

Nelly's Iconography of Greece¹

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In this chapter I examine Nelly's photographs within the framework of visual culture studies and heritage studies. My work also draws on classical reception, and on my research on the role of classical antiquity in early state-funded tourist publications (see Zacharia 2014). I concentrate on the photographs Nelly produced during her Greek sojourn from 1924 to 1939. During the Metaxas dictatorship (1936–41), the official discourse exerted propagandist control, especially through the Under-Secretariat of Press and Tourism, which deliberately reproduced the nationalist myth of Greece's exceptionalism and the attendant superiority of the Greek race, while aiming to construct the modern Greeks as undisputed direct descendants of the ancients, and caretakers of the ancient Greek heritage. I am interested in the tension between the makers and subjects of Greek heritage formation. I explore Nelly as both the photographer-agent who contributes to national iconography, but also as the product of the contemporary discourse. Furthermore, I examine different historical moments of Nelly's long life and career, focusing in particular on her photographic output during the authoritarian Metaxas regime and its recycling during the Axis occupation, her 'rediscovery' during the restoration of democracy (*metapolitefsi*, post the 1967–74 military junta), and her celebration in the 1980s as Greece's *par excellence* national photographer. I argue that Nelly's interwar photographs present a unique case when the political and historical context of nationalist iconography is de-emphasised or downright obliterated and the maker's relationship to the regime it served is occluded or underplayed, so that her photographic genius may be indisputably exalted. This is very much unlike

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the fate of Leni Riefenstahl who was promptly anathematised, and her output was forever stigmatised as paradigmatic fascist art. On the contrary, a number of Nelly's photographs produced for the regime propaganda publications remain to this day unpublished in museum archives. This chapter aims to unearth some of these 'forgotten' archives and narrate their untold story.

Nelly (1899–1998) opened her atelier in Athens (on 18 Ermou Street) in January 1925, after studying photography in Dresden (1921–24), first under Hugo Erfurth (classical photography; traditional studio portrait), and later under Franz Fiedler (modern approach and techniques; nudes; abstract compositions). Born and raised in Aydin in Asia Minor into a wealthy merchant family, she moved to Dresden after the destruction of her hometown in June 1919, while her family settled in Smyrna, only to be uprooted again in the 1922 expulsion of the Greek-Orthodox population of Anatolia following the tragic destruction of Smyrna. Nelly experienced the artistic life of Dresden, one of the most avant-garde cities in Europe, where expressionism in art (*Die Brücke*) and dance (Mary Wigman's Central School) flourished; indeed, she experimented with expressionism in some early photographs of dancers (Nelly 1997). Despite adverse criticism for her nude photos of dancer Mona Paiva at the Parthenon,² she photographed the semi-nude Hungarian dancer Nikolska again at the Parthenon in 1930,³ this time with greater success. In Athens, she soon became a popular photographer with the bourgeoisie, taking portraits of many well-known personalities from the worlds of politics, letters, and the arts. And in 1930, she exhibited her photographs of Plaka and 'Old Athens.' Nelly's success soon allowed her to move to a more spacious atelier on 21 Ermou Street.

Having photographed the Delphic Festival in 1927, Nelly became the official photographer for the Angelos Sikelianos/Eva Palmer second Delphic festival in 1930,⁴ due to her acquaintance with author Penelope Delta and the sponsorship of the festival by the Benakis family. Penelope Delta was the daughter of Emmanouil Benakis, a wealthy merchant from Alexandria in Egypt, who had served as Minister of Agriculture and Industry for the first Venizelos government, and was elected mayor of Athens in 1914. In a letter dated 28 December 1929, Delta commissions Nelly for her portrait, and mentions the purchase of three of Nelly's photographs of 'Old Athens' and her wish to purchase a fourth one.⁵ Nelly's photographs also gained some recognition with the State's early tourism initiatives. In 1929, the first

² Paiva's photographs were facilitated by Filadelfefs and were actually taken on 18 October 1925 (Karali 2013: 60ff.), not in 1927, as she reported in her autobiography, where she quotes in full Pavlos Nirvanas's forceful defence in the *Estia* newspaper (Nelly 1989: 103–4) on 24 October 1925. On contemporary reactions to Nelly's photos on the Acropolis, see Yalouri (2001: 160–62).

³ Not in 1929, as Nelly reported; see Karali 2013: 67 n. 25, and pp. 85–8 for more on Nikolska.

⁴ See Damaskos on the turn the 'romantic ancestor worship' took in Nelly's Delphic photographs (2008: 327).

⁵ Delta, furthermore, offers one of her contacts to advise Nelly on tax issues, and in a postscript refers to a book of Boissonnas's photographs she wishes to show her. Nelly had met Boissonnas in 1927

dated Greek Tourist poster appears, featuring Nelly's photograph of the Parthenon (*Greek Tourist Poster* 2007: 13). And in 1933, three photographs by Nelly's were featured in *La Grèce actuelle*, the first 'official, statistical work on Greece' (Miller 1934), a publication of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs begun during Venizelos' last premiership; all three photos portray women in traditional dress in staged postures and gestures typical of Nelly's classical aesthetics.⁶

The dictator Ioannis Metaxas, who had seized power on 4 August 1936, suspended the Tourist Organisation that had been instituted by Venizelos in 1929. He established his propaganda Under-Secretariat of Press and Tourism, governed by his confidant, Under-Secretary of State, Theologos Nikoloudis, who commissioned Nelly 'to give a visual content to the concept "Greece"' (Boudouri 1998: 97). Nelly photographically illustrated the first state-sponsored tourist publication, and many of her pictures were reproduced in the regime's youth magazine, *Neolaia* (Mahaira 1987). I will focus on Nelly's photos printed in the tri-monthly tourist periodicals *In Greece/En Grèce/In Griechenland* (seven issues from Spring 1937 to Winter 1939; and, one post-WWII issue in Autumn 1948), in the fashion magazine *La Mode Grecque* (four issues from Summer 1938 to Summer 1940), in the weekly *Neolaia* (1938–41), and in the photographic collages that served as backdrop for the material exhibits in the New York 1939 World's Fair Greek pavilion. In addition, I draw on relevant photographs from the collection Nelly personally donated to the Benaki Museum in 1985.⁷ There are also relevant materials in the collection of Dimitris and Alexandra Moretis, the architects who designed the Greek pavilion for the New York 1939 World Fair.⁸ I supplement my findings with printed and audio-visual materials on Nelly's life and career to suggest the influences on her work and to explore her collaboration with the Metaxas regime, quoting often from her autobiography published in 1989 and from the large photo-album published in 1990 by the Agricultural Bank, edited by the costume and set designer Dionysis Fotopoulos.⁹ Finally, I draw on the

during his visit to her atelier (Nelly 1989: 110–111). I thank Nikos Paissios for bringing Delta's letter to my attention.

