

European and non-European, refugee voices in fusion: A response to Modern Art

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There has been a lot of speculation on the changing face of Europe as a result of the waves of migrants settling in European countries. In semiotic terms, crossing the borders, both physically and emotionally, could lead to a reshuffling of perceptions of otherness, juxtaposing the non-European 'Alter' to the European 'Ego' and challenging established cultures, texts, seeking to identify themselves through differentiation from 'barbaric' non-texts¹. Drawing on a project involving the comparison of immigrant and Greek student narrative responses to conceptual artworks at the Greek National Museum of Contemporary Art, the present study indicates that, despite the shatteringly different experiential basis of the refugee articulations, 'self' and 'non-self' responses to modern artworks essentially converge, posing no particular 'threat' to the host country's cultural identity. It is suggested that the 'plasticity of borders'² at work in the specific project makes a redefinition of the 'other' mandatory. The emerging narratives point to the pervasive effect of the language of contemporary art, originating in Europe, and its potency as a cultural semiotics tool.

Key words/phrases: Conceptual Art narratives boundaries non-barbaric

Introductory

What is the effect of waves of refugees settling in Europe on the signs of the aging continent? Put somewhat schematically, has it breathed fresh air into the host country culture or has it been or is being appropriated by this culture instead? How unsettling has this fusion of signs been? In this paper we will explore a small slice of this phenomenon, the dialogue between European and, more specifically, Greek narratives and their refugee counterparts produced in response to Modern, Conceptual, art forming part of a project launched by the National Museum of Contemporary Art (EMST), Athens. We will attempt to show that the mediation of art could lead to the production of texts that may not question or challenge the host country culture,³ essentially, and that, as a matter of fact, the texts produced by both groups in the project described, namely Greek students and refugees, may be surprisingly close and could therefore be situated along what we will refer to as *a meta-talk continuum*. We will go on to suggest that this similarity also reveals interesting points regarding the relationship between *Ego* and *Alter* in the encounter of the cultures involved. In our discussion we will be making use of the concept of *boundaries*, as physical space to

¹Göran Sonesson, 'Ego meets Alter: The meaning of otherness in cultural semiotics', *Semiotica*, 128-3/4 (2000), 537-559.

²Raffaele De Luca Picione and Jaan Valsiner, (2017) 'Psychological Functions of Semiotic Borders in Sense-Making: Liminality of Narrative Processes', *Eur J Psycho*. 13 (3) (2017), 532-547.

³Göran Sonesson, 'Ego meets Alter'.

be crossed and emotional space to be potentially negotiated, but also, importantly, as permeable *boundary spaces* in the semiosphere,⁴ a multi-level, multi-dimensional semiotic space, an extension of the idea of basic semiotic structure as a binary one.⁵

Some speculations on the Self and the Other in cultural encounters

In the ‘canonical’ model of cultural semiotics, “every Culture conceives of itself as Order, opposed to something on the outside, which is seen as Chaos, Disorder and Barbarism, in other words, as Culture opposed to Nature”.⁶ Within this model, it could be argued that refugee culture may lie on the barbaric side, the non-text, the exclusion one, Nature opposed to (European) Culture. This would be largely due to the fact that we are (egotistically) adopting the point of view of the familiar, the European, which may potentially be ‘threatened’ by the intruding non-European. But, as Sonesson (*ibid.*) suggests, this asymmetry cannot accommodate the semiotic status of the two (or more) cultures. “If the cultural model is intrinsically egocentric, then Culture will always be where the Ego (the subject having the model) is”.⁷ Again according to Sonesson,⁸ we can go beyond the canonical model if “a Culture ... construes itself as being on the outside, representing Nature and Chaos while another society plays the roles of Culture”. If this is so, it could be suggested that immigrant texts, the immigrant narratives in our research, albeit a cultural mix, as will be demonstrated below, construe themselves as barbaric and on the outside and thus offer themselves for appropriation by Greek society, which represents Culture. What may lend support to this approach is the frequent reference to the need for integration in refugees’ narratives in our data sample. Here are some examples:

- (1) “When you go to a foreign country, you can’t change the country or the conditions you will face there”.
- (2) “The people and atmosphere in my country (Iran), as an aura and feel, are much like the people and atmosphere in Greece. This is why I want to stay in this country; I feel good here and I got to know people who have helped me immensely ...”.
- (3) “When you leave your country to start a new life elsewhere, you’ve got to be able to adjust”.

