

Christos Tsiolkas and the Antinomies of (His) Commitment

ALI ALIZADEH

Monash University

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I have been anticipating *Christos Tsiolkas and the Fiction of Critique: Politics, Obscenity, Celebrity* for a number of reasons. Its author, Andrew McCann, can be seen as an exemplar of the sort of *homo academicus* – to use Pierre Bourdieu’s famous phrase—which I myself may one day aspire to become. McCann is an abundantly multi-talented literary scholar who has written, in addition to this book on Christos Tsiolkas, monographs on literary history and radical politics, articles on Continental philosophy, and novels which have been translated into other languages. He has, to use the jargon of the current academic habitus, a proven track record in producing both *traditional* and *non-traditional* research outcomes. But these paratextual associations are perhaps irrelevant to McCann’s new book. My primary interest in the book resides in an understanding of the significance of the work’s subject; and also my attempts at producing some kind of a ‘fiction of critique’ of my own in the same cultural milieu as Tsiolkas, in contemporary Australia.

Although I will not ab/use this review article as a space to speak about my own fiction, I find it impossible not to declare an interest from the outset: I have been, consciously or otherwise, influenced by Tsiolkas’s work, and have come to perceive the literary space in which I and contemporary Australian writers like me—those who identify themselves as politically engaged, and who are identified as originating from a marginal or non-mainstream political, social or other position – as greatly affected by what I’d refer to as the Tsiolkas Position. It would not be an overstatement to say that Tsiolkas’s name is a sort of master-signifier for much of what exists in Australia in the way of what one may see, after Sartre’s possibly dated albeit foundational definition, as a ‘committed’ writing practice, a literary production with the aim of presenting ‘the subjectivity of a society in permanent revolution’ (Sartre 118). Tsiolkas’s writings have been, at least in the space of mainstream literary activity – the space of major commercial publishers, major literary awards and so on—the most noticeable instance of a writer ‘imbued’, as Sartre wrote of the committed writer, ‘with the urgency of [the] problems’ of socio-political change, conflict and antagonism (220).

I have come to McCann’s book with the knowledge that he generally agrees with me apropos of the place of Tsiolkas in contemporary Australian writing. In his 2010 article, ‘Christos Tsiolkas and the Pornographic Logic of Commodity Capitalism’—which forms the basis of the third chapter of the volume under review—McCann describes Tsiolkas as ‘arguably the most politically and theoretically engaged novelist working in Australia today’ (36). While it would not be impossible to contest such a grand statement by naming many other writers, I feel that the size and scale of Tsiolkas’s commercial successes and cultural impact justify the evident

hyperbole in McCann's claim. Indeed, as McCann readily admits in the preface to *Christos Tsiolkas and the Fiction of Critique*, it is precisely Tsiolkas's meteoric rise and popularity—as manifested in an article in a British newspaper after the publication of the bestselling, TV-friendly suburban melodrama *The Slap*—and not the supposed political commitments or radicalism of Tsiolkas's writing which compelled McCann to write this book (x). And while McCann's scholarly interest in Tsiolkas predates the latter's elevation to truly lofty heights of literary stardom and is not reducible to the novelist's current celebrity status—although, needless to say, the word *celebrity* does appear in the book's title—it is clear that this volume would not have been written, let alone published, had Tsiolkas not been enthroned as one of the major figures in contemporary Australian writing.

