A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF REPRESENTATIONS OF MAIDS IN GREEK MOVIES OF THE 1950s AND 60s

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Abstract

A variety of semiotic codes, for example, proxemics, kinesics, dress code, verbal code, usually construct specific representations in audiovisual culture. This paper explores the semiotic systems in synergy which seem to lead to consolidation of the social representations of maids in pop culture texts, such as Greek movies in the 1950s and 60s (the *old Greek cinema* era). The research questions explore the social representations which have been constructed and the ways in which the verbal and non-verbal signs of the maids can lead to the consolidation of their social image or even to a *myth* construction based on specific ideological perspectives. So, how do maids act in Greek movies in the 1950s and 60s? What does their performance signify? A semiotic analysis will examine all these questions through se-

miotic codes in those multimodal texts (Greek movies), selected from the field of the historically Greek pop culture texts. These verbal and non-verbal codes work coherently to translate the depiction of Greek society and culture and to convey connotative meanings.

Introduction

In this study I will explore how maids (male and female servants, domestic workers/servants) are depicted in Greek popular cinema of the 1950s and 60s. The working hypothesis is that the social representations of maids have been constructed in the cinema by reproducing a discourse of social division in Greece in that specific period of time. Greek movies of the 1950s and the 1960s are still playing on Greek television nowadays. They probably continue to have a great impact on the audience. With regards to the maids in particular, such research seems to have been conducted in the fields of sociology, history, literature, and art studies. The aim of this paper is to examine in a semiotic way the representations of maids, in order to explore verbal and non-verbal codes of their identity in synergy. This study contributes to research, since it aims to highlight connotative meaning through some repeating patterns in their performance. Those connotations may possibly lead to a construction of a *myth*.

Considering that mass media and pop cultural texts are the major means through which sociocultural representations are depicted, this study attempts to analyze the semiotic codes, such as dress code, and verbal code, which usually construct specific representations in audiovisual culture. The time period of old Greek cinema extends from the late 1940s to the early 70s (Skopeteas 2015: 117). The main question in the present research deals with the semiotic modes that the maids are depicted. Thus, if these representations of maids could establish a kind of discourse about this specific social and occupational group.

First and foremost, according to Foucault (1978: 101), "discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it". For many researchers, particularly linguists, "discourse" has generally been defined as anything "beyond the sentence" (Schiffrin et al. 2015: 1). However, the gesture also carries discursive information (Mcneill et al. 2015: 262). Furthermore, researchers nowadays support the notion that "discourses are knowledge

or models of the world, of how things work and why they are the way they are" (Chen & Machin, 2022: 141). They "shape and give meaning to social practices" (Chen & Machin, 2022: 143). The relations between ideology and discourse are apparent and, thus, Van Dijk (2006) considers that "ideologies are expressed and generally reproduced in the social practices of their members, and more particularly acquired, confirmed, changed and perpetuated through discourse". Fairclough (2013: 2) highlights that ideologies are "closely linked to power" and "representations of aspects of the world which can be shown to contribute to establishing, maintaining and changing social relations of power, domination and exploitation" (Fairclough, 2003: 9). This kind of social relationship (power, domination, exploitation, social stratification) is depicted in the films being studied here. This probably happens, because the films of the old Greek cinema favour the bourgeoisie and its values (Papadimitriou, 2020: 377). So, the representations of maids of this period must be explored and interpreted within their historical context, since texts are seen as parts of social events, according to Fairclough (2003: 21). Ideology and representations are also studied by Barthes' *myths* (1991 · Sériot, 2016).

Theoretical framework

In the 1950s, "movies contributed more than any other cultural activity to social cohesion and the establishment of social identities. In the 1960s, films questioned the precarious balance achieved during the decades of urban sprawl and industrial development" (Karalis, 2012: 287). Hadjikyriacou (2013: 85) claims that "the vast majority of the productions between 1949 and 1967 were either comedies or dramas. These two genres prevailed, sold more tickets than any other form of entertainment and attracted people of every age and class". However, "the limited requirements of the audience from a film resulted in the production of a very large number of low-budget films, most of them repeating the same story only slightly altered every time" (Hadjikyriacou, 2013: 85).

