

## Review

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Christos Tsiolkas. *Dead Europe*. Milson's Point, NSW:  
Vintage Australia / Random House, 2005.



### Exhuming History:

#### Neo-Conservatism and Christos Tsiolkas's *Dead Europe* (2005)

Published in 2005, Christos Tsiolkas's *Dead Europe*<sup>1</sup> stages a narrative intersection of the gothic and realist forms to produce a work of magic realism that avoids the latter's tendency for the whimsical, in order to delve deeply into the conflicts of history and cultural identity in the age of globalization. In the process, Tsiolkas's

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<sup>1</sup> Christos Tsiolkas, *Dead Europe*. Milson's Point, NSW: Vintage Australia / Random House, 2005. Subsequent references, incorporated in the text, are to this edition.

gripping novel-of-ideas reanimates the debate about the so-called “end of history,” and stages this debate within an arena that spans past and present, the personal and the national, from contemporary Australia to wartime Europe — and beyond.

Since the publication of his first novel, *Loaded* (1995),<sup>2</sup> Tsiolkas’s work has been committed to the politics of the Left. As I argued some time ago, in an article about *Loaded* and its film adaptation, *Head On* (1998), the protagonist’s angst as a young, Greek-Australian homosexual man is significantly due to his internalization of a political experience which had, properly speaking, been that of his parents as working-class migrants.<sup>3</sup> That was, literally, the hero’s *historical* background, given the added local, contemporary context of the economic recession of the early 1990s. In one of the most noted passages in *Loaded*, Ari ranted about things that were now “history,” a list which included “The [Athens] Polytechnic” — the site of student resistance to the Greek military regime which his parents had opposed (87). Ari’s list also included “Vietnam . . . Auschwitz . . . Hippies . . . Punks . . . God . . . Hollywood”, and, last but not least: “The Soviet Union” (87). Here, “history” is not just past, but also, implicitly, dead, over and done with — and, hence, lacking contemporary relevance.

In *Dead Europe*, Isaac, the narrator-hero, journeys to Europe ten years after a previous visit. The price of globalization is one of the central issues raised. After an argument with one of his cousins about progress and national identity, she pours two ouzos, and tells Isaac: “Drink, cousin, who knows if we’ll still be drinking ouzo when you next return” (135). Isaac explores a New Europe of exile, exploitation, cultural nihilism and homogenization; his trip is soon transformed into a traumatic journey into the past, and a thought-provoking critique of contemporary culture. Ari’s outburst about “history”, discussed above, is reprised in *Dead Europe*. Echoed in different forms, people express everything from smug dismissal to bitter disappointment. For example, when Isaac asks a friend about some words on a wall in Prague, his friend retorts: “That’s old. That’s from the Velvet Revolution. That’s history” (204).

History is also a record of political defeats and betrayals, and Isaac discovers that icons and slogans point to a burden of history that cannot always be shared. For instance,

<sup>2</sup> Tsiolkas, *Loaded*. Milson’s Point, NSW: Vintage, 1995. Subsequent textual references are to this edition.

<sup>3</sup> Ivan Cañadas, “A Sin That Dare Not Speak Its Name: Class and Sexuality in Christos Tsiolkas’s *Loaded* and Anna Kokkinos’s *Head On*.” *Overland* 177. Summer 2004. 43-7.

in the ghetto in Venice, an old Jewish man leads him everywhere: “all the while pointing at graffiti and wordlessly commanding me to take photographs of it” (151). The swastika and the symbol of the old, Italian fascists jostle with neo-fascist slogans. As Isaac recounts:

His insistence on me photographing the crude symbols of continuing racism had touched me. The desperate need to confirm the relevance of history made me melancholy” (151).

However, this moment of wordless communication — one could say of a form of *communion*, which cuts across time, place and religion — comes to an end when a crucifix worn by Isaac shows at his collar. Although it is, ironically, not the sign of a firm believer, but a gift recently given to him by a relative, it raises a barrier between young gentile and old Jew. The old man, then, attempts to destroy the photographs, evidently ashamed to have shared personal pain with a *stranger* — that is, someone alien, not of his own people.

