changing worlds & signs of the times

Selected Proceedings
from the 10th International Conference
of the Hellenic Semiotics Society

EDITORS
Eleftheria Deltsou
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Changing Worlds & Signs of the Times

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ART

Swarming with cops

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Abstract

The paper investigates the proliferation of images of police on the streets and on television in Greece. It attempts intertextual semiotic readings of police mythology, highlighting the ways in which television creates the dominant myth of police, by reproducing analogous audiovisual codes that aim for the same connotations in fictional and factual programming. The main focus of the paper, however, is to highlight the contradictions inherent in intertextual readings of the myth, looking into the ruptures that dialectics cause in police mythology.

Keywords

police , myth , news , television , everyday , intertextuality

During the socio-economic crisis, Greece was swarmed with cops; they were everywhere you looked: on the small screen, on the big screen, on the streets. It was the shock of this abrupt proliferation of police images that prompted me to look into the mythology of police as well as sheer quilt, as I place myself politically in the left wing and yet I enjoy watching police serials.

The paper will argue that all these different texts strive to produce a coherent myth and yet, inherent contradictions and differentiations allow, and even encourage, alternative readings, calling attention to the vacuums in the myth. My paper will highlight the intertextual play of connotations and myths being produced through the interaction of police serials, news, factual programmes, everyday life and film by reading audiovisual codes, as well as the omissions in the texts and the tensions created among them. I will be using the concepts of connotation and myth partially to test their limits when used for intertextual analysis. Police mythology seems to fail when used across different texts and these failures open texts to alternative readings.

The argument is based on the hypothesis that television, film and everyday life produce meanings intertextually. Such a hypothesis is derived from the dominant use of the film and television media, in order to record and project or broadcast real objects and people that are or were in front of the camera (Arnheim, 1957; Krakauer, 1997; Bignell, 2004). Both film and television are often marketed and seen as "realistic", both because the camera "records" what is in front of it and because both media have been affiliated with documentaries. Television in particular has also been affiliated with the news and current affairs programmes. Thus, they often mediate and connote reality.

This mediation and connotation of reality has been taken further by Baudrillard's notion of simulacra, whereby the signs construct reality. However, the notion of simulacra was based on images from "far far away". Experience of what happenned in the gulf was unaivalable to the television audiences in the US. I am more interested in the interaction of audiovisual texts and the everyday and the clashes that occur both among different filmic and television texts and between them and everyday experience. I will therefore be referring to the concept of myth and the ways it is challenged through inherent contradictions.

I will also attempt to read a personal experience. The flow of everyday life is often organised and therefore semiotic in Barthes's (2001) and Eco's (1985) sense rather than Kristeva's (1984). It might be worth noting here that both Barthes and Eco analysed everyday reality and wrote about topics ranging from gossip to food. The police presence is more organised than food or gossip, as police are often in uniform and they move in a pre-decided manner. Their presence is therefore more easily read as a text.

I was mainly prompted to look into contemporary myths about cops by the flood of detective series on Greek television during the 2012-2013 television season. The majority of television programmes addressed to young people during the primetime were police serials such as *CSI Las Vegas*, *CSI Miami*, *NCIS*, *Dexter*, *The Closer*, *The Mentalist*, *Law &*

Order, *Cold Case* etc. Primetime was dominated by detective serials in the 2013-14 season as well, although there was a slight diminish. This also has to do with a shortage of imported programming. However, both the reasons for the proliferation of police serials in the U.S. and the importing policy of Greek channels fall outside the scope of this paper.

It is worth noting though that police work is also popular in factual and light entertainment programmes addressed to audience groups over 45. One of the longest running factual programmes in Greek television, *Light at the End of the Tunnel (Φως στο Τούνελ)* is focused on searching for missing persons, while another one, *We go together (Πάμε Πακέτο)* focuses on finding long lost families. While the first programme indicates police failures by "stepping in" when police fails, it also involves people in "playing detective", as they call to give information on seeing missing people. The news and current affair programmes often evaluate highly police work, turning it into the first news item and holding extensive discussions on police operations.

The prioritisation of police related news reflects a raise in police presence and activity. The presence of cops on the street has multiplied within the last three years. Living in the centre of Thessaloniki, I now see them daily as opposed to an approximate of once every couple of weeks, three years ago.

The intertextual links to reality attempted by television exploit the characteristics of the medium: the flow, liveness and familiarity as well as the programming strategies and most importantly the conventions of the texts broadcast produce myths about the police which attempt to bridge inherent contradictions. However, the slight yet semiotic differences among serials, cops on the news and cops on the streets, aided by Greek subcultures cause ruptures in cop mythology and cause it to fail, particularly when seen intertextually.

