

The Element of Myth in the Post-War Greek Movie Posters

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Abstract

The post-war Greek movie posters are considered as art and in fact, a particular art form inspired by the very seventh art. Their main objective was to propagate among potential dark room visitors by promising something more than a two-hour entertainment: a happier and better quality of life. Artistic, 'nervous', minimalist, striking, elegant, evocative, still collectible items, the posters of that era were a form of narrative that seemed to serve the multiple dimensions of myth in order to attract the potential audience. The purpose of the following article is to research the unexplored, but at the same time, very interesting area of the post-war Greek movie posters and to highlight the importance of their myth concept. It claims to reveal how the painters, graphic designers and photographers of the time through their movie poster creations made Greek people dream again after both the disastrous World War II and the civil war that followed.

Keywords: post-war era, Greek cinema, poster, advertising, myth

1. Introduction

Posters constitute a communication tool and also one of the most prevalent methods of advertising events for the general public. The messages that they broadcast take effect almost automatically and often unconsciously. Studies have shown that a poster has only eleven seconds at its disposal to attract public attention and to convey its message and that is why the public does not stand to read or comment generally but it only casts a glance at it. Therefore the time to spread the message of the poster is effectively minimized. Nevertheless posters contain all the elements of the promotional ideals defined by the concept of myth and idealization. Especially the film posters of post-war Greece are the functional and perhaps the propaganda brightness of visual communication, but also as a unique field of artistic expression and creativity, namely two fundamental elements which quickly revealed them as the ideal precursors of the postwar Greek cinema magical era. This paper aims to identify, annotate and analyze all the essential characteristics of these promotional creations, which quickly have raised them on the sphere of the ideal. More specifically, in the course of our research we will comment on the importance of the historical context in which the functionality, aesthetics, and the semantic value of film posters were fashioned. There, we will discover that Greece, tattered from B! World War was trying to get back on track both socio-politically and economically, often seeking psychological support breaths through the regenerated domestic film production. Moreover, the evidence which in our view would advocate widely in revealing the mythic dimensions of these types of advertisements are very important references not only to their creators, but mainly to their technical and aesthetic characteristics which are identified through the analysis of selected pieces.

2. The Post-War Conditions and the Role of Cinema

After the Second World War and the Civil War that followed, Greece got hurt, drenched in blood with huge losses, from not only an economic but also an ethical point of view. At an economic level, apart from the loss of a human beings who died from starvation or military operations, a large part of the population was devastated, agricultural production declined by more than 70%, shipping slumped over 73% and the currency was annihilated, a fact that forced our country into commitments of a both financial and political nature (Daniel. A and Korkovelou, A., 2008: 19).

Unemployment, underemployment, immigration, the failure of every modernizing and social measure were the typical images of the society of that time. More specifically, during the 1950's and especially of the 1960's, there was not just an accelerated rural exodus, but a sudden and rapid agricultural output, a universal trend of urbanization, which caused in most provinces a differentiation between life and its organic tissue. (Filiat, V., 1989: 318). The two-thirds of the internal migrants of this period moved to the cities. More than half of them moved to the capital, which was the largest reception center of internal migration flow in the country (Tsaoussis, D., 1971: 104). This suggests that the migratory movement to the major urban centers was due to increased opportunities that they provided and that social integration remained poor in the rural society. This showed indeed the enormous emigration to foreign countries.

Another feature of the transformation of Greek society, especially during the 1960's, was the very fast but gradual formation of a broad social urban middle layer. The middle class which was formed due not only to the increased role of the tertiary sector of the economy, but also to the expansion of the state apparatus, soon acquired high social status and power and interfered with the authoritarian demands to the hitherto ruling class of production (Poulantzas, N., 1976: 102). At the same time that efforts were made to Greece for reconstruction and rapid economic growth, a significant expansion of practical materialism was observed in western culture affecting all strata of society: it was the materialism of a consumer society. Within this framework the damaged film production in Greece, after its brief pre-war course, began to recover as it seemed to be an ideal form of mass entertainment and also a very cheap and easily accessible purchasing product that had an appeal to every consumer group.

Through the cinema screen, the two post-war decades, those of 1950's and 1960's, respectively, seemed to reflect respectively the efforts of the Greek society to maintain collegiality cultivated through historical experiences, to leave behind the painful memories and to move on to the era of development and progress.