The section dealing with Isaac’s return to his parents’ native Greece is interesting, partly, for the character of Andreas, who has a jaded attitude to the spectacle of a new Greece, in which he himself is, nevertheless, successfully complicit. “Welcome to Peasantland,” he sneers, after witnessing a traditional folk wedding put on by actors for the sake of the tourists (97). As *Dead Europe* shows, such representations of the past are, of course, sanitized — not only nostalgic and uncritical, but also potentially insidious in its conservative ends. For that matter, in time, even the subversive may be honored when it ceases to be a threat to the status quo, as Andreas truculently proclaims: “Come . . . it’s all in the fucking past, isn’t it? There’s no exile any more, no civil war, no blood / feuds, no more prisons, and even the State builds a monument to the Resistance. We are all democrats, now, aren’t we?” (93-4).

Actually, everything is possible in a world in which a symbol — one could say *the* “poster-boy” — of 90s neo-liberal ideology, Francis Fukuyama, can use terms such as “Marxist” to refer to himself, as he did in the *New York Times*, while he accused the Bush Administration of turning “Leninist” through its attempts to “push” history along with its

War on Terror.<sup>4</sup> I am referring to Fukuyama because *Dead Europe* can be read as an interesting response to the arguments of a neo-conservatism, which must remain firmly associated with Fukuyama, however much he may now attempt to distance himself from the Neo-Conservative camp. In a lecture held at the time of the publication of *Dead Europe*, Tsiolkas cited the “euphoria of the capitalist Right in the early 1990s, proclaiming the end of history”; Tsiolkas stated that the fact that history had, in fact, *not* ended, was not really “understood . . . in the West” until 9/11, which “slapped us right in our faces.”<sup>5</sup> Tsiolkas’s comments about the “euphoria of the capitalist Right . . . proclaiming the end of history,” are, of course, a reference to Fukuyama’s arguments in his best-known work, *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992).<sup>6</sup>

Even years later, in one of Fukuyama’s numerous attempts to explain, or redefine, the pronouncements that he made in his key work, he still continued to ascribe the unavoidable triumph of liberal democracy to an “enlightened rationalism,” which he celebrated, and, arguably, sought to personify.<sup>7</sup> A key contradiction is that rationalism cannot be reconciled with individualist self-assertion — the drive to prevail. Yet, Fukuyama also maintained the importance of the “thymotic” part of the soul — the driving force behind pride, dignity, and the desire for status, whereby the success ethic — as opposed to egalitarianism — would be the basis of liberal democracy and its own formula for success as a world ideology. In these terms, as Fukuyama continued to argue in the late 1990s:

while all of us believe we are entitled to equal respect, no one in his heart of hearts believes equal respect is all there is to life, or thinks that life would be

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<sup>4</sup> Francis Fukuyama, “After Neoconservatism.” *New York Times Magazine* Feb. 19, 2006. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/19/magazine/neo.html>. Online, April 2, 2007. Fukuyama’s distinction is between his own so-called “Marxist” perspective of progressive historical change — a model that would end in liberal democracy, as opposed to communism — and the “Leninist” aspects of the ongoing War on Terror, which he ascribes to the Neo-Conservative belief that “history can be pushed along with the right application of power and will.”

<sup>5</sup> Tsiolkas, in “Politics, Faith & Sex: Christos in Conversation with Patricia Cornelius.” *Overland* 181. Summer 2005. 18-25 (21).

<sup>6</sup> Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Penguin, 1992.

<sup>7</sup> Fukuyama, “Reflections on *The End of History*, Five Years Later.” *After History?: Francis Fukuyama and His Critics*, Ed. Timothy Burns. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994. 239-58 (248).

worth living if there was no room for unequal respect based on some degree of excellence or achievement.<sup>8</sup>

In *The End of History*, Fukuyama cited Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, to provide a pedigree for his arguments about the naturalness of the success ethic, noting that "Smith argues that the reason men seek riches and shun poverty has very little to do with physical necessity."<sup>9</sup> A good question to ask, however, is how we may reconcile the needs of social stability with the ideal of individual success: the desire to triumph or prevail over others, whether they are individuals, nation-states or ethno-religious groups. By extension, how could anyone — or *any group*, for that matter — be expected to accept a subordinate status, if power and status were, in fact, more important than bread?

An additional paradox in Fukuyama's celebration of liberal democracy was his apparent contempt for the mainstream Western bourgeois subject, whom he contrasts unfavorably with the strong-willed "thymotic man"; as Fukuyama contended: "Economic Man, the true *bourgeois*, will perform an internal 'cost-benefit analysis' which will always give him a reason for working 'within the system.'"<sup>10</sup> Looked at in retrospect, the lines that followed seem prophetic. For Fukuyama went on to express implicit respect for "thymotic man." described as "the man of anger who is jealous of his own dignity and the dignity of his fellow citizens . . . who is willing to walk in front of a tank or confront a line of soldiers."<sup>11</sup> While he probably had in mind the well-known footage of the lone protester approaching the tanks at Tiananmen Square, in 1989, today, it may well suggest suicide bombers, such as the ones willing to kill, even at the cost of their own lives, on September 11, 2001 — and since. As the old proverb says, *beware what you wish for*.