In addition. "the films of the period in question, especially the comedies, narrate stories which take place mostly in urban environments, commonly in the capital city of Athens" (Hadjikyriacou, 2013: 85–86). It could be argued that "urban settings were preferred because they were more attractive to the majority of audiences" (Hadjikyriacou, 2013: 86). Also, "there are frequent references to people who had just migrated from the countryside to Athens and their attempts to adopt the new modernized lifestyle of the capital" (Hadjikyriacou, 2013: 86). Rural societies "were presented as con-

sisting of old-fashioned patriarchal families" (Hadjikyriacou, 2013: 86). As a consequence, "patriarchal control usually dictated that women were only to work in jobs that were regarded as 'proper' for females. Thus, women commonly worked as domestic servants or in manufacturing, especially in the textile and food service industries" (Hadjikyriacou, 2013: 37).

Maids appear frequently "especially in comedies of the 1950s and 60s" (Papadimitriou, 2020: 377). Papadimitriou claims that "the presence of service staff in urban homes is a sign of the social status and economic prosperity of the central characters of the films" (Papadimitriou, ibid). This observation also confirms the point of Hionidou (2020: 76), who states that "for the maids, Athens and other urban centers were an attraction for work". Home service "was almost exclusively an urban phenomenon" (Hionidou, 2020: 75–76). Maids were usually under 30 years old. This choice of employment was based on economic reasons. They were facing difficult financial situations (Hionidou, 2020: 91). Women who had the opportunity to work in another field did not choose to become maids (Hionidou, 2020: 92).

There has been limited sociosemiotic research on the identity construction of maids in mediated discourse. Greek films of 50s and 60s were an important part of the entertaining programme for Greeks in that era, but also, nowadays, reach fair audience rates. These movies are watched by people of all ages as symbolic resources.

Methodology

A number of criteria must be set in this research due to the huge data given by old Greek cinema. That is because the total amount of movies in the old Greek cinema period is over 500 titles. Thus, I define three types of criteria: 1) the film genre (comedies); 2) the time period (old Greek cinema: late 40s – early 70s); 3) the audience's preferences. Thus, the research sample consists of the most-viewed comedies of the old Greek cinema based on the recorded receipts during these two decades (1950s and 1960's). The research is based on a mixed-method approach using a qualitative content analysis, in order to categorize the examined material and an analytical framework for the interactional construction of identities (see Stamou, 2018a). The data was collected by observation from Greek comedies of 50s and 60s and were classified by date. Then, the characters which play the maids are analyzed through the aforementioned model which will be presented below.

Stamou (2018a) proposes an analytical framework for the interactional construction of identities, since Critical Discourse Studies "has mainly explored the representation of social groups and collective identities in non-interactional and/or written texts, neglecting interaction" (Stamou, 2018a: 569). This is not "solely a 'method' or 'type' of analysis, but primarily a perspective for looking at texts" (Stamou, 2018a: 569). So, fictional interactions could be seen as being ideal for "identity representations […] and identity performances in everyday talk" (Stamou, 2018a: 570).

Stamou, based on Bucholtz and Hall (2005) proposes some strategies to analyze identities. First, the *positionality* strategy "refers to the ways a person positions himself or herself and others as well as is positioned by others in interaction, namely, what identities he or she constructs for himself or herself and for others" (Stamou, 2018a: 574). Therefore, "positionality is relational, leadings us to the second strategy of *relationality*, emphasizing that the construction of identity acquires meaning in relation to the identities of other people" (Stamou, 2018a: 574). Verbal and visual *indexicality* "concerns the building of semiotic links between linguistic/visual forms and social meanings" (Stamou, 2018a: 574) taking into account linguistic, paralinguistic and extralinguistic codes. In addition to this, "in the case of fictional discourse, the strategy of *perspectivization* is specialized in what" Stamou (2018b) calls 'fictionalization'. Specifically, "this concept relates to the ideological perspective(s) adopted by the collective sender of fiction (e.g. scriptwriter, director, producer), which is reflected in all representational and editorial selections, devices and resources these agents employ for the making of identities into fiction" (Stamou, 2018a: 574). Thus, "the concept of fictionalization underlines the fact that the performed identities in fictional talk by actors constitute *representations* [...] performed in the represented talk of fiction" (Stamou, ibid).

