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NEW WRITING

## The Old Greeks

**George Kouvaros**

University of New South Wales

**Corresponding author:** George Kouvaros, School of the Arts and Media, University of New South Wales NSW 2052, Australia. [g.kouvaros@unsw.edu.au](mailto:g.kouvaros@unsw.edu.au)

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### Abstract

In his final unfinished book on the writing of history, Siegfried Kracauer wonders about his increasing susceptibility to 'the speechless plea of the dead'. '[T]he older one grows, the more he is bound to realize that his future is the future of the past—history.' For the children of migrants, the question of how to speak well of the dead is distinguished by complex feelings of attachment and rejection, identification and denial that are expressed in a range of everyday interactions. 'The Old Greeks' examines the part played by photographic media in this process of memorialisation. It elaborates a series of propositions about the value of photographic media that are tested through a consideration of the events that surrounded the author's first years in Australia.

### Keywords

**Photography; migration; media; memorialisation; Siegfried Kracauer**

It was nothing more than a scene glimpsed in passing. Two women are walking arm-in-arm through a suburban park. The younger woman is middle aged, perhaps fifty or fifty-five. She is dressed in a black knee-length skirt and matching jacket. Her hair is dyed a rich orange-brown colour that disguises the grey that dominates near the roots. The other woman is much older. Noticeably bent over, she is dressed in the plain black attire worn by Greek widows. Her thick grey hair finishes just above the line of her collar. Thirty years ago, these widows were a common sight in the Sydney suburbs populated by Greeks, Italians, Macedonians and Maltese. While her movements are steady, she relies on the support of the younger woman to guide her over the uneven ground. Apart from the two women and myself, the park is empty of inhabitants. This emptiness contributes to the impression that the space being traversed by the two women is more daunting than the confines of a suburban park. Indeed, as I watched these two black-clad figures, I imagined that it was not really a matter of space at all, but rather of time: the time that separates one generation from the next. I remember this scene because it occurred shortly after the funeral of my uncle, my father's eldest brother. My uncle arrived in Australia from Cyprus in 1951. Ten years later, he paid for his youngest sister to join him. In 1966 he purchased the boat fares required to bring my own family to Australia. After our arrival, we lived together in a small worker's cottage in the part of Newcastle known as Cooks Hill. As the eldest and the first to arrive, my uncle occupied a position of authority in the family. Any instance of questionable behaviour was viewed through his eyes. Not surprisingly, I came to regard him as someone stern and quick to judge. Like all the other male adults that were part of my extended family, his life was defined by work. The eulogy at the funeral sketched some of the main details: after a number of years in north Queensland cutting sugar cane, he used his savings to establish his first shop, a takeaway in the coalfields town of Maitland. Then came a string of small seven-days-a-week businesses in and around Newcastle. He didn't gamble or drink. As far as I know, he had no hobbies or past-times that might have distracted him from his work. He married and had two daughters. There were troubles—as there always are. But later in his life, he was blessed with a number of grandchildren who loved and respected him. When he sold the last of his shops, he spent the first years of his retirement helping his eldest daughter to run her own business.

The final chapter in his life was dominated by what the priest who delivered the eulogy euphemistically referred to as his 'sickness'. Gradually, he stopped attending the christenings and weddings. When he did attend, he would sit quietly next to his wife, occasionally responding to the greeting of an old friend with a look of bewilderment. Soon, even these appearances became too difficult to manage. In the end he was completely housebound, dependent on the round-the-clock care of his wife. When they could, my parents would drive up to Newcastle and visit him. Nearly always, they would return from these visits exhausted and looking much older than when they left.