This reading is only emphasized if we consider Fukuyama's involvement in the Neo-conservative think-tank known as the Project for a New American Century, which issued a statement — a year before those terrorist attacks — expressing the desirability of a "process of transformation" in American foreign policy, a return to "Reaganite military strength and moral clarity," a process that, as Sidney Blumenthal notes, "the PNAC

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<sup>8</sup> Fukuyama, "Reflections" 254.

<sup>9</sup> Fukuyama, *The End of History*, 173.

<sup>10</sup> Fukuyama, *The Last Man*, 180.

<sup>11</sup> Fukuyama, *The Last Man*, 180.

fretted . . . domestic political conditions would not permit . . . ‘absent some catastrophic and catalyzing event – like a new Pearl Harbour.’”<sup>12</sup>

*Dead Europe* can be seen as a creative response to this, one that contends that a society given over to sheer competition — a world where the idea that *Might-is-Right* prevails — will breed not greatness but madness, not gifted individualists but the ultimate egotist: the psychopath. In these terms, though it is considerably different in form and style, and far more profound and wide-reaching in its aims and scope, *Dead Europe* may also warrant some comparison with Brett Easton Ellis’s generally misunderstood cultural critique of the Reagan years, *American Psycho* (1990),<sup>13</sup> though this is beyond the scope of the present paper.

Fukuyama has also been criticized for his ready dismissal of religion as a relevant force or ideology in modern society, for example, smugly referring to “God having been killed off in the nineteenth century.”<sup>14</sup> The international events of the past few years show that God is hardly dead for a lot of people — including not only Muslim fundamentalists, but also a militant, influential and growing Christian Right in the United States and other Western nations. Tsiolkas himself has spoken about the short-sightedness of such a perspective, telling an interviewer:

just because you and I may speak as atheists, doesn’t mean that the notion of God or religion is unimportant for millions of people on this planet, and that experience has to be dealt with honourably.<sup>15</sup>

Tsiolkas expanded upon this idea, elsewhere, stressing that, since September 11, 2001: “there can no longer be a pretence that religion no longer plays a role in politics. Not only in the Islamic world but in Europe and the West itself.”<sup>16</sup> Yet, this statement should not

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<sup>12</sup> Sidney Blumenthal, “The Love Song of Francis Fukuyama.” *Comment is Free*, in *The Guardian* March 21, 2006.  
[http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/sidney\\_blumenthal/2006/03/the\\_love\\_song\\_of\\_francis\\_fukuy.html](http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/sidney_blumenthal/2006/03/the_love_song_of_francis_fukuy.html).  
Online, April 9, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Brett Easton Ellis, *American Psycho*. New York: Vintage, 1991 / London: Picador, 1991.

<sup>14</sup> Fukuyama, “Reflections” 248.

<sup>15</sup> Tsiolkas, in “Politics, Faith & Sex” 23.

<sup>16</sup> Tsiolkas interview: “*Dead Europe* Q&A” (Random House - 2005). *Downunderlit*, September 13, 2006.  
<http://downunder-lit.blogspot.com>. Online: August 23, 2008.

obscure the essential — one could even say, *fundamental* — nature of Tsiolkas's secularism, made evident when he added:

I think progressive people have to begin to address religion seriously, we need to educate ourselves. Especially — and here I am pessimistic — as I believe that all three of those religions ultimately want our destruction.<sup>17</sup>

While *Dead Europe* skirts around the issue of the U.S. Oil War, and its consequences, the novel focuses on a Europe, in which the “euphoria” of the end of the Cold War, noted above, has given way to the re-emergence of old conflicts, such as problems of displacement, and the problems affecting large-scale migrant and refugee populations. In Tsiolkas's novel, these problems are presented as the unearthing of ancestral hates, anti-Semitism and other forms of xenophobia, as well as the rise of new masses of exploited and exploitable people.