More specifically, in the 1950's cinema soon became a very popular culture spectacle along the lines of the Western world. The modern flair, movement, emotion embracing all Europeans in the post-war period, began to be felt by Greeks as well, thus contributing to the rapid evolution of cinema into an indispensable entertaining product. Greek cinema began to progress both technically and artistically, being felt gradually by an ever-increasing public but also to grasp for breath over the daring of topics relating to the recent past. Criticizing efforts for its post-civil war social reality could be made but allusively and, all the more so, at a deeper level (Athanasatou, G., 2001: 114). The people began to exist, to struggle, to work, to fall in love, to suffer pain, to "fabulist in its everyday life" as though it had no past, while the Civil War and its History were notably absent.

The next decade is that of so-called "golden era" of the Greek cinema. It is the decade of consolidation of new consumer standards that directly impacted upon themes and orientations of cinematography (Sotiropoulos, C., 1989: 93). The movie then began to be shaped by both the needs of merchantability and also by the reluctance of the public to revive in the halls familiar evils of the recent history which may still divide it. The auriferous source of cinema prevented producers from investing on themes that can be considered dangerous and may lead to the interference of censorship. The preference of screenwriters and producers to enhance the modernization of the Greek petty bourgeoisie highlighting the new consumer model prevailed despite the considerable efforts made by filmmakers to capture the 'other' Greece and its history (Kolovos, N., 2002: 154-156).

3. The Myth of the Movie Posters before the Myth of the Big Screen

But before the actual commercial product, the variety which extended into a large scale (comedies and dramas, musicals, social and historical topics) satisfying the tastes and demands of the viewing audience in the country, aspiring 'consumers' would come in contact with its advertising harbinger which dominated outside every movie in the form of pictorial posters, giant advertising posters, ordinary posters or simply informative tiny posters. Most of these forms of advertising, from the first stirrings of Greek commercial cinema began as mere ephemeral "decoys" that were originally targeted at advertising the film and the leading actors. They had frequently the hidden charm of "sirens", propagandizing in a flexible, "spirited" and unique way, every movie to the viewers. Black and white or color, posters and their art, began with small tentative steps seconding the work of filmmakers who created movies in the Greek scene (Mylonaki, A., 2008: 95).



Figure 1. A giant hand painted advertising poster for the popular film ‘Alice in the navy’, 1961.

Many of the posters - particularly the giant advertising ones – were painted by skilled artists with plenty of passion 'illuminating' with a commanding aura and great aesthetics the advertised movie itself. Certainly there were plenty of cases in which the owners themselves made impromptu handwritten movie posters which were smaller and of a less aesthetic importance but which had the same functional / propaganda value. But others, especially during the 1960's and 1970's were mainly left to the disorderly development of lithography and graphic arts and were printed massively and easily, replacing traditional painted giant advertising posters.



Figure 2. A ‘newer’ technology poster based on the techniques of lithography and collage for the film ‘ Miss Manager’, 1964

It is worth mentioning that the cinephile audience of post-war Greece, was fascinated with illustrations on canvas or on paper of lovers, disruptive action scenes and wonderful colored embossed lettering, with helpful information about the work, which "locked" their displacement on the supernatural frames sized of 2x6 m, 2x9m., 3x10 m, but always in harmonious relation to the dimensions of each cinema itself. So we understand that the movie myth started long before the public entered the dark hall: the poster had already preoccupied the individual viewer introducing any desire or fantasy in the myth of the ideal and promise.

The golden era when many artists lived on the giant advertising posters was from the late 1940's and until the mid 1970's. Especially immediately after the Second World War and the rise of the Greek film production, the studios of artists were producing models of film posters that eventually toppled the original purpose of their creation, given that today they are considered as works of art. Artists like Stephanos Almaliotis, Spyros Vassiliou, Nikos Nikolaidis Kostas Grigoriadis, Brothers George and Costas Kouzounis and Malcolm Touliatos were some of the pioneers in this art. But the most typical representative of this magical art was George Vakirtzis who after the German Occupation (1941-1945) dealt mainly with the design of giant posters which had been a milestone in the streets of Athens. G. Vakirtzis was not an artist locked in the "glass walls" of art. His visual technique with vivid bright colors renewed and upgraded the advertising image of the movie, as well as the poster of the road in such a way that it attracted while showing due regard for the general public to whom it was addressed. It expected the approach of the common man in the art and this is why it offered in generous way, its crafts and popular sensitivity to the aesthetic culture of the masses with simple and direct ways of both the ordinary and the giant advertising posters (Mortoglou, H., 2005: 3). This modern conception to display an advertisement raised this despised kind of painting to a new and unique artistic and ideological level.