It is worth returning here to Barthes's definition of the myth:

Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact. [...] In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions [...] Things appear to mean something by themselves... (Barthes, 1993: 143)

Myth both "purifies" things and hates dialectics. Myth's close affiliation to connotations would also make it culture-specific. So, trying to apply it to different texts from different cultures, i.e. U.S. serials and Greek news, seems wrong. However, as I will argue, dominant, popular media strive to create the same myth. Furthermore, myth seems to be close to the concept of ideology and dominant ideology seems to be propagandised through different texts, on both factual and fictional films and television programmes, and in reality. The analysis of the ideology of the news, Hollywood blockbusters or pol-

iticians' speeches is common ground. There is also direct and indirect evidence of collaboration between governments and the film and television industries. After 9/11 for example, there were meetings between the White House and Hollywood (Zizek, 2006). Similarly, in Greece television channels were exempt from tax on advertisements' revenue for three consecutive years during the crisis, while heavy taxes were being imposed on citizens. It may also be worth noting that private television channels in Greece do not hold legal licences. This fact creates a co-dependence between television channels and governments (Παπαθανασόπουλος, 2004), while public television was recently shut down and reopened. Although there is no similar evidence for U.S. government involvement in the production of police serials, their conventions nevertheless produce a clear ideology.

There are often close links between genre conventions and ideology. Although conventions are not signs, they nevertheless carry connotations and contribute to myths. Police serials are based on the interchangeable bipolar antitheses of crime-law and injustice-justice, connoting that the law and the state are just and the police are their main representatives. They will deviate from the law, e.g. when they beat up suspects, when the law is too lenient, allowing murderers to get away. Although cops will in those cases display delinquent behaviour, their 'breaking the rules' is rendered unproblematic by the manichaistic ethics of the serials (they are the good guys) and the Machiavellian excuse of 'the greater good'. They put away murderers and occasionally rapists and restore safety and social balance (Bignell, 2004). It is worth noting that we do not see them against citizens protesting or even putting away small-time crooks. Alhtough this convention can be justified as a convention adding to the (melo)drama, it also signifies that they are fighting the greater evils of society, thus contributing to the myth of cops as heroes.

The opening titles of *CSI NY*,[1] an extremely popular police serial, can further explain and exemplify the dominant myth in police serials. The opening titles of serials are quite telling with regard to the genre and ideology of each serial, as they need to attract viewers and deter them from switching channels. As the television programme flows, each serial needs to be distinctive from the very beginning. The opening titles of CSI use a blue filter connoting coolness - both in the sense of objectivity and in the popular sense of the word 'cool'. Scientific images connoting objectivity and/or 'cleverness' or education further build the myth of smart, objective, cool cops. Microscopes, testing tubes and more abstract images of fluids are used to indicate that they are scientists and they will carefully examine every minuscule piece of evidence that – unlike witnesses – will not lie.

These images are alternated with images of the cast and bird's eye views, street level and underground establishing shots of New York. The cast are beautiful people in medium close-ups, i.e. framed as busts or from the waist-up. This framing is most often used in television to connote familiarity. Their looks, their 'coolness', and the framing encourage viewers to identify with them.

The images of the city, on the other hand, offer viewers points of view from all levels possible and especially overviews, connoting omnipotence and control over New York as well as its liveliness, connoted by fast-moving cars. The rapid editing along with the busy streets and an image of a gun further connote fast action. Cops seem to have also filled the shoes of action heroes, offering televisual spectacle. The rapid alternation of the images of the city with those of the central characters both builds on the connotation of their omnipotence and puts the viewers in the same omnipotent position further connoting a sense of equality or "sameness" between the police officers and the viewers. The cops are "naturally" placed both within the busy city and in control of it, as objective scientists and cool heroes that bring justice and restore life's balance in the big apple.

They are each framed alone to accentuate each character's individuality. Yet both the shot where H is on the terrace of a building "on top" of N.Y. and the shot of the woman holding the gun with the camera's low angle magnifying her body connote an easy-going control. The gun is barely visible and placed in the context of a lab, in order to avoid connotations of threat to the viewers.

The theme song's lyrics are written in the first person and further encourage our identification with the detectives. The lyrics speak of hard work and no "need to fight to prove I'm right". They thus come to contrast with the connotations of fast action and support the non-confrontational image of super-scientists / cops. People that know the song may also know that the title: *Baba o' Riley* refers to the teachings of Meher Baba who also supported non-violence. The fact that it is a song by The Who connotes that the characters are both rock and classic. The song is also conveniently "cut" before the point where it mentions the "teenage wasteland" which would not be well combined with the cops' mythology.