The protagonist's journey through the new Europe exposes a culture of rising inequality, in which sexual commerce is an extreme — *yet, utterly banal* — example of social difference and exploitation. Part-Dante, part-Baudelairean *flâneur* — a voyeuristic passer-by, gazing upon the dirty underbelly — Isaac's every step marks the entrance into a new circle of hell, while the narrator's growing misanthropy, as he explores the new Europe and delves into its ghosts — those in his own family included — forces the reader to share the narrator's growing disgust. Italy, for example, is approached through the seaport where Isaac disembarks along with a ferry-load of gypsies. We witness a gallery of the destitute and displaced, from Albanian illegal immigrants being deported, to “a barely teenage girl” who services a sailor in an alleyway. The jaundiced, scathing style of a Juvenalian satirist, and the theme of moral corruption, if not irreparable decadence, is captured when Isaac refers to “a Russian whore leading a priest to a room” (138). The cultural context of migration and dislocation is, in turn, associated with the dissolution of identity when Isaac describes being accosted by three prostitutes, their identities uncertain, but, ultimately interchangeable and equally abject: “Three whores, who might

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<sup>17</sup> Tsiolkas, “*Dead Europe* Q&A.”

have been Romanian, who might have been Albanian or Macedonian, niggers from the Balkans and the East” (138).

Proceeding to Prague, he meets an old friend with whom he had studied photography. Corrupted by easy money and the ready availability of teenage boy-prostitutes — a temptation to which Isaac himself is not immune — the promising artist has learned to “whore his photography” — literally so, since he works for a pornographer. Having learnt to compromise, Isaac’s friend makes excuses for his actions:

This is just what I do for money, mate, alright? This is how I make a living. Every guy I shoot, every one of them, I take other photographs. Not porn. Real photographs. . . . I’m still an artist, does that make sense? (197).

However, at the same time, the primacy of materialism clearly reigns in the new world, as shown when he mocks Isaac for his unrewarded idealism — manifested by the fact that Isaac still travels “with a backpack . . . at thirty-five” (202). Moments earlier, Isaac has witnessed the prelude to a ‘porno-shoot,’ the description a visual critique of consumerism, worthy of a photographer. Two Czech boys sit on a mattress, “munching McDonald’s burgers, nude except for matching Adidas shorts” (195). Partly industrialized, partly antisocial, pornography and prostitution stand as the defining manifestations of rampant materialism and modern consumer culture taken to their logical extremes.

In interviews, Tsiolkas has referred to the *deaths* behind his novel — of needing “to understand certain deaths,” namely “the deaths of communism, the death of Yugoslavia,” and “that of the peasant class.”<sup>18</sup> It is a heritage which clearly both attracts and repulses the author, as shown when he referred elsewhere to his desire for readers “to experience not only the contemporary Europe but the smells and sensuality and horror of old peasant Europe as well.”<sup>19</sup> In these terms, Tsiolkas has explained that he sought “to examine how the legacies of the past still actively disturb our sleep in the present”, as the

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<sup>18</sup> Tsiolkas, in “Politics, Faith & Sex” 21.

<sup>19</sup> Tsiolkas, “*Dead Europe*,” interviewed by Gareth Beal, in *Good Reading* (July 2005), 26.



novel's protagonist struggles with "what it means ... to be an ethical human in a supposedly post-ideological age."<sup>20</sup> However, it is the novel's extreme context and form — of grunge realism spliced with a horror genre — that may arouse most questions, or doubts, from an ideological point of view. Nor is this resolved by the author's attempts to clarify his position, in interview, where he has responded to questions about whether his perspective is unduly extreme, or skewed, by stating:

The sons and daughters of Eastern European peasants now work as prostitutes in the West. This is harsh, this is extreme, but I do not think it is untrue. This is the death at the centre of *Dead Europe*.<sup>21</sup>

Interestingly, a position as admittedly *extreme* as that of Tsiolkas has been found problematic even within the Left, as "Writing Off Europe," a review of *Dead Europe* in the World Socialist Web Site makes clear; Tsiolkas is criticized both for sweepingly ascribing all Marxist societies and movements — including Stalinism — an inherently *progressive* character, while also being defeatist about the contemporary working class, its prospects and character:

Tsiolkas has written off Europe and the European working class. Skeptical and pessimistic about the working class's ability to struggle against the ills of capitalism, Tsiolkas attempts to startle the reader and jolt him or her out of supposed apathy. . . . The book resembles a freak show, with the majority of ordinary people absent from this Europe he has conjured up out of the most extreme layers and circumstances.<sup>22</sup>

This is rather reductive, and misses the point of Tsiolkas's creative approach, an approach that, in its worst moments, may, indeed, seem to be no more than "shock

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<sup>20</sup> Tsiolkas, cited in: David Mills, "Launch of Christos Tsiolkas' New Novel, *Dead Europe*," QNET, 17 May 2005. [http://www.qnet.or.au/content/news\\_and\\_events/events/0505christos\\_tsiolkas.php](http://www.qnet.or.au/content/news_and_events/events/0505christos_tsiolkas.php). Online: 22 August 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Tsiolkas, "*Dead Europe* Q&A."