I feel that my discussion has already established a key critical concern with Tsiolkas's work. The Tsiolkas Position—or the Tsiolkas Phenomenon, perhaps—presents us, as McCann very clearly identifies, with a 'paradox' (17). Tsiolkas is, on the one hand, an infamous, self-identified *enfant terrible*, who has claimed to want to 'destroy culture' (3). His novels and theatre have been both appreciated and derided for their excessive transgressions, shocking brutality and overt offensiveness; and it would not be too unreasonable to describe him, in McCann's words, as 'Australia's most controversial contemporary novelist' (19). Seen in this light, one can agree with McCann that Tsiolkas (of *Dead Europe* and *The Jesus Man*) can indeed be compared with Ballard (of *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*) (66); with the French avant-gardist Pierre Guyotat, the author of the banned 'revolutionary novel' *Éden, éden, éden* (66-67); and with the notorious Pier Paolo Pasolini, a pivotal reference point in Tsiolkas's oeuvre, in whose shadow, McCann contends, Tsiolkas's first three novels were written (74). And yet, on the other hand, Tsiolkas's novels, far from being banned, have been critically lauded and have become national and international bestsellers, turning the author into 'one of "Australia's most glittering literary treasures"' (xi). How could an author as seemingly politically committed—or perhaps *overcommitted*—as Tsiolkas have become a darling of the bourgeois literati and a book-club favourite?

McCann does not set out to solve this riddle. He instead rearticulates this apparent paradox and other related contradictions in insightful chapters which focus on closely investigating the rapport between politics and literary aesthetics in Tsiolkas's novels. In the case of Tsiolkas's debut *Loaded*, for example, McCann explores 'the fundamental opposition between the formlessness of the everyday and the possibility of a conceptual rubric that might allow [the novel's protagonist]—or the reader, for that matter—to fashion a viable narrative out of the rubble of his fragmented, quotidian experience' (22). I will return to this potential dialectic later in this review, and, by doing so, I will propose that in Tsiolkas's works, the real of 'the formlessness of the everyday' is more often than not subordinated to the desire to 'fashion a viable narrative'; an operation which can possibly solve the riddle of the controversial writer's success and present him as a rather agreeable, marketable writer despite his works' deliberate vulgarity.

But for now, I will note a few more instances of paradoxicality and ambivalence in McCann's analysis. His reading of *The Jesus Man* and *Dead Europe* concludes with the scholar wondering if the novelist, despite offering an apparently scathing critique of consumerism and liberalism in the novels, 'can rescue his own voice from the abyss he exposes' (84). Although McCann does not detect an obvious complicity between the novelist's voice and the abysses—of capitalism, racial and sexual violence, hegemonic ideology and fetishistic horror—he also notes the 'varying degrees of precariousness' with which Tsiolkas relates to the demands of 'political commitment' (84). In other words, the author of these novels is neither participating

in a pornographic aestheticisation of politics and society, nor is he unambiguously militating against the regimes of commodification and exploitation that produce the abjections depicted in these narratives—he is instead taking an insecure, alternative position, one somehow detached from the opposition between collaboration and revolution. This proposed indeterminacy also characterises Tsiolkas's greatest commercial achievement, *The Slap*, a novel which, McCann believes, 'develops a cultural politics much more ambivalent and complex than the [progressive] discourse around it suggests' (110); and which, he describes, in the study's conclusion, as 'a fairly nebulous sort of undertaking' (133).

One may be tempted to see McCann's book itself as a nebulous and ambivalent depiction of Tsiolkas's fiction. In fact, in the book's preface, McCann admits 'to a certain degree of ambivalence in [his] own relationship to Tsiolkas's writing' (xiv). But the argument that emerges from this thoughtful study as a whole is not so vague. As McCann's enthusiasm for Tsiolkas's latest novel, *Barracuda* shows, while the novelist may not have become an exemplary heir to the queer communist iconoclast Pasolini, he has yet succeeded in producing a novel, in his mature phase, which 'points to an ethical horizon oriented to a productive engagement with a social habitus in which characters can choose to remake themselves on the basis of a politics of care, charity, inclusion and selfless surrender to the claims of the other' (133-134). According to McCann's overall assessment of Tsiolkas's body of work, the latter retains and indeed excels at a form of literary commitment. This is not a revolutionary, combatively anti-hegemonic kind of commitment—of the sort one may find in, for example, the fiction of Elfriede Jelinek—but a softer, Levinasian ethos with echoes of an Aristotelian catharsis. Tsiolkas does not incite a revolution in literature; but he does manage to express, as the volume's title suggests, an accessible, mainstream 'fiction of critique'.