Representations of maids: A semiotic approach

The grouping of this very interesting character category, therefore, also reveals visual and verbal code patterns which become signs that construct identities. The maids did not actually promote the action in the movies until the middle 1950s. After 1955, the role of the maid contributed to the narration of the film (e.g, *O ziliarogatos* (1956), *The Policeman of the 16th Precinct* (1959)) (Mini, 2020: 339–41). The representation of maids includes the standard dress code, usually consisting of long, dark dresses (black or grey), usually below the knee or at knee height, a white apron and low pumps, if they are not wearing flat-soled shoes. Their hair is short and,

if it is long, tied in a pony tail. The dress code, attitude, behaviour, hair-style, body language and the minimal linguistic utterances that the maids use, convey to the audience a sense of inferiority, submission, and reduced perception (Mini, 2020: 339–41). They walk quietly, discreetly, maybe with a small hunch, with a neutral or shy face style. They show insecurity and do not take initiatives (Mini 2020: 339–41). Their linguistic utterances are mostly limited to the phrases: "Yes, sir", "Would you like anything else, sir?" and other similar. It is the type of the naive maid. They all work for families of upper-middle or high class. Why is the maid portrayed as a person with limited mental abilities? The difficult rural, provincial past of Greece from the beginning of the 20th century, which reminds the origin of most of the bourgeois of Athens, must be erased from memory, as Mini proposes (2020: 338–339). From this moment on, the bourgeois of Athens have to demonstrate that they are "Athenians". From my point of view, it would be very interesting to see the visual representations of the maids in synergy with the verbal utterances and names they have, in order to conduct a multimodal exploration.

In this study I have reviewed 19 cases. I begin with the film *The Four Stairs*[1] (*Τα τέσσερα σκαλοπάτια*) (1951). In this case (see picture 1), Katina (a diminutive of the first name "Katerina", Catherine in English) is a maid (positionality) who works in a family of upper-middle class. She wears a long, black dress, a light-coloured apron (visual indexicality), she holds a tray and she serves her householder and her friend. Her linguistic utterances are restricted to the phrases "Of course/Yes, madame" (verbal indexicality). The contradiction in visual codes between the maid and the ladies of upper social class is obvious (relationality). So, the maid connotes inferiority and low socioeconomic class (perspectivization).

Picture 1: the maid in *The Four Stairs*

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[1] The author uses the official translations or transliterations of movie titles according to imdb.com.

In the film *The Grouch* (*Το στραβόξυλο*) (1952) we meet Stathoula (a diminutive names of the first name "Efstathia"), a mature woman who plays the maid (positionality) of that house. She doesn't speak a lot, as we only hear, "Yes/Of course, sir" (verbal indexicality) from her. She looks scared, since the householder is a very severe and strict man (see picture 2). She stands close to him, because he has asked for her. She wears probably a light-coloured dress and a white apron (visual indexicality). Also, she announces the guests. She looks like the other maids visually and linguistically and she differs from the householders' identity (relationality). So, this maid connotes inferiority and subjection (perspectivization).

Picture 2: the maid in *The Grouch*

The next example is taken from the film *No Harm's Done* (*Ούτε γάτα ούτε ζημιά*) (1955) and depicts Tasia (a diminutive name of the first name "Anastasia"), the maid of the house (positionality), answering the questions of the householders. The visual representation (visual indexicality) remains approximately the same as in the previous cases (see picture 3). In the linguistic field (verbal indexicality), she has some small exchanges about chores and everyday life with the householders. So, she has semiotic codes in common with the other maids and as we can observe, she differs from the identity of the householders (relationality). The maid connotes inferiority and low socioeconomic class (perspectivization).

Picture 3: the maid in *No Harm's Done*

The film *O ziliarogatos* (1956) shows us Katina (a diminutive of the first name "Katerina") a maid (positionality) in a family of upper-middle class, too (see picture 4). The difference between this case and the others is that she is a bit more elegantly dressed. She has some small exchanges with the householders and she often utters the phrases "Welcome/Yes, madame/sir" (verbal indexicality). Her visual representation (visual indexicality) has the same pattern as in the previous cases of maids. Also, she serves the couple, she carries the bags and answers phone calls. Generally, there are similarities between her and other maids and obvious differences (relationality) with the householders' identity.