It is the same mythology that the news on Greek television endeavour to reproduce, using analogous signs. The news in Greece often highlight spectacle, focusing on prison escapes and hundreds of shots being fired or streets swarming with cops and the operation 'Xenios Zeus', which entailed large numbers of cops on the streets of Athens and other cities, who detained immigrants with the aim to export illegal immigrants. It is worth noting here that police often detain people who have legal migration papers for several hours, while people who do not have migration papers often end up in detention camps with horrible living conditions for indefinite amounts of time.

The use of the title 'Xenios Zeus', meaning hospitable Zeus was coined by the government and the police but is also frequently repeated by the media. Its use for police operations entailing the arrest and detainment of immigrants in concentration camps has altered the mythology of ancient Greece and strengthened fascism. Zeus was the god of hospitality and the name 'Xenios Zeus' was often invoked to protect strangers and/or foreigners. The ironic or false use of this name by police and the media has also prompted Golden Dawn to falsely state that hospitality in ancient Greece was only applied to Greek people.

A closer look at news footage on one of the "Xenios Zeus" operations[2] reveals various similarities with police serials in the audiovisual codes used as well as important differences. The quick editing reproduces connotations of fast and efficient action that is strengthened by the omission of any kind of comment on the fact that even though 611 people were drugged to the police department, only 85 were arrested. Other signs that attempt to build a similar myth to that of CSI NY by almost mimicking the audiovisual code are the shots of cars on the streets and the target that resembles a gun target. However, they do not quite work due to crucial details: the target seems to be aimed at the police, as it is superimposed on their backs, placing them at the receiving end of violence and power. The cars in the footage are police cars thus connoting action by the police but also possibly a disruption of the city's life rather than safety, normality and balance. There is also an overview of Athens that might remind us of bird's eye views of New York but the image here seems more like an archaic version of google earth, connoting a lack of technology rather than scientific efficiency. The sirens sounding at the beginning of the reportage also connote fast action and might even remind us of car chases or justice – apprehending the 'bad guys'. However, there are no connotations of coolness or non-confrontation, let alone investments of classic rock.

The blue colour is also dominant here, being the colour of police uniforms. However, it is a warmer shade of blue, which is also used in the Greek flag and therefore connotes ethnicity, if not ethnicism. The fact that these cops are in uniform as well as the position of the camera behind them or at their side and the consequent concealment of their faces depersonalise them, thus linking the police to the impersonal state, rather than encouraging identification. Furthermore, the super that reads "hundreds of arrests - centre of Athens" does not use a subject and thus does not refer directly to the role of the police, as if the arrests were just "happening".

On the other hand, two medium close-ups of citizens are used, who comment on the importance of the police operation, blame immigrants for shops' closing in the area and delinquency, and ask that the police also show up at night, when there are more immigrants. Viewers are asked to identify with the citizens who support the police operation and see immigration as the cause of problems – a view that of course goes unchallenged. However, the request that the police also operate at night disrupts connotations of police efficiency.

There is also a hint of police abusing their power, since the reporter mentions that some immigrants are holding their immigration papers. When the camera approaches the immigrants, one of them mentions that it is the fourth time he is arrested, even though he is legally in Greece and another one shows his papers to the camera. This information however is not commented upon, as the camera immediately cuts to the reporter stating the time and place and where the police operation is taking place and we are then informed on the numbers: 611 people were taken to police stations and 86

were arrested. The reporter's comments connote the "nowness" of the action taking place, while the numbers seem to be used as "hard facts" connoting efficiency. The vast number of people unjustly detained seems of no concern but it may be read by some viewers. The reportage however comes to an end with the reporter's voice informing us that from the beginning of the operation – spanning various days at the time – 4500 illegal immigrants were arrested. Once again, a cold number is used to connote police efficiency and to purify the systemic violence of detaining legal immigrants or holding illegal immigrants in concentration camps.

The news footage seems to mimic the audiovisual code of police serials, its connotations and myths. However, it fails in crucial details, thus potentially opening the text to alternative readings and causing ruptures in cop mythology.

The news footage is even further away from Hollywood's "super-cop" mythology. During the same season when Greek television was swarmed with cops, there was also an influx of "super-cops" on the big screen. Although it falls outside the scope of this paper, it may be worth mentioning that the latest Batman and James Bond movies as well as *Argho* can all be read as "super-cop" films, where the protagonist serves justice through purified violence and/or purified deception and restores balance.