But is his really a fiction of political critique, or one of potentially self-gratifying moralism? How committed a writer is Tsiolkas if in his recent works of fiction, as James Ley has written, 'worldly political concerns retract into the personal'? I shall not attempt an answer to these questions beyond what is required for a discussion of McCann's work, and I shall focus on my concerns with what I see as McCann's sophisticated apologia for Tsiolkas's career; that is, with the view that the novels under discussion are, ultimately, symptoms of a successful development, from 'precarious' beginnings in grunge and gothic fiction (*Loaded* and *Dead Europe*) to maturity in the social novel (*The Slap*) and some kind of ethical (and/or spiritual?) denouement with the *Bildungsroman* (*Barracuda*). I admit, however, that my misgivings with this narrative—originating from McCann's problematic citation of a specific theoretical theme at the start of the book's introduction—are not limited to an analysis of the volume under review, and could be seen to express a broader concern with the fiction of Christos Tsiolkas and with the im/possibilities of committed writing in contemporary Australia.

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While I have not found *Christos Tsiolkas and the Fiction of Critique: Politics, Obscenity, Celebrity* as theoretically invested as James Ley has—he has commented, approvingly or otherwise, on McCann's ability to appear 'well-versed in modern literary theory and philosophy'—I was pleased to see a reference to a highly influential essay by the prodigious Walter Benjamin on the first page of the book's introduction.

Benjamin's essay, one of his most accomplished writings on Baudelaire, may strike one as generally relevant apropos of a study of Christos Tsiolkas: perhaps the contemporary Australian novelist has been, in his own socio-historical context, as scandalous (at least during

the earlier phases of his career) as the French poet was in the Paris of the Second Empire. McCann's reference to Benjamin's theory is brief, and is not explicitly pursued in the other parts of the book. However, what I see as McCann's questionable handling of this reference—despite his having written extensively and very persuasively about the German thinker elsewhere in, for example, a 2014 article called 'Walter Benjamin's sex work: prostitution and the state of exception'—is concomitant with what I see as the shortcoming in his overall analysis of Tsiolkas's novels.

Claiming quite rightly, in my view, that focussing on the autobiographic would be 'misleading' in an investigation of Tsiolkas's work, McCann proposes that one may instead consider 'the notion of experience' (1). To this end, he writes:

Walter Benjamin's famous discussion of shock, to take one leading example [of a theory of experience], hinges on the distinction between a localized, visceral moment of lived experience (*Erlebnis*) and a more robust order of consciousness bound up with memory, temporality and futurity (*Erfahrung*). For a long line of critical theorists working in the Frankfurt School tradition, this second sense of experience is precisely what capitalist ideology disorganizes. As Miriam Hansen puts it, *Erfahrung* implies something that is "mnemonic, mimetic, and collective"; it thus also offers a kind of emancipatory potential absent in the immediate experience of everyday life (1).

As mentioned before, McCann does not explicitly refer to this Benjaminian binary in his analyses of Tsiolkas's fiction. And yet, as my summary of his overview of Tsiolkas's career has indicated, the tension between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* characterises much of the prism through which McCann maps the fluctuations of Tsiolkas's supposedly precarious relationship with political commitment.

In the case of *Loaded*, for example, McCann's reading is clearly informed by this dyad: as mentioned before, according to McCann, 'the fundamental opposition' in the novel is found between 'the formlessness of the everyday'—*Erlebnis*—and 'a viable narrative [fashioned] out of the rubble of [the protagonist's] fragmented, quotidian experience', that is, *Erfahrung*. And one could observe that—in keeping with McCann's reading—*Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* remain at loggerheads for the rest of Tsiolkas's career as chronicled in this book, with the treacherously inchoate *Erlebnis* coming dangerously close to overwhelming the authorial voice and the protagonist in *Dead Europe*. In *The Slap*, however, Tsiolkas makes a turn in the direction of the communality and communicability of a coherent *Erfahrung*. And McCann's final appraisal of *Barracuda* is redolent with praise for the triumph of an *Erfahrung* utterly indistinguishable from a classic sense of the word *experience*; that is, the accrual of social consciousness, ethical values, wisdom and maturity.