These examples highlight the cultural submission stance adopted by some of the immigrants in the present study, though, naturally, caution is needed in generalising on the basis of this evidence alone. Such caution is also dictated, as we will see more specifically further down, by the proof we obtained in the refugees’ narratives as to their visualising themselves not as barbaric, on the outside. One of the refugee project participants, John, from Zimbabwe, a student, refers to one of the conceptual artworks in the Museum programme (*Sails*, by Bia Davou, 1981-1982), which pictures sails pointing in different directions, as follows:

- (4) “In this work, sails are like people with different opinions about life, of different origins, religion etc., having different orientations, probably due to

⁴Juri Lotman, ‘On the Semiosphere’ (translated by Wilma Clark), *Sign Systems Studies* 33.1 (2005), 205-229.

⁵Juri Lotman, *Universe of the Mind. A Semiotic Theory of Culture* (I.B.Tauris: London & NY, 1991), p.2.

⁶ Göran Sonesson, ‘Ego meets Alter’, p. 539.

⁷ Göran Sonesson, ‘Ego meets Alter’, p. 541.

⁸ Göran Sonesson, ‘Ego meets Alter’, p. 540.

different goals. But, still, *all the sails are fixed on the same base, just like humans who share many common traits*".

(<http://www.faceforward.gr/en/faces-stories/john/>; emphasis ours).

This statement suggests that the focus of refugees' talk is what connects rather than differentiates the two cultures, the Other claiming self-hood on a par with the Self/Ego.

The need for integration recorded in the above statements, among several others, could also be accommodated within Sonesson's 'Projected Ego extension of the canonical model',⁹ where "this same Ego is projected to another sphere, so that there is an imaginary Culture which is built up around the projected Ego". We would interpret this as either of the following. Refugee talk may be originally construed as a non-text, in the sense of being of practically no value, within a context which disfavours the intruding new, and then convergence with the Cultural Ego (European-Greek) may mean that the non-text becomes text and, thus, "has value ascribed to it", is comprehensible and familiar, belongs and can be accounted for by a particular system of interpretation.¹⁰ Alternatively, Greeks may perceive refugee talk as Extra-Culture, in Sonesson's inverted canonical model, and, thus, as non-barbaric. In actual fact, though we have a prototypical centre, that of the host culture, we do not seem to be dealing with a classic instance of appropriation, 'the discovery of the discovery of the other'.¹¹ On the other hand, it could also be argued that Art neutralizes power forces, alleviates Ego and Alterity differences, allowing a more balanced conversation of cultures to take place.

The project

Let us now get to the details of the research project described. The National Museum of Contemporary Art set up a project in 2017-2018 called *Face Forward ... into my home*, which was interactive and which, as noted on the Museum site, "focused on the stories of people who have been forced to leave their homelands and are rebuilding their life in Greece. It include(d) storytelling workshops inspired by a selection of contemporary artworks from the collection of the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens (EMST), the photo shooting of portraits, and a photography exhibition about and with refugees and asylum-seekers, now living in the country ..." (<https://www.emst.gr/en/exhibitions-en/past-exhibitions-en/face-forward-into-my-home>).

The present study deals with the storytelling part of the Museum project. More specifically, 54 Greek 15-year-olds were presented with the artworks the refugees had been exposed to in the EMST project and asked to respond to them in writing. They were given time and had the opportunity to revisit the artworks, as a simulation of the process followed by the refugees, as well as discussing them on the Museum premises, and were finally expected to comment on similarities and differences between their stories and those of the refugees in relation to a specific work of art. In what follows, we will present and discuss similarities and differences between the two 'voices' and attempt to see whether they both constitute 'texts' in the sense explained

⁹ Göran Sonesson, 'Ego meets Alter', p. 541.

¹⁰ Göran Sonesson, 'On the notion of text in cultural semiotics', in *Semiotiké* (Trudy po znakovym sistemam, Sign System Studies 26), ed. by Peeter Torop, Michael Lotman and Kalevi Kull. (Tartu: Tartu University Press, 1998), pp. 83-114 (p.86).

¹¹ Tzvetan Todorov, *La conquête de l'Amérique. La question de l'autre* (Paris: Seuil, 1982).

earlier, entering into conversation with each other, whether they are convergent or divergent.