⁶ *La Grèce actuelle* 1933: 51, 61, 97; the first is of a woman in profile looking down in traditional Attic dress shot in Nelly's studio with a characteristic shadow cast on the wall (see Damaskos on the evocative uses of shadows in Nelly's photographs of classical antiquities, 2008: esp. 322–4); the second, of a smiling woman in the traditional costume of Thessaly on a mountain top; and, the third, a woman in profile with her back to us to showcase the ornate traditional dress and headdress of Epirus.

⁷ Nelly 1989: 305–6; on the collection, see Boudouri 2001. Nelly's archive of written notes is now lost, which impedes any secure dating of her photos.

⁸ In the 1980s the two architects donated a photo-album to the Benaki archives, but most of their collection is stored privately in Athens. I am currently working on a publication on the official and unofficial discourses evident in the choice of artifacts on display in the Greek pavilion.

⁹ This album is written in an uncritical and exalting spirit and, for all intents and purposes, may serve as a sequel to Nelly's autobiography as it has been produced in close collaboration with her, as both the editor Fotopoulos, and the two contributors, A. Xanthakis (2008: 303, 496) and E. Trichon-Milsani (1990: 41), attest.

extensive recent bibliography, especially on the work of Irini Boudouri, former curator of Nelly's archive at the Benaki Museum.

'Like a picture'

In the classical ideal aesthetic expressed by Simonides of Ceos (c. 556–467 BC), 'on the one hand, painting is silent poetry, on the other, poetry is painting that speaks' (Plut. *Moralia* 346–7). Echoes of this aesthetic are present in Nelly's personal narrative and output, and are aptly captured in her assertion: 'A good picture is worth ten thousand words' (Nelly 1989: 41).¹⁰ How visual images were conveyed and processed is the subject of a long-standing debate in the social theories of visual representation and visual culture, some of which I will draw on.

First, in some very broad strokes, I begin with a couple of images from the iconography of 'Hellenism,' western and indigenous, and a few words on the politics of national identity formation to place this chapter in an ideological context. During the Neoclassicism of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, western travellers to Greece treated the country as a museum. They bore with them an eternal image of a sublime Greece, a spiritual landscape severed from contemporary social circumstance and context, a view influenced by the paintings and photographs of western artists and the writings of classical scholars of the period.¹¹ After independence, Greece became 'a landscape with ruins' (Papaioannou 2005: 46) and the liberated Greeks, as Hamilakis (2007) has shown, turned their classical monuments to *topiosima* (landmarks, as termed by Hamilakis) in the narrative of a new national charter myth. This myth produced the imaginary *topos* of Hellenism drawing from and revising imported images of western Hellenism (Leontis 1995).

The western ideological, and the later (and current) economic colonisation of Greece, produced a unique nation-state. In early 1830, Greece was the first nation-state 'with full sovereignty and international recognition' in Europe, albeit in an ongoing client-status (Beaton 2008: 8; also, Beaton 2009) and as such, constituting a prime example of 'crypto-colonialism' (Herzfeld 2002). Fanon's (1968: 206–48) cultural evolution schema among the colonised offers a blueprint for analysing the national imaginary project of the 'crypto-colonised'

¹⁰ Nelly paraphrases a 'Chinese' proverb; this phrase seems to have been coined by Fred Barnard in an issue of the journal *Printer's Ink* (10 March 1927), who is quoted as admitting to adding a Chinese provenance to the proverb 'so that people would take it seriously'; Stevenson 1948: 2611.

¹¹ On travellers to Greece and the Mediterranean, see Peltre 2011. On early photographic depictions of Greece, see Antonatos and Mauzy 2003 and Antoniadis 2008. On Poussin's 'Shepherds of Arcadia' of 1637–38, one of the earliest depictions of an exotic image of pastoral Greece, and the meaning of '*et in Arcadia ego*', see Beard and Henderson: 1995: 117–26.

Greek nation-state.¹² For, even though Greece was never formally colonised, it was 'imagined' in processes similar to those encountered in the conversion of the colonial imaginary to the national. Furthermore, the nationalist imaginary projects of the colonised are re-workings of earlier colonial ideas.¹³ In the case of the Greek national project, the concepts of the continuity of the Greek race and the supremacy of the classical past are two such ideas. The liberated Greeks appropriated and modified them. They did away with the 'allochronic technique' of the Philhellenes who saw the modern Greeks as 'survivals of the classical heritage' 'out of time and history' (Hamilakis 2007: 21), thus bracketing off the in-between centuries since classical antiquity. Instead, the modern nation-state adopted the national historiographical schema of Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos, which elevated and integrated Byzantium as the necessary link in the continuous 3,000-year-old grand-national narrative.¹⁴

National photography, which produced the iconography of the new state, mediated reality in the service of the western colonial-cum-national project (Hamilakis 2008). Greece was at different periods perceived as exotic, 'picturesque' – a picture, and as such always prefigured, always already an image (see Krauss 1981). As the Greek diasporic subject became immersed in the imported western colonial ideas of the national imagery, in her first encounters with Greece Nelly saw the prefigured images of her childhood imagination. Spurred by the nostalgic stories for the motherland narrated by her middle-class Asia-Minor parents at the time of the Great Idea, she saw 'ready pictures' waiting to be captured everywhere: 'When I met Greece and saw its many beauties, almost on every step I saw yet another painting in front of me. Wherever I turned, I would encounter pictures ready to be shot. Our Greece can make every man an artist' (Nelly 1989: 79; see also Trichon-Milsani 1990: 42, 44, 48).