<sup>22</sup> Gabriela Zabala-Notaras and Ismet Redzovic, "Writing Off Europe." *World Socialist Web Site*, Book Review. November 16, 2005. <http://www.wsws.org/sections/category/arts/book.shtml>. Online, April 9, 2007.

tactics,” but which gets the point across better than simple realism. After all, the author openly denies having produced a straight social documentary, but a creative work, which juggles and combines different forms, as indicated by the folk-tale opening — regarding the protagonist’s grandmother, “the most beautiful girl in the world,” swiftly transformed into the tale of a family’s — and a continent’s — ghosts. It is fitting, therefore, that Isaac’s final descent into madness — which entails his own dissolution as a narrative voice — should follow the escalation of such sexual materialism to the edge of violence — and beyond — while episodes in which Isaac wolfs down food, and is drawn to sexual experiences defined by a similarly monstrous hunger, will arouse the readers’ suspicions about the narrator’s possibly delusional state — or, indeed, of his being *possessed*.

In addition, this psychic collapse remains inextricably enmeshed in a political parable, involving Isaac’s meeting with two AGFA representatives, an American called Bob, and a Russian, Nikolai — a malicious variation on the abusive, dysfunctional couple, if ever there was one (370-81) — while the chapter also functions as an allegory about Globalization and the end of the Cold War. Traveling together, Bob openly abuses Nikolai, who turns out to be a self-destructive, abject alcoholic. Nor is this simply a stereotype about Russians proudly guzzling large quantities of their national drink, since Nikolai’s *poison* is not vodka, but the most ubiquitous of world whiskies: Johnnie Walker. Similarly, America’s consolidation of economic and political power is refracted through Bob’s account of his experiences in Eastern Europe, an account of success as a modern adventurer-entrepreneur, which is largely defined in terms of Bob’s enjoyment of economic privilege in the form of sexual commerce. In these terms, he ranks the “whores” of Bucharest, Prague and Warsaw — and slips easily from that *cultural* evaluation and a dismissive comment about the lax work ethics of his company’s Russian employees (372). In what may be either a psychotic fantasy, or Isaac’s final descent into ghoulish bloodlust — but which certainly works as a political allegory — he slays *both* the triumphalist American and the abject, brutalized ex-Soviet, after he finds Bob preying sexually on the unconscious Nikolai.

This account gives way gives way to Isaac’s reduction from narrator to mere character in a hospital bed, after he is found by the police “ranting and screaming in the

city” (397). Since classical times, an unbridled will, manifested in the tyrant’s desire to fulfill one’s every appetite, was seen as the root of insanity. As Rebecca Bushnell explains: “The Platonic tradition describes the tyrant as giving in to excessive desire, which unseats the sovereignty of reason,” a dissolution of self that essentially “transgresses the boundaries that separate human from beast,” the tyrant transformed into “a monster, a wolf, an animal masked as a human being.”<sup>23</sup> *Dead Europe* would suggest that the modern equivalent of the *tyrant* is the decentered, rapidly-disintegrating subject of modern consumer society — at its worst, a psychopath, a ghoul, cut off from the communal roots.

The narrator-hero — symbolically speaking, a *possessed* subject of modern consumerism — is driven first by disgust, later by inexplicable appetites; his monstrous desire for food, sex, even violence, is doomed to culminate in the twin horrors of mental illness and the traditional realm of the supernatural. *Dead Europe* succeeds as an experimental history because, like Tsiolkas’s previous novels, it is critical of easy, shallow notions of multiculturalism, to which lip service continues to be paid, even while global forces continue to erode the capacity of less powerful communities, minority groups, and, ultimately, individuals, to make meaningful decisions about who they are, and their own destinies.

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<sup>23</sup> Rebecca W. Bushnell, *Tragedies of Tyrants: Political Thoughts and Theater*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990. 9, 11.