Reduced to these basic details, the story of my uncle's life sounds remarkably similar to the stories told of other migrants of his generation. Change a few of the dates and details and the priest's summation of a life devoted to hard work, thrift and the virtues of family life could be used at any number of funerals occurring in Greek Orthodox churches all over Australia. My uncle's story matches the more general story of postwar migration that is told in school textbooks and government histories. Part of the reason this story is so familiar is that, in its basic details, it corresponds with the life experiences of many members of this generation of migrants. It may be a standard story, but this does not mean

it is less valid. Yet as I listened to the eulogy, I was struck by the question of how one might bring to the standard story the viewpoints and perspectives of the generation who arrived as infants or were born here and spent their lives watching and quite often turning away from the experiences of their parents. This is the generation that grew up on one side of a divide marked not just by age but also by fundamental cultural and linguistic differences, a generation whose sense of identity was formed on the basis of being ‘not like them’. It was as a member of this generation that I took my place in the front pews of the church, respectfully listening to the priest’s eulogy, while also wondering about the debts and obligations that bind us to the generation of the old Greeks.

## II

To talk of one’s obligations to previous generations is, of course, to reflect on one’s own mortality. In the introduction to his final unfinished book on the writing of history, Siegfried Kracauer wonders about his own increasing susceptibility to ‘the speechless plea of the dead’. ‘[T]he older one grows,’ he proposes, ‘the more he is bound to realise that his future is the future of the past—history.’<sup>1</sup> For the children of migrants, the question of how to speak well of the dead is also distinguished by a sense of incommensurability. To describe a relationship as incommensurate is to say that it lacks a common measure. And for a time this is how things felt. On the level of values, life experiences and aspirations, we were ‘not like them’. Thinking about the volume of writings and creative works produced by the children of migrants one might believe that we became very good at incorporating incommensurability into our stories. But this assumption relies on the common mistake that equates incommensurability with conflict, namely the conflict between one set of values and aspirations coming up against a different set of values and aspirations. Like the story of my uncle’s life told by the priest, this story of generational conflict is familiar because it is based in lived experience. Yet what it tends to leave out are those emotions and experiences marked by incommensurable difference that do not necessarily express themselves in the form of conflict. Indeed, far from being the last word on the matter, the insistence on being ‘not like them’ was merely the start of an on-going oscillation between feelings of attachment and rejection, identification and denial that expressed itself in a range of everyday interactions and encounters.

These oscillating feelings were particularly acute in our engagement with the past. On one level, the past that shadows many of the interactions between first generation migrants and their children manifests itself as a matter of religious beliefs and customs that are either adopted or rejected or, just as often, simultaneously adopted and rejected. These beliefs and customs do not simply constrain our behaviour; more positively, they also invest it with a significance that it would not otherwise have. On another level, the past that shadows our closest relationships manifests itself as a series of histories that remain unknowable. We encounter these histories in a variety of ways: a story only half understood or grasped that comes together over time; an unexpected rise of emotion that brings with it a sense of grief or resentment lying just beneath the surface; a gesture whose opaqueness speaks of another place and time. Of course, these subterranean histories exist in all family structures. The distinguishing feature in migrant families is that the process of geographic displacement shrouds the past with a sense of unknowability that is both temporal and spatial.

<sup>1</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, Markus Wiener Publishers, Princeton, 1995, p. 6.

In the case of my own childhood the encounter with these histories nearly always involved an encounter with images, in particular, photographic images. In a convergence whose implications are becoming clearer in retrospect, the process of postwar migration occurred at the same time as photography shifted from the domain of the dedicated hobbyist to a universally available medium of recording everyday life. Hence, nestled among the personal belongings that filled the suitcases of many migrant families was a selection of carefully chosen photographs. Gradually, these images were supplemented with more recent photographs produced to commemorate significant milestones: one's first house, the birth of a child, a cousin's christening. Added to the pile were photographs that arrived tucked inside airmail envelopes, often with some sort of caption or comment on the back—evidence of other viewers whose presence was inscribed on the photographs. Over time, an odd sort of collection was formed in which images from different periods and places were mixed together. Some of the images could be contextualised and placed in a coherent chronology, while others were like puzzles, half understood and redolent of a gap in one's knowledge. I remember scrutinising these photographs—sometimes alone, sometimes with my mother and sisters. The objective of this scrutiny was to construct something that was missing from my own consciousness: a narrative that could link the blunt immediacy of the present with the restless persistence of the past.