In an essay where she likens the camera to a gun, Sontag (1979: 15) notes the 'elegiac' character of photography: 'When we are afraid, we shoot. But when we are nostalgic, we take pictures. It is a nostalgic time now', and even more so, I might add, for the interwar period in Greece, following the destruction of Smyrna in 1922. By the same token, though, photographs 'being taken now transform what is present into a mental image, like the past' (Sontag 1979: 167). Nelly photographed the Greek monuments, the landscapes, and the people looking to bring the past alive and to establish continuities with the present. Her aesthetics followed German classicism, but her technique was

¹² Fanon recognises three phases: the assimilationist phase, when the colonised offer proof of the conformity to the culture of the coloniser; the cultural nationalist phase, where the colonised intellectuals discover their own culture and resist assimilation; the nationalist phase, where the colonised fight the occupying forces.

¹³ In Amuta's elaboration of Fanon's schema, the second phase of cultural reaffirmation of the colonised is characterised by unbridled traditionalism and a recourse to the resuscitation of past glories (1989: 159).

¹⁴ See also Stathatos, Moschovi and Tsirgiolou, this volume.

modern, though she also developed an expertise in the pictorialist bromoil process, which likened her images to paintings, and gave them an antiquarian feeling due to the 'old-school' patina. The enigmatic apostrophe in her signature has not been addressed successfully in recent scholarship. I argue that Nelly intentionally adopted the signature 'Nelly's' to replicate the standard of Byzantine icon-painters who signed with their name in the genitive case to indicate that the 'writing' of the icon was by their own hand. In Nelly's case, it is my contention that it reveals her intention to stress the affinity of her photography to painting, staking out a place for herself in the fine arts national annals.¹⁵ This comes at the very core of the artistic persona Nelly sought to propagate.

During her first tour in Greece in 1927, Nelly visited Tripoli and saw two men with 'true biblical physiognomies', while during a visit to Hypate, she saw a shepherd that 'appeared to me as an ancient god' (Nelly 1989: 94, 98, 111).¹⁶ This man, she argues, gave her the idea for 'parallelisms', sets of photographs where contemporary Greeks are set next to ancient monuments to accentuate their resemblance and establish visually the continuity of the Greek race (see also Trichon-Milsani 1990: 46). Extremely proud of her 'parallelisms' idea, Nelly developed it through the years and even had an article published in *Life* magazine (Nelly 1989: 276, 280); and until her very late age, she wished to publish the parallelism pictures in an album. When she was commissioned to create the collages for the Greek pavilion, she gave the shepherd's head a prominent position in her 'parallelisms' giant-poster (Fig. 11.1), and

the photographic collage (*'synthesis'*) that features the head of the shepherd, I now have in my home gallery, and thus I see it many times per day. At every glance I cast upon him, I reminisce the times I photographed him and what a great impression that simple man made upon me, that I thought I was seeing a god from Olympus (Nelly 1989: 112).

This is Nelly's 'private pantheon', to borrow a phrase from Sontag (1979: 162).

The Metaxas regime similarly advocated cultural and racial continuity and the inherent superiority of the Greek race. In a 1936 lecture to university students in Athens, Metaxas (1969: I, 73) admonished his young audience to strive towards a national rebirth and return to selected moments of the glorious past. He asked them to close their ears to 'songs of the Sirens' and, as a modern Odysseus, return to the 'springs of Hellenic civilisation.'

¹⁵ Note that she always wanted to exhibit in the National Gallery pressing the point about her photography being equivalent to painting, but due to regulations was prohibited from doing so: 'only in that space could the volume and diversity of my work be hosted, and honoured (let me not talk myself about the quality, which the foreign experts recognised). Unfortunately, our National Gallery did not organise photographic exhibitions' (Nelly 1990: 298–9).

¹⁶ See also Damaskos (2008: 327–31) for a discussion of Nelly's 'comparisons' illustrated by a good selection of relevant photos by Nelly from the Benaki archives.



Figure 11.1 Nelly, Collage of Greek physiognomies decorating the hall of ancient sculptures where five originals, a number of replicas by Emile Gilliéron & Son, and some contemporary sculptures are exhibited in the Greek Pavilion 'Hall of Ancient Sculptures' at the 1939 New York World Fair

Source: Printed by permission from the Moretis Archive

'[T]o move forward, we need to go back, as did Ulysses' comrades' (see also Carabott 2003: 27).¹⁷ This 'going back' to 'move towards' and 'being with' others in the present for a better future echoes Heidegger's *Dasein* and his views on authentic temporality in *Being and Time* (1978 [1927]). Metaxas – and Nelly – was imbued with German values and culture. The 'Third Hellenic Civilisation' project was Metaxas' ideological construct for his regime as the historical successor to ancient Greek culture and the Christian Byzantine Empire, in the mode of Hitler's Third Reich (see Hamilakis 2007: chapter 5; also, Petrakis 2006). By 1941, the regime's youth organization, EON, numbered 750,000 young members, indoctrinated in the regime's nationalist charter myth.

¹⁷ Interestingly, this is the very speech two former women members of Metaxas's youth organization EON, Eleni Frangia-Papadimou and Antigoni Vryoni-Hatzitheodorou, recount in interviews posted by Yannis Papadimas on the website of Metaxas' grand-daughter, Ioanna Foka-Metaxa (www.ioannismetaxas.com).

Bourdieu (1977: 170–71) cautions us against the power of a leader who, in moments of crisis which call for ‘extraordinariness’ (*Ausseralltäglichkeit*), employs language to ‘mobilise the group by announcing to them what they want to hear’. The ‘heretical power’ of the leader ‘rests on the dialectical relationship between authorised, authorising language and the group which authorises it and acts on its authority’. Nelly was very much aware of her charismatic camera skills, her ‘extraordinariness’, which she had honed successfully over the years having established a clear personal signature in composition and artistry. She believed image to be more direct and enduring than writing (so too Sontag 2003: 66), an ‘authentic’ eyewitness. Hence, she considered the commission by the Under-Secretariat of Press and Tourism as an opportunity for her to showcase the beauty of Greece (Nelly 1989: 147). Nelly’s ‘parallelisms’ project derived its power through the objectification of everyday people, whom she turned into icons of the authorised official discourse on racial and cultural continuity. By doing so, Nelly legitimated and reinforced the very authority of the Metaxas regime she served (Bourdieu 1977: 170–71). Nelly led ‘the way back’ to ‘the springs of Hellenic civilisation’ (Metaxas 1969: I, 73) by meticulously documenting the visual similarities of contemporary Greeks to their ancient forebears. Her photography provided the yardstick for Metaxas’s national cultural dream for a Third Hellenic Civilisation. At the age of 95, when Nelly was interviewed on a Greek television programme, she reiterated with conviction her belief in the continuity and supremacy of the Greek race:

The *Times* of London wrote, a gentleman there, that we, the Greeks of today, are not descended from the ancients but from gypsies, from the Albanians and from such races and that we are of mixed race. I was really furious when I heard this. And I had done a photomontage of parallelisms that I had made for the exhibition in New York, an immense, a huge picture from the floor to the ceiling. And at my own expense, I made thousands of posters so that we could spread them everywhere, *so that they may see that even the shepherds in the mountains have the ancient features* (emphasis added; excerpt from Nelly’s interview on 10 June 1994 for the ‘Monogramma’ television series with Alexis Savvakis as special consultant).

