued work in the abstract, "for what it was", beyond its surplus value.[9] (The same was true of the appreciation of nature, or "the land", to which one should be connected through direct sentimental bonds.) So, indeed, the intellectual working unselfconsciously in public spaces of perceived leisure, as did "The Stranger's" Mitsos Hadjopoulos, was the alter ego of the *flâneur* and the removed sage-genius. Hard work was, again, a kind of proof that the preoccupation with art or politics transcended not only commercial concerns, but also easy recognition. Only a hard working individual could be interested in going beyond certain familiar ties, nepotistically organized networks of production and consumption, or deceptive imitations of foreign styles that would guarantee short-term success.

The bourgeois, on the contrary, had to be seen *acting* a bourgeois—which in itself entails a kind of deception: first, because bourgeois disposition personifies a game of imitation, second because this imitation itself deceives *as* imitation. It is a distorting lens for the signified, it betrays its essence, for it can only communicate *itself*. It ignores the complexities of psychology or social empathy, for it can only use the social registers of unproductive "seeing, being seen" and shallow conversation. Outward signs were considered false, as if the lack of education was also a lack of a consciousness of vanity. This ignorance provoked immediate social conflict, since it lacked "kindheartedness" and was "narrow" and "selfish".

What is actually assumed is that the bourgeois put a fixed exchange-value price-tag upon themselves. Sociability measured in "rhythm", exhibitionism and small talk was taken for a barbaric market of economic and sexual transactions, rather than a community of humanist individuals. This is the criticism expressed by Vokos' Zoe, as well as by "The Stranger". It is a criticism to which intellectuals are immune, since they have an eponymous, visible profundity of personhood when amongst equals in the café, and an inner use-value to implicitly convey through their symbolic production. Alienation from productive la-

bour, as well as from the process of working, is passed on to the bourgeois as an attribute of *their* class.

The discourse of the visibility of intellectual work, as well as the discourse of "artistic sincerity", another popular early-twentieth century term, bear the traces of this shift in perceptual aspects of social signification and, consequently, of the change in the conception of public space. The conscious creation of an appearance that would act as a systematic enactment of class allegiance was a fundamental part of the abstraction that was the Athenian intelligentsia. In a culture preceding mass democratic institutions, still relying, as it were, on a bourgeois-democratic ideology, the intellectual had to fulfill both the function of the observer and that of the observed. This was also projected upon the bourgeois, in a movement of negative self-identification. Visible difference was yet another metonymy for a sense of social incoherence.

It seems, though, that by choosing to compete with the bourgeois on the level of appearances, and declare winners those who were the least profit-seeking, yet most hard-working and most in touch with their inner drive, intellectuals were making a clear choice. They would be beside, yet beyond the bourgeois, they would be an ideal version, a kind of super-ego, of the bourgeois.

Notes

1. Crary, 10-11: "Over the course of the nineteenth century, an observer increasingly had to function within disjunct and defamiliarized urban spaces, the perceptual and temporal dislocations of railroad travel, telegraphy, industrial production, and flows of typographic and visual information...modernity is inseparable from, on one hand a remaking of the observer, and on the other, a proliferation of circulating signs and objects whose effects coincide with their visuality".
2. The article was written a few months after Sunday was established as a holiday for working people and Faliron soon became a popular resort on Sundays.
3. Articles like these formed a genre preceding the later standard "gossip column".
4. G. Vokos. *Beyond This World* 1910, 205: Δεν ζουν δια τον εαυτόν τους, καθετί που κάνουν το κάνουν για να φανούν. Κινούνται με ρυθμόν, βαδίζουν, κάθονται, χαιρετούν με ρυθμόν. Αλλοίμονον εις όποιον δεν έχει σύντροφόν του τον ρυθμόν σε κάθε τι.
5. Romos Filyras's play is staged in 1910 in Varieté. His play is about the anxiety of a painter, who perseveres to finish the portrait of his beloved, feeling that it will prove to him his value and true vocation. But when he finishes it and realizes that it does not conform to what he had dreamt of, he goes mad. In Vokos's first 'social drama', the painting "implies the idea that if socialist theories prevail there will be enough bread for all" says Vokos in a summary of the plot (published in Καλλιτέχνης I, (1910), 153. It stands for "what the woman inspired in him" and he refuses to show it to her when he sees that she is not willing to leave her husband and children for him. The tragic element is all saved for "the man of Plato", the husband, who watches them both commit suicide and still says he loved them both. There is an easy political allegory behind this plot. The painter stands for the romantic but selfish artist, the Platonist is the par excellence idealist intellectual who is superior to all petty things (money, gossip, submissive attitude towards higher ranking people, interaction with

people in power to gain position).

6. Anon. "Words of a Hellene who Loves his Country", 1863, on the kafeneion Oraia Hellas (Beautiful Hellas) which was a lively meeting place between 1839-1879, quoted in Papakostas 1998, 12.
7. C. Varnalis on Dexameni, quoted in ibid, 12-3.
8. On Zacharatos café, a late nineteenth-century centre of intellectual activity, quoted in ibid.
9. Löwith (96) comments on how Nietzsche and Tolstoy had felt the "fake passion" and "hidden nihilism" inherent in such a view of work.

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