### III

In her photographic series 'Innocent Reading For Origin', Elizabeth Gertsakis dramatises the powerful affect of these half-understood histories.<sup>2</sup> Alongside a series of photographs that span the period prior to and just after the emigration of her parents, Gertsakis transcribes basic contextual information as well as her thoughts and responses to the images. 'A wedding day portrait,' she writes about the first photograph (see Figure 1). 'My father's brother and his wife with my grandmother seated in front.' Yet the more she looks at the images the more certain details expose the gaps in her knowledge. These gaps take the form of questions. 'What are all the dried bits of grass doing on his suit?' she asks about the photograph of her uncle. 'Why is he holding grass in his hand?' These questions dramatises the distance between then and now, between the moment captured in the photographs of the family members looking back at the camera and the present moment of viewing. The photographs collapse this distance or, at least, provoke the sensation that it might be overcome. They do this at the same time as they draw attention to those elements of the past that remain unknowable. The written commentary transforms the everyday phenomena in the photographs into objects of a strange curiosity. 'My mother looks very young,' she writes about a photograph showing her mother and aunt standing together outside of a house. 'She has big slippers on. Would they get dirty on the road? My aunt has special shoes and very slippery stockings. Their dresses have too many buttons. The buildings look dirty and old. This is a special picture. They stand in a special way.'

In a deceptively simple manner, Gertsakis's work establishes a series of affinities between photography, a vision of history as unknowable, and an experience of migration marked by the failure of things to carry over and survive the uprooting. The outcome is a dizzying sense of contingency: Why am I *here* rather than *there*? Why am I alive *now* rather than *then*? These questions also shadow Kracauer's discussion of the relationship between photographic media and the challenges facing the historian. The study of history, he argues, has become bogged down in 'inherited habits of thought and themes of long standing which altogether

2 This series was first exhibited at the Australian Centre for Photography in Sydney in 1987.



**Figure 1** Elizabeth Gertsakis, *Innocent Reading For Origin*, 1987, gelatin silver print, 74.0 x 48.5 cm

Source: Monash Gallery of Art, City of Monash Collection, acquired 1994; Copyright Elizabeth Gertsakis, reproduced with permission

render it nearly impenetrable ... Actually, the whole area is pervaded, and overshadowed, by a curious blend of concrete *ad hoc* insights and ill-fitting generalities.<sup>3</sup> By reacquainting us with the contingent aspects of everyday life, film and photography have the potential to cut through these ill-fitting generalities. 'They help us to think *through* things, not above them,' Kracauer stipulates. 'Otherwise expressed, the photographic media make it much easier for us to incorporate the transient phenomena of the outer world, thereby redeeming them from oblivion.'<sup>4</sup> The challenge facing the historian is to follow the path mapped by photographic media, a path that leads away from the realm of ultimate truths and toward a field of knowledge that exists somewhere between the haziness of mere opinions and the lofty aspirations of philosophy and art. He refers to this intermediary area as the 'anteroom': a realm

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

of historical reality that is ‘full of intrinsic contingencies’.<sup>5</sup> Stopping in the anteroom does not mean an end to the writing of history, only its transformation: ‘The historian devotes himself to the last things before the last, settling in an area which has the character of an anteroom. (Yet it is this ‘anteroom’ in which we breathe, move, and live.)’<sup>6</sup>