In both her autobiography and in the many albums of her work that have appeared to this date, Nelly presents herself as having lived in a capsule, isolated from the artistic, ideological trends and political upheavals of the troubled interwar period in Greece and Europe. She even claims she was ‘apolitical’ (Nelly 1989: 303). What lenses did she use to filter her reality? Did she, perchance, apply the bromoil process to smoothen the edges and turn adversity into a more palatable experience? Any latent influences she would have us believe she absorbed seamlessly into her own well-digested personal photographic signature, *Nelly’s*. And yet, even one of her loyal defenders is clearly baffled by Nelly’s denial of any familiarity with the ‘deep classicism’

movement in visual arts and the 'myth of Hellenism' (Trichon-Milsani 1990: 44); another notes the similarity of one of her photos to Man Ray, though Nelly denied it (Xanthakis 2008: 300); yet another illustrates Nelly's debt to Frédéric Boissonnas, and Hans Holdt and her proximity to Leni Riefenstahl and Walter Hege (Boudouri 2003: 17, 18, 27–9; also Damaskos 2008: 332–4). In a 1938 newspaper article, archaeologist Alexandros Filadelfefs, then director of the National Archaeological Museum, is hailed as the instigator of the 'parallelisms' concept.¹⁸ It may well have been that Filadelfefs proposed this important 'national and artistic' study to the officials or that Nikoloudis commissioned Nelly to complete four large collages for the 1939 Greek pavilion (Damaskos 2008: 330f.). Still, Nelly's silence on the matter agrees with her pattern of asserting her independence from outside influences or trends.

In a recent discussion of Nelly's work, the evidence is considered inconclusive as to whether 'her ancestor worship was just the product of the naivety of an ignorant romantic, exploited by the machinery of the Metaxas regime' (Damaskos 2008: 334). However, the materials in the Moretis archives revealed more collages by Nelly in the 1939 Greek pavilion. In line with the regime's exhortation for the cultivation of every 'inch of Hellenic earth' (Metaxas 1969: II, 140), spearheaded by Metaxas who is routinely featured as the 'First Farmer' (Hamilakis 2007: 174–5), I discovered two collages by Nelly's with peasant women and men involved in agricultural activities. Furthermore, I found Nelly's collages depicting young children, reading, exercising, and dancing on the centre of the collage, overseen by a young male athlete, themes repeatedly iterated in all the propaganda youth magazines of the Metaxas regime (Fig. 11.2).

In this chapter, I argue for Nelly's more active and wholehearted engagement with the Metaxas regime. Nelly was a charismatic agent of the regime's iconography. She produced the images that transformed antiquities and folk art into monuments of national memory. At the same time, these very images became iconographic *testimonia* legitimising the national charter myth that dreamed the *heterotopic* locus of the nation (Foucault 1986; Gourgouris 1996;

¹⁸ *O Typos*, 14 April 1938: 3, article entitled 'The Eternal Greek race: the contemporary Greek men and women look like our ancient progenitors. An idea of Mr. Al. Filadelfefs.' The article is illustrated with a photograph of the head of an old Peloponnesian peasant 'paralleled' to the bronze head of Artemision Zeus, the very same shepherd Nelly photographed in Hypate, without stating its provenance. The second photograph of a young woman from Preveza mentioned by name in the main text (but misidentified as an Athenian woman in the caption) was taken by Filadelfefs and is posted in parallel to the marble head of a woman from Tegea in Arkadia (probably Hygeia, ca. 350–325 BC) on display in the National Archaeological Museum. In the main text, Filadelfefs urges the readers to send more live models to the National Archaeological Museum to further 'his' idea of a 'parallelisms' project. See also Karali 2013, on the provenance of the idea for Nelly's nude photographs on the Acropolis and Filadelfefs's more active involvement; and, above nn. 1–2.



Figure 11.2 Nelly, Collages exhibited in the 1939 Greek Pavilion

Source: Printed by permission from the Moretis Archive

Leontis 1995; Hamilakis 2007). Images do not exist in a vacuum, as Nelly and her admirers would have us believe. They are socially constructed, exchanged and nationalised. They add value and meaning to heritage sites and artefacts (see essays in Waterton and Watson 2010). Once objectified, they become consumed landscapes that can be owned as material artefacts or postcards promoting a tourist image of Greece. Nelly reportedly photographed the Acropolis as ‘an act of devotion to eternal Greece’ and was ‘the first to produce and sell postcards with photographs of antiquities’ (Trichon-Milsani 1990: 46), thus actively promoting her perspective of viewing Greek antiquities. Later generations would turn her very images into national heritage and the maker of these images into a national treasure, as we shall see below.

The cult of beauty

In her autobiography, Nelly often makes rapid transitions from traumatic experiences to more pleasant memories. She glosses over adverse circumstances and events ‘beautifying’ her experiences in the selective memory of a diasporic Greek who was displaced from Aydin to Dresden, to Athens, to New York, and finally back to Athens. She soldiered on through the difficulties that befell

her and through hard work overcame them.¹⁹ She does not linger on the bad memories, but tends to overstate the good ones.²⁰

Her praise-singers are quick to point out Nelly's love for 'the beauty of the anonymous crowd' (Zotos, in Nelly 1989: 10) and for Greece as the driving forces for her aesthetic and life choices (Trichon-Milsani 1990: 41). One critic even attempts to fend off possible criticism of a borderline 'nationalistic' love of Greece by stating that 'she believed she was directly linked to antiquity' (Xanthakis 1996: 31). Nelly followed the turn to classical aesthetics, which stemmed from the need for order after the chaos that followed the destruction of WWI, and, in her case, after the 1922 Smyrna disaster. By the mid-1930s, the clean lines and figuration of Classicism 'functioned as both a vehicle for mourning and an assertion of beauty' (Silver 2010: preface),²¹ later hijacked by Hitler and Mussolini with devastating results.