Picture 4: the maid in *O ziliarogatos*

In the film *We Only Live Once* (*Μια ζωή την έχουμε*) (1958), Calliope, a mature woman works as a maid (positionality) and wears a long dress and a white apron (visual indexicality). She serves an upstart, nouveau riche man, who tells her to go to buy matches (see picture 5). Her only linguistic utterances are "Yes/Of course, sir/madame" (verbal indexicality). This is a special case, but not the only one, because we meet again another mature woman working as a maid in this corpus. She looks like the other maids visually and linguistically (relationality).

Picture 5: the maid in *We Only Live Once*

Picture 6: the maid and the householder in *Captain Fandis Bastouni*

For example, Tasia is also a mature woman who also works as a maid (positionality), as we see in the film *Captain Fandis Bastouni* (1968). The dress code is slightly different in this case, but the linguistic utterance remains the same using the phrases "Yes, sir. Pardon me?" (indexicality). There is not the usual black dress with the white apron, but she wears a full dress with some little embroideries and a band on her head. Nevertheless, she behaves according to the standards of maids of that time (relationality). These are exceptions concerning the age, since we know that the maids of old Greek cinema were usually under 30 years old.

The five cases of maids in the following titles (Tasia in *The Underdog [To κλωτσοσκούφι]* 1960), Tasia in *The Policeman of the 16th Precinct [Ο Ηλίας του 16ου]* (1959), Kula in *Zititai pseftis [Ζητείται ψεύτης]* (1961), Katina in *O filos mou o Lefterakis [Ο φίλος μου ο Λευτεράκης]* (1962), Tasia in *Throbs at the Desk [Χτυποκάρδια στο θρανίο]* (1963)) are not significantly different from the previous maids. The common linguistic code is that they speak little and only if they are asked, they have diminutive names (Kula is a diminutive name of the first name "Angelike", Tasia, Katina, as they are also seen before), and the dress code remains as it is (pictures 7, 8, 9, 10, 11).

Picture 7: Tasia in *The Underdog* (1960)

Picture 8: Tasia in *The Policeman of the 16th Precinct* (1959)

Picture 9: Kula in *Zititai pseftis* (1961)

Picture 10: Katina in *O filos mou o Lefterakis* (1962)

Picture 11: Tasia in *Throbs at the Desk* (1963)

Picture 12: the maid in the *O pseftis*

Maria is also an ordinary maid (positionality) in *O pseftis* (1968). She obeys and serves the family, she opens the door, and she announces the guests. Her dress is above the knee, which is a little different to the other maids (relationality). However, the pattern of the visual representation and the linguistic utterances remain the same ("Yes/Sure/Of course, sir/madame": indexicality). In fact, the pressure of work was so great that the maid thought of quitting.

Picture 13: the maid in *O Dimos apo ta Trikala*

In the movie *O Dimos apo ta Trikala* (1962), Kaity (a diminutive of the first name "Katerina", "Catherine") is the maid (positionality) of Dimos' house who lives with his wife, Lela. The relationship between the lady and the maid is more familiar and intimate. This is a difference between Kaity and other maids at that time in this specific corpus (relationality). The householder (Lela) suggests to the maid that they exchange roles, in order to reveal the double life of the disloyal husband. After giving her a dress, she asks her "to take a walk like you were a lady". Kaity also admits that she has tried on all of the lady's dresses from time to time. This behavior (a maid trying householder's dresses) is rare and we do not see it again in this corpus. Lela does not reacts negatively, because it seems that Lela and

the maid have a more informal relationship. Nevertheless, the pattern of the visual representation (the dress style and colors and the apron: indexicality) remains the same.