What dominated the refugee talk, in contradistinction with that of Greek students, was the personalised, experiential narrative element. The reporting verb ‘reminded’ was used most frequently. For example, when talking about a clothes bundles installation, *Bottari*, by Daegu, 2005-2017,



Kimsooja

Bottari, 2005 - 2017

Site specific installation

6 Bottari made from traditional Korean bed covers and used clothes from Athens and Kassel.

Variable dimensions

This installation was donated by the Artist on the occasion of the inauguration of the EMST's new museum building in 2017

Inv. No. 1098/17

Collection of the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens

Photo by Katerina Paraskeva

Mahdi, a student from Iran, noted:

- (5) “The work with the clothes bundles *reminded* me of my country. We also used to wrap our clothes up and tie them in a bundle when we’d take small trips. I liked the colors of the fabrics in the work, especially the red. I have a gift someone gave me once and if I had a bundle like that today, I’d put the gift inside to keep it safe so that it wouldn’t ever break. If each of us is a bundle where we hide stuff we’ve experienced and have inside our mind, it takes a long time to open up and share all that with other people. I’ve got things inside me that I don’t share with anybody”.

Similarly, when he was presented with *The Harpooned Fish*, a 1985 video installation by Costas Tsoclis,



Costas Tsoclis
 Harpooned fish, 1985
 Video installation
 Color video projection on painted canvas of dimensions 220 x 300 cm and metal pole
 Donated by the artist 2017
 Inv. No. 1075/17
 Collection of the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens
 Photo by Stella Tzachristas

Mahdi's words were:

- (6) "If each painting of this artist shows a different country, then mine is the one with the harpoon in it. And because I didn't want to see all the awful things that were happening there, I wanted to go to a country which is at peace".

Bibiche, a 33-year-old woman from Congo, comments:

- (7) "As a refugee, I felt that the fish also symbolised all that sense of confinement I've experienced".

And Beshr, 26 talks about the female suppression culture in Tsoclis's work:

- (8) "The fish in the middle that's pinned down represents for me the woman who's missing, the girl. ... it symbolises a woman in society, who doesn't have any rights and is tied down and restricted".

On the other hand, Maya, 26, from Tunisia, points to the physical impact in the work and compares it to the more lasting mental scar:

- (9) "I have a mark on my body, just like the harpooned fish does, a scar from the time I was attacked on the street. But in the end, the mental trauma it left was even bigger".

Some of the Greek student participants were able to identify the narrative thread in refugees' talk. When comparing it with their comments on one of the artworks, one of them specifically said that "immigrant texts were able to tell something like a story". With reference to *The Raft*, a 2004 video-sound installation by Bill Viola,



Bill Viola

The Raft, 2004

Video-audio installation

Digital colour high definition video projection with surround sound 5.1, Duration 10'30''

Edition 1/3

Loan from the Hellenic Culture Organization S.A. (HCO) to EMST within the framework of the Cultural Olympiad, 2004

Inv. No. 538/04

an artwork with obvious associations with refugees' tempestuous journey to freedom and safety, once again Beshr, 26, from Syria draws a parallel between personal experience and what he can see in the work:

- (10) "In the beginning they weren't united but after the water hits them they try to get up and help each other and make something for their future. Just as I left behind my family and friends to start a new life for myself all over again".

Similarly, Ghassan from Syria, 59 comments:

- (11) "It was painful to watch. There's a woman praying to God saying: oh my God, save us, we're drowning, we're going to die ... These images, they're painful, they speak to me because I've seen these things myself. I've lived through them".

Hassan's story (student, Pakistan) is more extensively told:

- (12) "My own trip lasted five hours, even though they said it would be only an hour and a half. I was on my own and didn't know anyone else in the boat. It was winter and the weather was bad and I didn't know how to swim that well. I thought I was going to die, but thank God, I'm still alive. But the fear has stayed inside me ever since. I'm not afraid of the sea, but when it's windy

and the sea is rough, I remember what I experienced in the boat and I don't feel well".

The idea of difficulties overpowering one, that of support over the common threat is captured by the Greek students' words, too. Thus, Stella, 15 suggested:

(13) "The raft reminds me of life and the storm reminds me of all the difficulties that don't stop coming",

while Spyridoula likened it all to Noah's Ark and Niki put forward the more oneiric:

(14) "It's as if the people above the man lying are making a dream for him!".

Deppy winced at the installation:

(15) "It conveys a sense of fear and confusion",

while Ourania insightfully stated:

(16) "For once, they are equal".