Nelly singled out 'beauty' and staged compositions that idealised rural life, and in so doing she actually turned peasants into images of themselves. In her travels in Greece, she became what Sontag describes as the photographer as 'supertourist', 'always trying to colonise new experiences or find new ways to look at familiar subjects' (1979: 42). Indeed, Nelly's critics are quick to note the inconsistency between the serene landscape, the idyllic portrayal of the peasants, and the realities of human toil and hardship in the midst of the harsh natural world. Nelly develops 'an eternal image of Greece', searches for peacefulness and 'for the timelessness of the Greek race in the portraits of country folk' and delivers compositions of 'incomparable beauty and boundless-optimism' (Boudouri 1998: 97–8).

I feel spontaneously attracted by everything that is beautiful. Yes: beauty, harmony. And perhaps this care for composition, this aspiration to form is in effect something very German [...] unconscious and not from my knowledge. [...] Whatever is purely realistic, slice-of-life, which is average, quotidian, doesn't interest me [...] I am fascinated by what is beautiful, strong, healthy, what is living. I seek harmony. When harmony is produced I am happy (Sontag 1972: 85).

These words are spoken by Leni Riefenstahl, not by Nelly. Riefenstahl seems to follow a reverse trajectory to that of Nelly's career.²² She began with silent

¹⁹ 'From an early age, I was eager to learn whatever beautiful I saw': sewing and fashion, painting porcelains, making lamps, and cooking; Nelly 1989: 25, 18, 21, 23–4, 26, 196, 294, 287, 230, 226, respectively.

²⁰ For example, she reports that her father had lost all his property in Smyrna, and as a refugee in Athens took such great care of his 'small chalet', 'the most beautiful place' in Nea Smyrni, that the beauty of his manicured garden prompted visits by the mayor of Athens, Kostas Kotzias (Nelly 1989: 142, 296).

²¹ On the modernist trend for a 'healthy body culture' with respect to Nelly's nudes, see Damaskos 2008: 324–7.

²² For a comparison of Nelly with Riefenstahl, see Damaskos 2008: 332–4.

films replete with pro-Nazi imagery, quickly enlisting her talent to create some of the most successful and evocative propaganda films ever, only to resort in the last quarter of her long life to taking ethnographic photos and films, when all other avenues for her creative talents had been closed off. In 'Fascinating Fascism', a seminal critique of Riefenstahl's late photographic album *Last of the Nuba*, Sontag aims to lay open the utopian aesthetics of fascist art, which extol 'physical perfection,' and feature 'identity as a biological given'. She highlights fascist art ideals that continue to seduce, including 'the ideal of life as art' and 'the cult of beauty' (1972: 96). So too Eco (1995) includes the 'cult of beauty' in his account of fascist ideology. With these observations in mind, let us proceed to a careful examination of Nelly's involvement with the Metaxas regime and fascist aesthetics.

'National photographer'

Nelly's bourgeois upbringing and her studies in German aesthetics and culture (she even married a German-raised diasporic Greek, Angelos Seraidaris) may account for her work ethic. She venerated hard work, recalling Weber's protestant ethics and spirit of capitalism where one sees one's craft as a 'calling.' When Nelly opened her first studio in Athens and attracted the Greek bourgeoisie, she remembers: 'Seeing all the world embracing me with love and kindness, *I also tried my hardest to please them* and was very glad when they left my studio satisfied' (Nelly 1989: 70, emphasis added).

Nelly is selective with the memories she records in her autobiography. It is worth pondering briefly on her choice of words and narrative to probe how she stitches together her self-portrait. She is certainly not forthcoming with information that would connect her more closely with the Metaxas regime. As it transpires, however, her brother-in-law, married to her sister Maro, was Spyros Malaspinas, voted into office in 1936 as a member of the Parliament for the Cyclades.²³ He soon became the vice-president of PIKPA (Foundation for Social Providence) and the Red Cross, when the president was Konstantinos Georgakopoulos, his close friend (Nelly 1989: 184), who became Minister of Education for the Metaxas regime.²⁴ In her autobiography, Nelly (1989: 173) only mentions the Metaxas dictatorship once, merely in reference to the period of time, but never to the regime itself. In the epilogue to her autobiography, after

²³ He was a native of Santorini, hence Nelly's album (Braggiotti 1987) with photos taken probably in the 1930s.

²⁴ Georgakopoulos eventually tried to overturn the Metaxas regime and resigned on 25 November 1938. Malaspinas served as Minister for Social Welfare when Konstantinos Georgakopoulos was appointed as staff Prime Minister in a transitional government in 1958 (5 March–17 May). See a photograph of the Malaspinas couple in Nelly 1989: 177.

expressing her gratitude for the late recognition of her oeuvre in Greece (1989: 300, 301, 302) she makes a strong statement:

I was never coloured politically. We in Asia Minor since we were young all learned to love Eleftherios Venizelos. We knew only him and believed only in him. All the years I have been in Greece, I never got involved with politics; I believed it was not my business. And neither am I on anyone's side now (Nelly 1989: 303).

She portrays herself as a simple Venizelist refugee from Asia Minor, apolitical her entire life, though she was actively working within the dominant ideology of the Metaxas regime producing the images that nourished and propagated it. In the programme from her first exhibition at the O'Toole Gallery in New York, Nelly is listed as the official photographer of the royal family and of the Greek government (Nelly 1989: 198). And though I could not locate any photographs of Theologos Nikoloudis in Nelly's archive at the Benaki Museum, there were at least two such photos attributed to her, one in the brochure for the 1939 Greek pavilion, and another on the cover page of the 3 May 1939 issue of the Greek daily newspaper *Makedonia*. Nelly also actively produced photographs and photomontages for the regime's youth organization EON and the magazine *Neolaia*. Such photos rarely bear her signature, though her aesthetic composition is indisputable. An indicative selection of EON collages forms part of the collection Nelly's donated to the Benaki Museum (Fig. 11.3). Nelly's admirers tactfully gloss over this portion of her oeuvre (Trichon-Milsani 1990: 44).