But is this reading not occasioned by a particular take on Benjamin's themes? Are McCann's and the late American film historian Miriam Hansen's interpretations of *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* the only available or the most compelling engagement with Benjamin's system of thought, one which, despite Benjamin's many eccentricities and deviations, can still be reasonably described as Marxist, by which I mean an approach inherently critical of modern consciousness and prevalent ideological values?

To answer this question, and to establish my doubts about McCann's thesis and about the proposed 'emancipatory' dimension of Tsiolkas's fiction, I would like to directly quote Benjamin's definition of the *Erlebnis/Erfahrung* dialectic. By drawing on Freud's discussion of the rapport between trauma and dream, and for the purpose of providing a framework for exploring Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*, Benjamin writes:

The greater the share of the shock factor in particular impressions, the more constantly consciousness has to be alert as a screen against stimuli: the more effectively it does so, the less do these impressions enter experience (*Erfahrung*), tending to remain in the sphere of a certain hour in one's life (*Erlebnis*). Perhaps the special achievement of shock defence may be seen in its function of assigning to an incident a precise point in time in consciousness at the cost of the integrity of its contents. This would be a peak achievement of the intellect: it would turn the incident into a moment that has been lived (*Erlebnis*) (159).

Comparing this passage with McCann's previously mentioned summary, a number of immediate observations can be made. Firstly, while McCann is right to distinguish *Erlebnis* from *Erfahrung* in terms of an opposition between the momentary and the memory of the moment, his view that only the latter is associated with temporality seems inaccurate. As Benjamin clearly established, *Erlebnis* too is temporally defined: it grounds experience in the space of 'a certain hour in one's life'. It may be interesting to distinguish between different understandings of temporality—along the lines of, for example, Deleuze and Guattari's famous aeon/chronos binary (262)—but it's clear, at any rate, that *Erlebnis* is as dependent upon a notion of time as *Erfahrung*. Also, read against Benjamin's definition of *Erfahrung*, McCann's assertion that this term denotes a 'sense of experience [which] capitalist ideology disorganises' seems somewhat naïve. Can one have, in the age of capitalism, an organised experience that predates the disorganising forces of capital? In other words, does the fact of capitalist hegemony not render every experience always already disorganised, annulling the possibility of speaking of a pre-disorganised experience?

I wonder if McCann's definition of experience is not predicated upon a highly Romantic prelapsarian aura and provenance (e.g. the Blakean innocence) and, as such, to what extent it corresponds with a Marxist philosophy of any kind, including Benjamin's or, for that matter, other Frankfurt Schoolers'. And this suspicion brings me to my key criticism of McCann's presentation and application of the *Erlebnis/Erfahrung* dichotomy. Does 'the more robust order of consciousness' which McCann correctly identifies with *Erfahrung* have an 'emancipatory potential' as he posits, particularly if it's seen as the 'mnemonic, mimetic and collective' defence against the shock of the moment?

Realising the limited scope of this review article—and that I may have already strayed too far from the topic of Christos Tsiolkas's fiction—I will only briefly mention that for Marx himself consciousness was not an unquestionably desirable or singular aspect of subjectivity, particularly in a committed/revolutionary literary work. His discourse on Diderot's novel *Le Neveu de Rameau ou La Satire seconde*, for example, distinguishes between the narrator's falsely 'honest' 'quiet consciousness' – which 'goes on singing the melody of the True and the Good in even tones' – on the one hand, and, on the other hand, an unambiguously 'disintegrated consciousness [which] is the consciousness of reversal and indeed of absolute reversal' (Marx qtd in Lifshitz 55). This latter dimension of consciousness reveals the narrator's ethics and 'honesty' as 'a farrago of wisdom and madness' (Ibid); and it is this reversal or radical negation

of the upright and coherent ethical perspective which has the potential to usher in a revolutionary consciousness which breaks with the tribal, collective wisdom, doxa and ideology.