As we can see in these comments, however, direct personal involvement is missing and, even in more engaged instances, like Nick's "I feel the pain ...", the prescriptiveness of what follows is a sign of disengagement:

(17) "We should be different but have a common purpose, chasing not profit but the joys of life and love for our fellow men".

This disengagement is further ratified by the use of the third person referent, as in Rodanthi's statement below:

(18) "They are trying to find a reason to keep fighting for a life they deserve."

The pattern obtained so far is more or less replicated in the case of the *Swedish Flying Carpet*, by Kostis Velonis, 2001:

Photo 4



Kostis Velonis
 Swedish Flying Carpet, 2001
 Wood, fringe
 8.5 x 80 x 200 cm
 Donated by the artist, 2002
 Inv. No. 221/02
 Collection of the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens

This becomes evident through a comparison of the sophisticated comments produced by Greek students:

(19) Eleni, student, Greece: “The carpet symbolizes dreams but its wooden texture means the dreams are not romantic ... but then, the carpet is wavy, so there is hope”,

(20) Pauline, student, Greece: “The exhibit represents impossible dreams. ... The material prevents them from materializing, with the more experientially driven refugee voices, visualizing themselves as the cross between two worlds in an encounter of cultures:

(21) Assizi, 35, Afghanistan: “It represents the marriage of two civilisations, Asian and European”,

(22) Carlos, 25, Syria: “The work talks about the encounter between different cultures”.

or the existential need for warmth and safety in Mahdi’s words:

(23) “Its waves reminded me of a seagull, flying to leave a country where it’s cold to go to one where it is warm”.

But the most revealing responses were to Vlassis Kaniaris’s *Hopscotch*, Environment, 1974, where boundary crossing, the delimitation of refugees’ existence, materialized in the artwork itself:



Vlassis Kaniaris
Hopscotch, 1974
 Environment
 6 human figures, 9 suitcases, 1 cage, a tar paper base and a hopscotch chalk drawing
 155 x 440 x 600 cm
 Purchased in 2000
 Inv. No. 3/2000
 Photo by Katerina Paraskeva
 Collection of the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens

Refugee narratives are permeated with this sense of lameness, deprivation, struggle but also victory. Here the ‘reminded me plus concrete experience’ element was most outspokenly present. These are the words of Ava, 29, from Iran (italics ours):

(24) “Of all the artworks I saw in the Museum, Vlassis Caniaris’ *Hopscotch* stood out the most. In this installation, there are human figures in a space that’s bounded by a wooden frame. Only one figure, at the back, is outside the frame in the open space. *To me, it means that this man has crossed the border.* What I mean is, if [the game of] hopscotch symbolizes what being a refugee is like, then this man has played and won and now is *beyond the borders*. You can also tell by the way he’s standing that he’s the winner of this game. If you look at the figures inside the wooden frame, you see that one is sitting on a suitcase and the other is standing up waiting. The figure outside the frame has his arms raised as if he’s shouting to us “I won”. The fact that there’s only one figure outside the frame and all the others are still inside and deep in thought shows how hard this all is. I also think that the way the figure is facing the others is supposed to convey a positive message, as if he’s saying, “Look, as soon as I won this game and crossed the border, I was safe, and you can do it, too.” Of course, now that he’s crossed the borders, he has to face a new “game”, which he must also win. And that’s adjusting to the host country. I identify with the figure who has managed to win.”

In a similar vein, Bryan, a student from Zimbabwe, comments:

(25) “If you look at the work by Vlassis Caniaris, you can see that it shows exactly the condition of a refugee who has just arrived in another country and is expecting something important to happen, to be given an opportunity to do something. I could identify with the figure outside the frame because I don’t like to feel constrained”.

Though, once again, Greek student texts cannot compare with those of refugees in personalisation, experiential terms, the search for an identity, albeit not personal, is effectively captured. They focus on headlessness:

(26) John, student, Greece: “Headless, because they feel lost when they leave their country. Limited moves”.

(27) Fenia, student, Greece: “Immigrants leave their country without any personality”

but also on the need for integration, ‘adjusting to the host country’ in Ava’s words:

(28) George, student, Greece: “Loss of identity ... Chalk-drawn hopscotch represents need to embed oneself within reception country workforce”.