During her 1937 visit to Berlin, Nelly photographed Mussolini's entrance into the Berlin stadium while seated two rows above Hitler and Mussolini. She reportedly donated photo albums of her work to both Goebbels and Hitler (Nelly 1989: 171). During her visit with her husband to Goebbels's mansion, Nelly recounts the impression her photos made on Goebbels's wife. Seizing the opportunity, Nelly requested that Goebbels recommend her to UFA, the 'Hollywood' of Germany, to be trained in shooting documentaries, presumably due to her admiration for Riefenstahl's recent work. Riefenstahl had received numerous awards for her technique in the notorious propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* (1935), which documented the 1934 Nazi Congress in Nuremberg. Following that success, Hitler had commissioned Riefenstahl to film the 1936 Olympic Games, which Nelly also attended. Nelly visited Olympia in 1932 and 1937, and quite possibly with Riefenstahl during her visit in 1936 for the filming of the Berlin Olympics.²⁵ Coincidentally, a new round of German excavations in Olympia began in April 1937 and in early 1938 the Greek Minister of Education and German officials visited the site (Hamilakis 2007: 196). In Nelly's archive, donated to the Benaki, there survives the portrait she made of Hitler.

²⁵ Riefenstahl's visit to Olympia resulted in the documentary feature film *Olympia* (1938). On Nelly's visit to Olympia, see her oral testimony to Nikos Paissios in 1996, and Damaskos 2008: 333; so too in Boudouri 2003: 27.



Figure 11.3 Nelly, Collage for the Metaxas regime's youth (EON)

Source: © Benaki Museum Photographic Archive

Nelly continued working for the Metaxas regime and produced a number of collages that formed the backdrop to the exhibits in the Greek Pavilion at the 1939 New York World's Fair. Indeed, Nelly arrived at the port of New York with her husband aboard the SS *Queen Mary* on 21 August 1939 to attend the opening events for the Greek pavilion. Once the war broke out, the couple stayed in New York for 27 years. While in the United States, and before the postal service to Greece was interrupted during WWII, Nelly's family mailed her a large number of her negatives. These included the photographs of the May 1939 excavation at Thermopylae, which had been carried out by the General Director of Greek Antiquities, Spyros Marinatos (1901–74), and financed by his friend, the American Elizabeth Hunt, who years later was awarded the esteemed Phoenix medal and was named honorary citizen of both Sparta and Athens (*Ethnos* 23/5/1951: 3). Marinatos published his excavation report in the regime's semi-official journal in a narrative steeped in nationalistic ideology setting up the ancient battle for emulation by the regime's youth (Hamilakis 2007: 169–73). Unlike the demoticist Metaxas, Marinatos was a

fierce supporter of the archaising purist Greek language (*katharévousa*) and considered any student spelling failings an indication of sub-humanity. He believed that 'if scripts were subjected to the idiocy test used in Germany, most Greek pupils would be classified as imbeciles and sent for sterilisation' (Mackridge 2009: 31).

In her autobiography, in the section on her 'national and artistic activity' in the States, Nelly discusses how she invited William Dinsmoor, Professor of Classical Architecture at Columbia University, to draw a map of the ancient battle of Thermopylae (1989: 195, 196–7, 200–202) and went on a lecture tour at American universities with Marinatos to raise awareness about the plight of Greece in WWII (Xanthakis 1997: 28), often donating half the proceeds of the sales of her work for the benefit of the Greek War Relief Association (Baltimore Museum of Art, 2/7/1941). Nelly and Marinatos paradoxically sought to indoctrinate an audience that was distinctively anti-Axis using vocabulary that had been associated with fascist leanings. The content of the lectures and photographic selection would have invoked similar nationalist references to the glorious past with aspirations for the advent of the Third Hellenic Civilisation.²⁶ Her admirers refer to her national pride, as when, in November 1939, she donated her photo-album to Mrs Roosevelt: 'She must have felt the pleasure of someone who through the medium of her art has conveyed perhaps the fullest picture of what "Greekness" means' (Trichon-Milsani 1990: 44). Nelly could not have been more intimately involved with the Metaxas ideology than when she was collaborating with the regime's foremost archaeologist contributing her pictures, promptly enlisted to rouse up the diaspora Greeks and the classically trained American audiences to action.

In the States, Nelly's friends were the editor of the royalist diaspora newspaper *Atlantis* (Nelly 1989: 186), and not the Venizelist *Ethnikos Kyrix*, a curious allegiance for an Asia Minor refugee and Nikos Pattakos, brother of Stylianos, who later became one of the three 1967 junta dictators (Nelly 1989: 287). Her closest friend was Kostas Kotzias (1893–1951), who had been elected mayor of Athens in 1934 (Nelly's 1989: 142, 207, 253, 274, 277). In his speech at the Italian Institute in Athens in January 1935, Kotzias referred to the 'atmosphere of mutual trust and sincerity' that was impressed upon him during his recent meeting with Mussolini. Such a comment was rather callous given the fact that the Dodecanese was still under Italian occupation since the Italo-Turkish war of 1912, and just on the day before Kotzias's talk, Kalymnos had rebelled against its Italian occupiers. The inopportune meeting with Mussolini

²⁶ Interestingly, Metaxas's resistance to Mussolini's ultimatum has recently resurfaced in nationalist sites which liken Metaxas's stance to 'Leonidas and the 300,' on the grounds that the Italian army was eight times larger, and, also to Konstantinos Palaiologos's resistance to the Ottomans during the siege of Constantinople when he reportedly replied in Leonidas's words 'μολὼν λαβέ' ('come and take them'); e.g. <http://www.metaxas-project.com/who-was-metaxas/> (last accessed on 15 August 2013). See also reference to the 'Greek DNA' YouTube video in Damaskos 2008: 334 n. 43.

and Kotzias's tactless comments provoked a protest by two Greek youths, as reported in the national newspaper *Proia* (25 January 1935). In August 1936, Kotzias had been appointed Secretary of State for Athens by the Metaxas regime. In September 1936, he received Goebbels in Athens. Kotzias often travelled to Germany and befriended the Nazi regime officials throughout his appointment. In July 1940, Kotzias was implicated in an attempt to overturn Metaxas with German assistance. Yet, in 1941, after Metaxas's death, when King George II asked Kotzias to form a government, he declined. Instead, during the Axis occupation, Kotzias moved to the States, where he had already cultivated his relationship with AHEPA since 1934.²⁷