In the film *The Woman Driver* (1964), Calliope is a maid (positionality), who has her hair short, she wears a black dress, a white apron and high heels (visual indexicality) and she uses the usual phrase "Of course, madame" (verbal indexicality). Her householder (named Mary) calls her 'Pipitsa' (it is a nickname, diminutive of the first name Calliope). The use of the nickname Pipitsa instead of first name Calliope connotes intimacy, familiarity, and cuteness. They also dance together (see picture 14), which is a peculiar and unfamiliar behaviour (relationality) in contrast with the previous cases of maids. The householder is typically less stern, as we have already observed in other instances, so this specific approach is understandable.

Picture 14: the maid and the householder in *The Woman Driver*

Picture 15: the maid and the householder (right)
in *Mia treli…treli oikogeneia*

In the film *Mia treli…treli oikogeneia* (1965), we meet Filió, a maid (positionality) also dressed in black and white (visual indexicality) serving tea or coffee to her householder (see picture 15). She makes some grammatical errors in her speech that indicate she is uneducated (verbal indexicality).

These utterances reflect a real aspect of the maids' identity, since the majority of maids were typically uneducated (relationality). They come from a lower socioeconomic class, as we observed in the theoretical framework, and their families face financial problems. However, her body language (see picture 16) and the fact that she is chewing gum while she is working, shows that the householders were not strict.

Picture 16: The maid (Filio) with her hands on her waist

Picture 17: the maid and the householder in *Jenny Jenny*

In picture 17, we can see the maid (positionality), named Sofia, dressed in black and white, carrying a tray and another girl (Jenny) studying. This is a scene from *Jenny Jenny* (1966), a colour film of the old Greek cinema. The maid serves the people in the house. She appears and she speaks little in the movie, she wears the well-known type of dress code (visual indexicality). Thus, the verbal and non-verbal semiotic codes of maids' identity during this time are confirmed once more (similarities with the other maids: relationality).

Picture 18: the maid in the *O gois*

The maid "Katina" in *O gois* (1969) is a special case of representation of a maid (positionality), since she is playing a role within a role. Katina is Aristos' sister and Aristos is a friend of Babis (the left one on the picture). Babis wants to impress a woman he likes and pretends to be a rich man, in order to charm her. So, given that "you can't be rich without having a maid", as we hear in the movie, Katina helps Babis by playing the maid. Thus, the representation of a maid in this case is purely theatrical and deliberate. She is wearing the usual dress code (visual indexicality), but also the hem is above the knee. We should not ignore the fact that the movie reflects the late 1960s when the fashion system began to change in Greece. Firstly, she utters the usual phrases "Yes, of course, sir" (verbal indexicality). However, Babis was ridiculing her and, thus, Katina's behaviour was not that of a common maid. She was not as subservient (difference between other maids: relationality). The important fact we note in this case is that the bourgeois ideology in that time seems to require the upper class to have a house maid. A maid is represented as an *index* of wealth, richness of the householder (perspectivization).

However, there are two interesting cases of male domestic servants (positionality) in old Greek cinema. Firstly, in *The Big Shark* (1957) we meet Leó, who is wearing a white suit, a white shirt, a black bow tie, handkerchief and black trousers (visual indexicality). He speaks French (verbal indexicality) and he lives in the house of a very rich man. He performs only briefly in the movie.

Picture 19: the servant in the *The Big Shark*

Moreover, in *Good morning, Athens* (1960), we meet Yerásimos, a mature man who is the domestic servant (positionality) of a rich man, Menelaos. Yerásimos (picture 20) wears a suit, a shirt and a bow tie (visual indexicality and similarities with Leó: relationality). He is loyal, trustworthy and sincere. He speaks little. The verbal address "sir" to Menelaos is very frequent (verbal indexicality). However, Menelaos invites his servant to go for a walk together and their clothes look very similar. Yerásimos is allowed to replace his work clothes with others, such as a suit, jacket, shirt, and a tie (this situation is prohibited or is not observed in the case of maids). However, Yerásimos is not wearing a hat, as Menelaos does (see picture 21). The hat in Athens of that era could connote the levels of social class.