The partial convergence of the two groups of ‘narratives’ indicates that refugee texts have indeed ‘crossed the border’ and are no longer ‘bounded by the wooden frame’. They are texts in the sense of ‘belonging’,^{12,13} comments on the encounter of the two cultures, strongly impressing on the reader’s mind the need for adjustment to the host culture. The refugees in our research apparently view themselves as peacefully claiming an identity in the host culture, braving Alterity, while also retaining the tremendous emotional and often physical weight of their tormented Ego. Quite interestingly, Greek student voices also seem to go some way towards the Other, as in “Headless because they feel lost when they leave their country”, “Headless creatures. Difficulties” or in combining scepticism with hope, as in “The

¹² Göran Sonesson, ‘On the notion of text in cultural semiotics’.

¹³ Göran Sonesson, ‘Semiosis and the elusive final interpretant of understanding’. *Semiotica*, 179–1/4 (2010), 145–258.

carpet symbolizes dreams but its wooden texture means the dreams are not romantic ... but then, the carpet is wavy, so there is hope”, to be compared with the refugee text “a refugee’s life, as the artwork (*Hopscotch*) shows, is like a game where you have to keep climbing, level after level, until you reach your final goal, which is to adjust to a new foreign country and succeed there”, among several others. On the other hand, the European voice in our study was called upon to compare itself with the already articulated voice of immigrants, which means that Alterity was treated as a means of constituting the voice of the Ego.¹⁴ Yet, overall, it seems that, while the hosts empathised with refugee experience and refugee texts, as their comments suggest, it is immigrants who crossed the Ego border most vividly, allowing themselves to be constituted via their encounter with the Other, the European.

Lotman describes the boundaries among semiotic spaces or structures as permeable, filtering mechanisms, which intersect with the ‘other’ at multiple points and levels rather than boundaries in the sense of a solid line ‘drawn in the sand’.¹⁵ As suggested earlier, in Kaniaris’s work, the refugees’ voice echoes the relief of being outside the frame, the borders being neatly delineated. Thus, the semiotic space seems much less flexible. Yet, there are headless figures both inside and outside the frame, which points to the permeability of the boundaries: To immigrants, the figure outside the frame is the winner, one big step further into the host culture, striving to embark on a new life while retaining features of the old – one of the refugees even speaks of searching for a balcony like the one they had in their homeland.

In terms of the meta-continuum referred to in the opening of this paper, we would suggest the following: If, following Picione & Valsiner,¹⁶ “narration –talking – is the process of searching for meaning that occurs *post hoc*, that is, after having lived an experience, we try to find meaning for it”, then it is some kind of meta-talk. Greek talk being mostly in the form of comments rather than personalized narration, it would also form meta-talk.^{17,18} We could, therefore, postulate a continuum such that Greek and immigrant meta-talk are located relatively close to each other and, with the mediation of art, and conceptual art at that, they can be brought closer still:



Figure 1. Meta-talk continuum: Greek and immigrant narratives

Concluding remarks

So, what immigrants in our study bring into the ‘polyglotist semiosphere’, in Lotman’s terms,¹⁹ is the deeply touching experiential narratives, which could form the

¹⁴Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *Speech genres and other later essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).

¹⁵ Wilma Clark, ‘Translator’s Preface’, in *Culture and Explosion* by J. Lotman, ed. by Marina Grishakova (Berlin, NY: Mouton de Gruyter, 2009), pp. vii-xvii (p.x).

¹⁶ Raffaele De Luca Picione and Jaan Valsiner, ‘Psychological Functions of Semiotic Borders in Sense-Making: Liminality of Narrative Processes’ (p.532).

¹⁷Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

¹⁸Christine Calfoglou and Spiros Polymeris, ‘Conceptual Art: The Visual and Verbal Semiosis Interplay’, *Adaptation*, Volume 12, Issue 3 (December 2019), 284–297.

¹⁹Juri Lotman, ‘On the Semiosphere’.

basis of a more personalized and emotional response to modern art. Bibiche, 33, Congo interestingly points out that “we have the chance here – she means, through art, in the museum -- to light up the darker places in our mind, the dark memories of the terrible things we’ve experienced, and to feel human again”. As Sonesson²⁰ argues, Peirce sees the Alter, the second person as a thirdness, a tu, a “friend and a collaborator”, not a barbarian. It might then be suggested that art transforms the two into Peircean collaborators, acting as the harmonising principle.

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²⁰Göran Sonesson, ‘On modelling the complexity of cultural models’, in *Sign processes in complex systems: Proceedings of the 7th International Congress of the IASS*, ed. by Walter Schmitz and Ulrich Froeschle (Dresden, University of Technology, October 6-11, Dresden: WEB-Verlag, 2001), pp. 11-21 (p.7).