But, against Marx's theory of consciousness, for McCann a consciousness emanating from collective wisdom and social ethics—as seen in the mature Tsiolkas's latest work, *Barracuda*—presents a literary experience or novelistic *Erfahrung* which is 'emancipatory'. And it is this contention and its implications which I find most problematic. McCann's celebration of the 'politics of care, charity, inclusion and selfless surrender to the claims of the other' in *Barracuda* seems very much a valorisation of precisely what Marx describes as a 'quiet consciousness', enamoured of 'the Good', working in tandem with bourgeois ideology and morality, and not at all appreciative of a radical consciousness capable of unmasking the ethical and revealing it as the ideology of the ruling classes.

Benjamin too, despite his apparent preference of *Erfahrung* over *Erlbenis* in the earlier part of his essay on Baudelaire, was clearly aware that accepting the presence and values of the social mainstream and avoiding a confrontation with social relations—that is, the sort of position advocated by McCann in his reading of the mature Tsiolkas—was not progressive. Indeed, while it is believed by some that Benjamin's characterisation of the French poet in this work is more unsympathetic than in some of Benjamin's earlier essays, 'Some Motifs in Baudelaire' concludes with quite an appreciative description of the poet's ability to not supplant *Erlebnis* with *Erfahrung* but to give *Erlebnis* the 'weight' of the support of *Erfahrung* (190).

According to Benjamin, Baudelaire loses the 'antiquated' aura or 'halo' of the traditional lyric poet precisely due to his rejection of 'the lustre of a crowd' (188-9). In the community of people in a modern city organised according to the cultural logic of capitalism, Baudelaire finds a collective whose morality corresponds with bourgeois ideology, people who 'would be ready to advocate a well-ordered life, condemn libertinism, and reject everything except money' (Benjamin 189-90). Baudelaire confronts and fights this crowd in his poetry and—despite displaying 'the impotent rage of somebody fighting the rain or the wind'—he precipitates 'the disintegration of the aura in the experience of shock' (Benjamin 190).

Such an experience of disintegration—or of a disintegrated consciousness, in Marx's sense—has the capacity to liberate the artist from a magical aura and to promote emancipation. And it is precisely this capacity which has gradually vanished from Tsiolkas's work as he has devoted himself to the social novel and the *Bildungsroman*. However, while McCann admits that in *Barracuda* 'the anarchic thrill of [Tsiolkas's] earlier writing has gone', he feels that the suppression of *Erlebnis* in favour of *Erfahrung* has been a praiseworthy move and has been made 'in the interest of the political' (131).

I disagree. In my view, far from becoming a more politically engaged and committed writer, Tsiolkas's socio-ethical turn has provided him with an aura—in the precise Benjaminian sense—of a *great* mainstream novelist, a 'glittering literary treasure', and so on. Fame and celebrity alone may not be seen as obstacles to a radical artistic practice, but I believe that, in Tsiolkas's case, and based on what I've described as McCann's misapplication of Benjamin's theory, the novelist's works have increasingly sidelined, suppressed and finally erased the shocking encounters with capitalist violence and ideology in favour of agreeable and reader-friendly morality tales.

Despite my strong disagreement with one of the thematic mainstays of *Christos Tsiolkas and the Fiction of Critique: Politics, Obscenity, Celebrity*, I am not dismissive of McCann's scholarship. That he's produced the first substantial, book-length study of Christos Tsiolkas is unreservedly commendable, and that this study has the capacity to easily provoke discussions around the relationship between art and politics—as seen in this review article—is, in my opinion, a significant contribution to current literary debates. This book is, in my opinion, a very valuable description of the limitations and challenges faced by committed writers in contemporary Australia. Despite my misgivings about the political potential of Tsiolkas's recent works, I am in very little doubt about his past sincerity to produce a genuinely radical literature and to become an unapologetic heir to Pasolini. I am not, however, confident of his literary trajectory as a suitable model for contemporary writers who wish to 'change life', as another, far more iconoclastic writer, Arthur Rimbaud, once wrote.

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