Although Kracauer did not complete his account of this new type of history before his death in 1966, his remarks do provide a detailed rendition of the states of being with which it is associated. In the chapter ‘The Historians Journey’, he refers to the famous moment in Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* when the narrator returns to his family’s apartment after an extended absence and catches sight of his beloved grandmother lost in thought. The narrator describes his perception at this point as that of ‘a stranger who does not belong to the house’.<sup>7</sup> He compares this stranger’s perception to the detached mechanical viewpoint of a photograph. Kracauer modifies this moment of subjective disturbance in two key aspects. First, instead of an overturning of the habit-formed way of seeing, he imagines a process of superimposition whereby the stranger’s observations are superimposed upon the temporarily effaced perception of the loving grandson. The second modification follows from the first, it involves transforming the experience of alienation described in Proust’s novel into a productive form of outsider vision that paves the way for a reinvigoration of history: ‘A stranger to the world evoked by the sources, [the historian] is faced with the task—the exile’s task—of penetrating its outward appearances, so that he may learn to understand that world from within.’<sup>8</sup> A little further on Kracauer concedes that the alienation experienced by Proust’s narrator is a temporary phenomenon that dissolves under the weight of his deep love for his grandmother. The estrangement experienced by the historian, on the other hand, leaves a permanent mark. No longer is the historian ‘the son of his time’. More appropriately, ‘he is the son of at least two times—his own and the time he is investigating. His mind is in a measure unlocalisable; it perambulates without fixed abode.’<sup>9</sup>

Less directly interested in questions of historiography, Gertsakis shares with Kracauer an investment in states when the self perambulates without fixed abode. This is evident in the attention paid to elements in the photographs that encapsulate the unknowability of the past as well as the oscillations in the narrator’s perspective. In one of the images, the photographer’s mother and father are standing either side of a small girl whose hands are clasped in prayer (see Figure 2). ‘The little girl is praying so beautifully,’ Gertsakis writes. ‘That is the church in the back. Why are they watching her? Why are they standing in that way?’ After analysing the postures and clothing of the two adults, her attention turns back to the little girl: ‘I think she is the one they said was deaf and dumb. Why don’t they ask me to pray like that and then stand next to me?’ The threat of being rendered deaf and dumb is what haunts the photographer’s own struggle to speak well of the past. Positioned between the two adults, the little girl kneeling in supplication embodies ‘the speechless plea of the dead’ and functions as a link between past and present, between one generation and the next. Like Proust’s narrator, her position is on the threshold. As someone who experienced the dislocations of migration first hand yet because of her age was sheltered from many of its consequences, the photographer shares this awkward disposition. The history that she struggles to put together is hers and not

5 Ibid., p. 45.

6 Ibid., p. 195.

7 Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, vol. 2, ‘The Guermantes Way, Cities of the Plain’, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, Penguin, London 1981, p. 141.

8 Kracauer, p. 84.

9 Ibid., p. 93.





**Figure 2** Elizabeth Gertsakis, *Innocent Reading For Origin*, 1987, gelatin silver print, 74.0 x 48.5 cm

Source: Monash Gallery of Art, City of Monash Collection, acquired 1994; Copyright Elizabeth Gertsakis, reproduced with permission

hers. Working in tandem with the written text, the photographs are like meeting points in which the lives of those in the picture and those looking on are brought together in a story of recognition and misrecognition.

#### IV

Near the end of my uncle's funeral the mourners began filing past the coffin. First in the procession were his wife and daughters, followed by the various members of his extended family. Because the long years of illness had left his body emaciated, the coffin in which he lay seemed tiny. On top of the coffin rested an icon of the Panayia; next to this was a photograph of my uncle grinning back at the camera. From the colourful bow tie visible at the bottom of the photograph, I guessed that it was taken on the day of his eldest daughter's wedding. I remembered that day because I was part of the groom's wedding party. My cousin had met her

fiancé during a trip back to Cyprus, and because he knew very few people in Australia nearly the entire wedding party was comprised of friends and family of the bride. The day of the wedding was stifling hot. I can still recall the sweat pouring off the face of the groom as the priest waved the censer containing the burning incense. The only one who didn't seem bothered by the heat was my uncle who sat quietly in the front pews of the church in his bow tie and light coloured suit. By this stage, I no longer regarded him as the stern patriarch. In fact, I hardly regarded him at all. He was part of the past, part of a world that I had successfully left behind. Pausing briefly in front of his coffin, I did exactly as everyone else in the procession had done: after crossing myself, I knelt down and kissed both the icon of the Panayia and the photograph.