In her autobiography, Nelly (1989: 253) denied allegations of Kotzias's involvement with the Italian and German regimes. She bemoaned the 'troubles' experienced by Kotzias, whom she believed to have been falsely accused with 'fake photographs', even though a number of these photos survive (Fig. 11.4). Nelly expresses her frustration at the treatment of Kotzias's sons who were repeatedly denied admission to American universities as 'sons of fascists', until Kotzias's friend, Emma Russell, secretly financed their studies at Harvard. Kotzias also solicited Russell's assistance to organise a grand opening reception for Nelly's new studio in New York. Emma Russell belonged to the elite 'New York 400' and invited all her high-society acquaintances (Nelly 1989: 206–8). Incidentally, at both the opening reception of her studio in New York, and later at her fundraising exhibition for WWII at the Baltimore Museum in 1941, which showcased her photographs of antiquities, Nelly welcomed her eminent guests in a Queen Amalia 1837 romantic court folk-dress,²⁸ fashioning herself as a Greek cultural 'ambassador' (Xanthakis 1990: 28). Indeed, Nelly presents a good candidate for the kind of 'long-distance' nationalism Anderson (1992) describes, whereby the diasporic subject retains the national identity of the 'old country,' embodying the cultural signifiers of that identity.

Since her rediscovery in Greece after the return to democracy in 1974, Nelly's connections with the Metaxas regime have been trivialised or silenced altogether. When interest in Nelly's work was rekindled, there followed a series of exhibitions, documentaries, and publications of large photographic albums, all sponsored by renowned state and private foundations and museums. One cannot fail to notice an attempt to rehabilitate, nationalise, and monumentalise Nelly's work and recast her as the 'photographer of the nation,' a cultural ambassador for Greece, a national hero who captured the image of 'the "Greece" we all carry inwardly, the "Greece" to which we all return to, the "Greece" we cannot easily overcome' (Boudouri 1996: 14).

²⁷ AHEPA (American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association) is a Greek-American service organisation, which supports charities that promote 'Hellenic identity' in the States. See photos of Kotzias with AHEPA officials and members in the MIET/ELIA collection: L118.210, L118.211, L119.005, L119.024, L119.163.

²⁸ Queen Amalia originally envisioned her dress as an imitation of the Greek folk dress in an attempt to conquer the hearts of the local peasants.



Figure 11.4 Unknown photographer, Kotzias (second from left) with Third Reich officials in Dresden, 1936

Source: Photo L119.222 © MIET/ELIA Photographic Archive

In 1990 the Agricultural Bank of Greece published a large illustrated volume with a good selection of Nelly's diverse oeuvre. One of the contributors to the volume hailed her as 'Greece's unofficial ambassador to the US' and triumphantly set her up for emulation: 'the "Nelly phenomenon," a model of ethics and artistic endeavour, has, I believe, all the features to make it an ideal for young artists even today' (Xanthakis 1990: 28). And in 1996, a contributor to a special issue of the daily *Kathimerini* on her work placed Nelly's on the pedestal as 'the national photographer' recalling with nostalgia a better past:

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The Greek state honours her work. It is recognised for the importance of its national contribution [...]. Her presence is comforting in our midst during these anti-spiritual and anti-creative times. She is the last link that connects us with our noble past. Her photographs will always lead us back to the lands of Nostos [...] re-instructing us in love of Greece. For this reason, therefore, almost triumphantly [*πανηγυρικώς*] she deserves the title of the national photographer (Savvakis 1996: 6).

Which one of the national pasts is it that Nelly is hailed for recording and recalling? The transcendental Greece of dreams? Is it the classical past of ruins? Is it the idyllic life of peasants in tamed natural landscapes? In the *Kathimerini* special issue, there is no room for debate and no mention of Nelly's connection to the Metaxas regime.²⁹ The mission of the 'panegyric' is to monumentalise and sacralise Nelly's output, to 'record' the interwar period 'relieved' of any and all tensions, and to insert an 'iconic' photographer in the annals of the newly-established democratic Greek state of the *metapolitefsi*.

A similar process of retrospective 'purification' runs through Nelly's past in her nationalisation makeover. What is foregrounded in her autobiography is the iconography of resistance to Nazi Germany. Nelly's photo on the cover of *Life* magazine on 16 December 1940 drives the message home: a soldier sounds his trumpet calling the Greeks to arms to fight off Italian fascism (Fig. 11.5).³⁰ And yet, this particular image falls into the category of photos reproduced in the *Neolaia* magazine to incite the regime's youth to work hard and to support the regime's effort to raise young citizens fit for the Third Hellenic Civilisation cultural project. And there are more such concerted efforts to brush off Nelly's links to fascist ideology and distance her from the Metaxas regime.³¹ The 'panegyric' special issue ends with a cautionary note punctuated by an exclamation mark that attains the force of a repudiation:

²⁹ Even when Boudouri (1996: 12–13) refers to the commission of the Ministry and Nikoloudis, she does not mention Metaxas and reports that Nelly began working for Nikoloudis from 1930–39, though the propaganda ministry was established in 1936 by the dismantling of the earlier tourist organisation instituted by Venizelos. But however paradoxically, as Roderick Beaton has commented in a private correspondence, this was also the regime that fought against fascism in 1940–41. On the political nuances, an instructive source is Seferis's 'Manuscript Sept. '41'.

³⁰ In the introduction to her autobiography (Nelly 1989: 10), next to the photo from *Life* magazine, Stefanos Zotos remarks: 'In the middle of the war, and while Greece is pushing back the Italian attackers, the cover for *Life* magazine features an impressive Greek soldier to awaken the world to fascism and nazism and to their destructive imperialism.'

³¹ Boudouri (1997: 27) claims that 'Nelly's Hellenocentric education with references to classical antiquity and the romantic approach to the ancient world, in which primarily she sought her own roots, will keep her away from Nazi ideology, towards which the photographic search for the perfect human body in Germany was oriented. Other photographers [she cites Walter Hege] of German education [...] either willingly or unwillingly will be enlisted in the service of the aesthetic quests of National Socialism' (emphasis added). However, see above discussion of Nelly's 'parallelisms' project.