Picture 20: the servant in the *Good morning, Athens*

Picture 21: the servant Yerasimos (left) with Menelaos (right)

So, according to Stamou's framework, the positionality of the maids is based on an identity construction constituted through their profession. This highlights the provincial origin and, also, a low-prestige job identity. These are women with no other career options. Concerning the indexicality during the narration, we detect certain verbal and non-verbal signs that construct the maids' identity. For instance, we note the same pattern of dress code composed basically of a dark-coloured dress and a light-colour-

ed apron. In addition to this, the utterances of maids in the 1950s and 60s in this corpus is limited. We hear them saying "Yes, sir/madame", "Of course, sir/madame", "Would you like anything else?", "Sir/Madame, Mr. […] has come". Of course, they participate in small talk, if they are asked to, but their main duty is to serve the householders. The strategy of relationality is quite interesting. We observe the relations of similarities and differences between maids and women of upper-middle social class in that era, in particular the semiotic modes of their representations. Finally, the strategy of fictionalization is based on the ideological perspectives of the power of the bourgeoisie, social stratification, the idea that maids are poor, humble, submissive and uneducated with reduced perception, and, thus, subordinate women, as reflected in the most of representational semiotic modes (e.g. the linguistic utterances).

However, the representation of maids changes a bit in the 21st century. As we can see in modern Greek television series (see Tasia in *Hara's Café* (2003–2006, 2019–2021), see Martha and Ritsa in *Sto para 5* (2005–2007)), the maid plays an important role in the fictional play and behaves differently. Nowadays, the maid isn't depicted as a subordinate person, but just as a job identity. Domestic workers have better interpersonal relations with the housekeepers and act differently, they respect each other. Although, a social transformation is obvious, certainly, more data are needed for this research. The sample is not enough yet.

Conclusions

The construction of the character of maid in the old Greek cinema is clear, and the pattern of the identity is almost always repeatable. Even if the dress code presents small variations, the maids' behaviour, attitude and their interpersonal relations with the householders remain generally the same (exceptions are also included). They maintain a social distance which is also reflected linguistically (e.g. the maids speak little, their names follow a sociolinguistic pattern).

Considering the evidence above, old Greek cinema draws hegemonic social representations between specific socioeconomic groups. The identity of the female maid is constructed visually almost in the same way, while the behaviour of the maid is determined by the severity, strictness of her householders. There are those who only serve the family and do the daily chores, while not really contributing to the film plot. However, the present study has found that the construction of fictional characters is neither neutral nor self-existent. If we consider that this construction takes place in a historical, social, cultural context in combination with previous texts, then we are talking about intertextuality (Vovou 2020: 408).

Nevertheless, maids did have a symbolic value in people of upper-middle and high class lives, in addition to the practical help that they offer in the house. In most cases, maids maintained formal relations with their employers. However, there are cases where maids had more intimate relations with their employers.

Concerning social stratification, the case studies show that maids, as people of low/lower social class, constitute an *index* of wealth and prosperity for upper-middle or high social class. The cases of male servants are also interesting, because although they are domestic workers, they are mature and elegantly dressed. Regarding the names of the maids, they usually have hypocoristics[2], diminutive names, rather than their first names, although this is not an absolute rule in the specific sample. Their names are accented on the last or next to the last syllable. Furthermore, the low educational level, as well as the wretched financial situation of the maids as stereotypical perceptions are demonstrated in the under-analysis films through their personal names and the special use of verbal and body language.

Furthermore, taking into account the Barthesian semiological system (Barthes 1991, 1994), the representations of maids in old Greek cinema of 1950s and 60s construct a *myth* of poor, uneducated, naive women. They seem to signify a low status historically, since they function as a reminder of the Greek province.

Finally, the synergy of semiotic codes in audiovisual culture enhances a manner of communication between the film director and the audience through verbal and visual signs. Furthermore, the synergy of semiotic systems contributes to the consolidation for the social image of the maids and, thus, this synergy leads to semiotic representations. In the process of narrating implicit and explicit meanings in audiovisual culture, these movies seem to represent and illuminate the multiplicity of moral and sociocultural aspects in Greek society. We suggest that semiologists, sociologists and cultural analysts engage in further research on social representations in cinema and TV, since the fluidity and complexity of the (fictional) construction of identities could be better explored in the future.

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[2] See about terminology of onomastics: https://icosweb.net/publications/onomastic-terminology/

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