The most important ruptures, however, in cop mythology seem to happen on the streets. In real life, people who go to demonstrations experience their interaction with cops as repressive (Hardt & Negri, 2000), and deeply undemocratic. We have all seen recent footage of Golden Dawn members literally hiding behind the police, while throwing stones at anti-fascist demonstrators.[3] It may be worth noting that the footage was shot by an independent cinematographer, Aris Xatzistefanou, and was broadcast by television after being widely viewed on the internet.

I would also like to share a personal experience that was filmed in Volos, the city where the conference took place. I will once again refer to video footage, since the problem with the semiotic analysis of everyday life is not the subjectivity of the reading – this is as much of a problem with any text – but what you choose to perceive as a text and common access to it. On the 25th of March 2012, Yannis Vlahopoulos, Maya Tsamprou and I tried to film the parade for the Greek day of Independence in Volos and any demonstrations that might occur.[4] We were stopped by police and we were taken downtown so that they could check the authenticity of our I.D. cards, as we were told. We were, however, detained for three hours.

The short video[5] starts with medium close-ups of Craig and Vaya, inviting the audience to identify with people opposing police oppression, either by trying to get to the centre of Athens or by taking photographs. The footage from Volos places us in front of the police or with the citizens sliding behind them, providing a point of view of a citizen on the street and the connotation that the audience too is confronted by the police. The video also shows the cops' faces, in contrast to the news' footage concealment of their faces. Showing their

faces in long shots documents their presence both as oppressive and distant. It connotes that these people are going to be making arrests, while at the same time the distance of the camera does not encourage identification. Police here are not CSI's supercops or the impersonal and thus more terrorising power of the state that we see on the news.

The next sequence provides the point of view of a camera secretly filming in a police car, inviting viewers to identify with us and revealing a small slice of police violence, when one of them hits the camera. Obviously, they detest the camera, connoting that they have something to hide and they turn against citizens who have not committed a crime, thus disrupting society. Their physical violence is not purified, unlike the violence that police used in serials or the violence against the immigrants in the news.

Different views of the police can also be rooted in an antagonistic police mythology. There are Greek subcultures going back to the 1920s like rebetiko music and there are also ideologies of the left such as anarchism that view police consistently as oppressive. The last video that I will refer to builds a myth of police as the Bad and the Ugly, combining unflattering photos of the police with a rebetiko song of the '20s[6]. Rebetiko was a kind of Greek music and a subculture developed in the 1920s-1950s and still popular today that also makes references to gambling or using hash. The song tells the story of cops interrupting a game of dice and closes with the inducement of resistance and swearing at the cops.

The photographs in the video are extremely unflattering, directly opposing the myth of cops as beautiful heoes/-ines, show ineptitude for action and carry connotations of cops as pigs and references to police work as shameful.

The myth of police as pigs, shamefully oppressing the people to guard the capital and the governments is an established one within Greek sub-cultures and is directly antagonistic to the one projected by popular media.

Although antagonistic mythologies may encourage alternative readings to the news, it is mainly the crucial differences in details of the audiovisual codes and everyday experience that cause ruptures to cop mythology.

Police serials are the most successful in purifying the police as justice in action. The news in Greece try to reproduce the same myth, yet crucial differences in the signs they use have connotations of oppression, disruption and lack of efficiency that cause ruptures in that myth. Police in serials and police in reality may strive to carry the same connotations; yet a closer reading reveals contradictions and gaps. Yet the biggest ruptures in the dominant myth seem to be caused by real life.

An anarchist moto goes: the revolt is not an image on the news, conscience is born on the streets. It seems, however, to carry its own mythology, as being on the street already presupposes a social conscience and the saying assumes the perception of similar texts and similar readings. On the other hand, the moto may be used as a reference to the contradictions inherent in dialectic readings between reality and the news. As

contradictions, gaps and differences are often inherent in intertextuality, intertextual readings can provide the dialectics that myths hate and reveal the limits of a myth.

Endnotes

1. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ObooJ3xd70.
2. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-0W8KcLEk0.
3. http://info-war.gr/2013/09/συνεργασία-αστυνομίας-με-συμμορία-α/.
4. Filming the parade was part of a research project titled "Chronicle of a Winter" that tried to document audiovisually the everyday experiences of the crisis.
5. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WBswR-0xT28.
6. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bZb9lk_h_qQ.

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Videography

CSI NY: Opening Titles: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ObooJ3xd70.

On March 25 2012: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WBswR-0xT28.

Xenios Zeus on the news: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-0W8KcLEk0.

Police co-operating with fascists: http://info-war.gr/2013/09/συνεργασία-αστυνομίας-με-συμμορία-α/.

These Cops – rebetiko song: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bZb9lk_h_qQ.