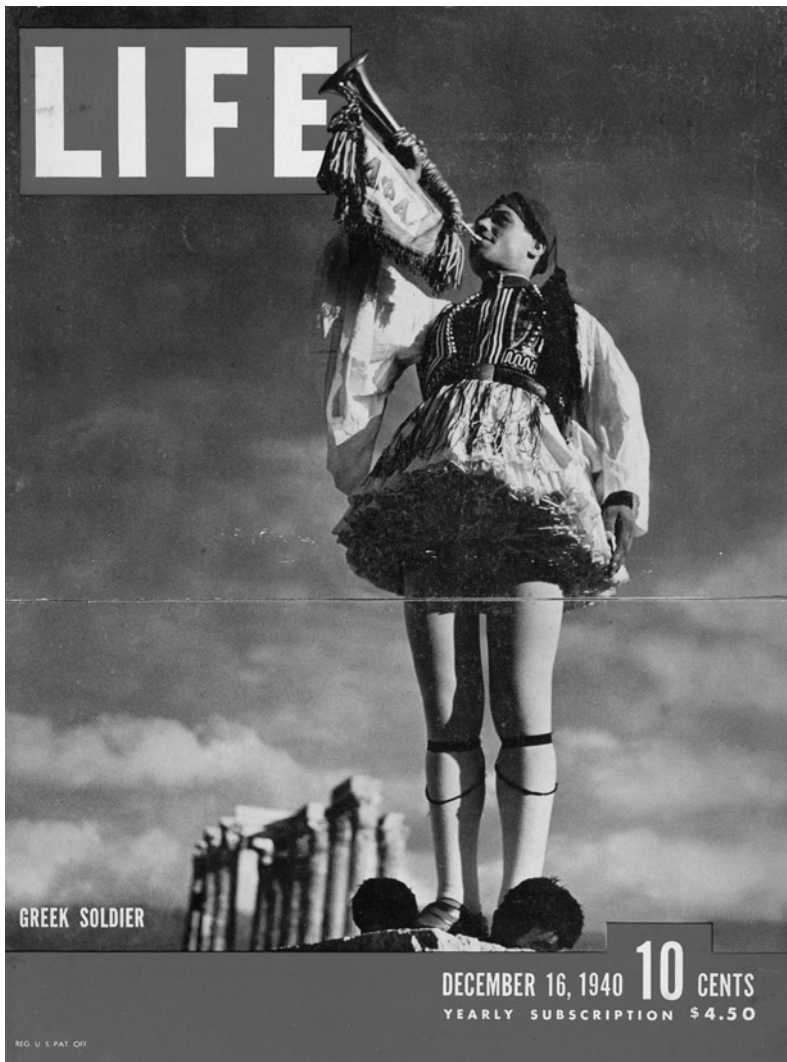


Figure 11.5 Nelly, Photo on the cover of *Life* magazine (16 December 1940). The caption reads: “The skirted soldier on the cover is a Greek Evzone (which means literally “well-girdled”). The five Greek regiments of Evzones specialising in mountain fighting have in six weeks made a name for themselves that ranks with that of the Finnish ski troops. Fighting against similar odds, they had last week driven the overwhelming Italian Army out of Greece and up the Albanian coast. This was against all rules, for the Greeks were supposed to lose the war in jig-time. When they last fought, in 1922, they were badly beaten by the Turks. In battle the Evzone wear khaki skirts’

Sixty years later, another writer doubted the [...] democratic spirit of the photographer, because she agreed to take the official portraits of the royal family at the time, and of the ministers of the Metaxas government! (Xanthakis 1996: 31).

How dare one doubt Nelly's patriotic contribution to the national imagery? Her nationalisation and sacralisation is complete: she is a 'Living Legend!' (*Ev ζωή θρόλος*), attests the only western contributor to the *Kathimerini* panegyric, Bodo von Dewitz, the Director of Agfa Foto-Historama of the Ludwig Museum in Cologne.

Conclusion

Nelly began her ethnographic pictures in 1927 during her travels to discover a Greece she had never met but recreated in the nostalgic imaginings of an Asia Minor diasporic subject, who had lived through the rise and fall of the Great Idea irredentist national dream. She was imbued with the classical ideas of her upper class private tutorials and French schooling, and later in the buzzing cultural life of the city of Dresden in the 1920s. For Nelly, Greece was a 'picturesque' and exotic land, implicated in her personal journey of discovery, when at the age of 25, on her own initiative she set out to explore and photograph a land that had fascinated her from childhood. With the support of influential members of her Athenian bourgeoisie clientele, she received commissions from the Greek Archaeological Society and the Greek Tourist Organisation under Venizelos. Nelly became more influential when she worked for the Under-Secretariat of Press and Tourism under Nikoloudis in 1936. She effectively created tourist images for the regime's brochures and periodicals, and political collages to inspire the regime's youth organisation through its main publication *Neolaia*. She promoted her 'parallelisms' iconographic project intending to quell any 'heretical' attack on the 'purity' of the Greek race and refute any argument for the racial miscegenation of the modern Greeks. Racial continuity was one of the main ideological thrusts of the Metaxas regime, but it also resonated with Nelly's national and personal imaginary. Therefore, she displayed incessant resolve in developing her own iconographic argument, a testament she bequeathed to the Greek nation.

Nelly's life was coterminous with the twentieth century, while her photography has been recycled to serve various agendas – artistic, touristic, political and national – for over 70 years: it embraced German romantic classicist aesthetics, but also flirted with expressionist art in Dresden; it served early tourist policy under Venizelos; it contributed to the monumentalisation of the Greek landscape, attempted to assert racial continuity for the Greek folk, and was conscripted to fuel the nationalist dream of the Third Hellenic Civilisation for the Metaxas regime; and, by a fortuitous inversion, it donned the iconography of resistance to the struggling Greek nation under attack and under Nazi occupation during

WWII; it was nationalised in the postwar period and, was, finally, sacralised and guaranteed a conspicuous place in the national imaginary.

Nelly's photography presents a rare example of the intersection of visibility and social power, aesthetics and politics in modern Greece. If we opt with Baudrillard and the postmodernists to see representation as all there is, and we choose to give preponderance to discourse over agency, then any photographic dialogue with the world is debunked (Edwards 2003: 185). In this case, Nelly would appear as the product of the contemporary discursive, and her agency would be diminished or altogether abandoned. Still, Leni Riefenstahl failed to gain sympathy for any mitigating circumstances of the discursive. If, however, we acknowledge Nelly as a wilful agent of the nationalist myth of cultural and racial continuity, then, I argue, *mutatis mutandis* her 'rediscovery' during the *metapolitefsi* was predicated upon the deliberate suppression of her EON collages from national memory, placing emphasis instead on her patriotism during the German occupation, and on her masterful illustration of the 'beauties' of an earlier rural Greece of the 1920s and 1930s.

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