Driving home from the funeral, I thought about all the other times we had gathered at the church. During those early years there were so many weddings and christenings. Two jobs, marriage, and then children: this was how the demands and pressures of a new life taking shape over here helped contain the feelings of homesickness for people and places back there. Every so often, a late-night phone call from overseas brought news of an event that highlighted the cost of these frantic efforts. From what I could tell, my uncle was never bothered by feelings of homesickness. He was unsentimental about the life that he left in Cyprus. The village was a place of hard lessons. It shaped who he was. But it was migration that enabled him to become the person he wanted to be: respected by many, treated warily by others and loved by just a few. After his children were born, he went back for a holiday with his family. He caught up with his siblings and widowed mother. But after returning, he was content to leave it at that. Growing up, I saw him most frequently late on Saturday evenings. After closing the shop, he would drop by with my aunty for a cup of tea and a chat. My parents would get home from their own shop, shower and quickly eat something before his arrival. Occasionally, I would sit and listen to their conversations. No matter how tired she was from working in the shop, my mother would serve the tea and biscuits; at the same time she would engage in friendly banter with my uncle. He enjoyed making fun of her attachment to the village—the same village where he grew up. Most of the time, she was able to laugh at his jibes. She wore her attachment as a badge of pride. But more often than she cared to admit, I could tell that the jokes touched something painful and unresolved in her history of migration.

The photographs that were taken in front of the church or in the vacant lot next door helped assuage the confusions and anxieties that accompanied our arrival. Each time we looked at the camera, we became a little more connected to this new place with its neatly arranged houses, wide streets and enormous parks. The connection was more real in the images than in our minds. But it was a start. After they were processed, my mother would enclose the photographs that she liked best in the aerogramme envelopes that were dispatched to her parents and siblings in Cyprus. Ruthless in her judgments, the images that were less-than-flattering were torn in two. What did she see in these images, I wonder? Was it simply that they caught us in an awkward moment? Or did they reveal something else about who we were at this point? The carefully staged moment of the photograph was thus an opportunity and a threat: it helped us to get the measure of this new place; at the same time, it set off feelings that highlighted the fragile connection binding us to where we were. This is Kracauer's point about the value of photography: the camera affirms our connection to the places that we occupy and instigates a fundamental displacement. It reacquaints us with our home—as a place of transit, a place where we become adept at coming and going, at viewing things in the guise of a stranger.

The problem with this explanation is that it leaves out the thing that made my mother's response to the images so memorable. For us, the photographs were just images. For her, they



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were troublesome objects able to circulate and trigger stories about the past as well as the present that might best remain untold. This is why they couldn't be allowed to remain buried in a cupboard drawer. More befitting their status, they had to be destroyed. In 'Innocent Reading For Origin', photographs matter in the same way. They bring us face-to-face with the transient phenomena of everyday life and serve as instigators for stories. Gertsakis's oblique commentaries are intimations of the fascination and curiosity that drives these stories. They draw out of the images a tension between loss and recovery that characterises so many migrant narratives. They shed light on certain events, while deepening the mystery of others. Most of all, they shroud our engagement with the past in a sense of generational obligation: How to speak well of the dead? This was the question that was running through my head as I listened to the eulogy during my uncle's funeral—the same question that came to me as I watched the two black-clad women slowly walking through the suburban park. The power of this question lies not in any answer that it might generate, but in the disorder that it instigates: a disorder in which our own need to be spoken for is irrevocably marked.

## About the author

George Kouvaros is Professor of Film Studies in the School of the Arts and Media at the University of New South Wales.

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