His amply sized works of art which were usually painted with powders and fish glue of hagiography on poster or canvas, used to be wrapped up with a ritual and were framed hurriedly to catch the premiere, were an integral part of the cinema history as the mythical posters which keep alive the old tradition and the "perfume" of unripe cinema era unadulterated. Focusing on one of his classic works, the portrait of Melina Mercouri in the movie *Stella*, we observe that on top of the poster, the title of the movie is written in big red italic lowercase letters outlined in white. At the bottom of the poster there are the words: "A film by Michael Kakoyannis" (the film director) while on the left, there is the artist's signature. Most of the visual elements of the piece seem to be borrowed from pop art that has just appeared on the world stage of art. Purple-pink face and shoulders, yellow ochre hair, red lips, yellow earrings and necklace, blue dress look more like graphics attempts rather than a painting display. But they wonderful convey both the natural features and the elements of the heroine's strong personality.

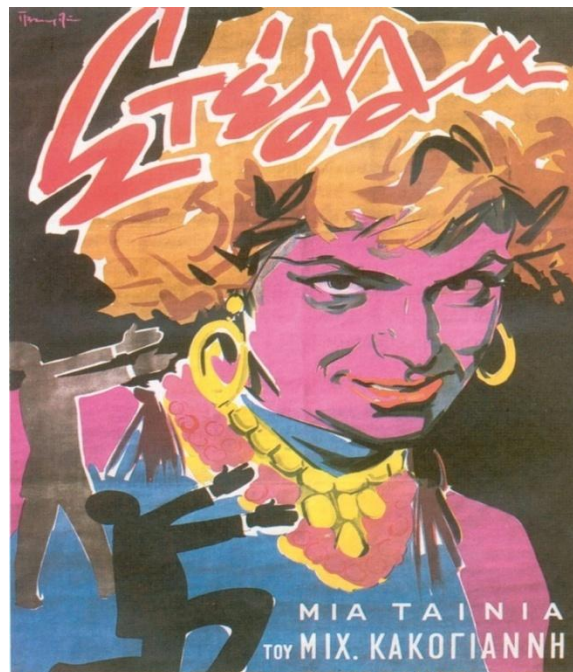


Figure 3. G. Vakirtzis's poster depicting Melina Merkouri in the film *Stella*, 1955.

In contrast to this technique emerged the technology itself which quickly began to rival the handmade giant advertising poster. The use of lithography enabled mass production of printed advertisements and soon proved to be a very important practice, which primarily using collage and photomontage in some cases, created strikingly beautiful, functional, posters although much smaller in size.

Watching a graphic design of Printing Arts of N. Zafeiropoulos for the film *My Wife Went Mad* by Dimitris Nikolaidis, (1966) we understand that it is a balanced synthesis as it achieves to render the comic element of the film perfectly combining a film star out of his mind (Lambros Konstantaras) and the leading actress (Mary Aroni) in a typical scene depicting a celebration in a club. Simple colors, red on black for the title of the film, and a blue background on which are displayed black and white photographs. Generally this poster is a collage of pictures of typical scenes and is divided into two parts. One relies on the contributors of the film and the other, more emphatically, the comic element. Noteworthy is the lettering of the title because thanks to the calligraphic skills of the artist, it manages to exacerbate its funniness.



Figure 4. Poster for the particularly popular comedy film *My Wife Went Mad*, made through lithographic process, 1966.

4. Theoretical Analysis of the Post-War Film Posters Myth

According to Roland Barthes any object or idea in the world can pass from its closed, silent existence to a verbal sphere, perceived by society as there is no law, be it natural or not, which prohibits talking about objects or ideas (Barthes, R., 1988: 117).

The poster, however, is itself a communication system which enables us to perceive it as a pinpointing way, being almost synonymous with the concept of narrative, and therefore it is easily understood. Also an object, an idea, but also an entire communication system can acquire mythical significance not so much for their personality as such, but rather for the way in which they broadcast the messages of their characteristics. That's just the way we think was the essential element, which transformed the post-war movie poster into a dynamic product, possessing the power of myth and therefore of the lively promise, namely two ingredients which in many cases were stronger of the very mixture of the final product, i.e., the film itself.

It is plausible that the images can be understood with less difficulty than the words and offer more opportunities to convey emotional flare, imagination and mood. Usually a picture is "plausible" but without a "transparent" meaning since it is directed to play not only the leading, but also the guiding role. The role of language, namely the text that is used to enhance this image, is secondary but also important.

According to this viewpoint, a characteristic type of the communication system, such as the movie poster, used the written word, but rather the image to more easily carry its messages to the consumer masses under the specific sociopolitical conditions that we have already known.

Based on all the above we can conclude that the most important factor in conveying the first and most effective message was the painting performance of scenes or of individuals of each piece the selection of which was the responsibility of the individual artist or graphic designer. However it was the combination of textual performance of information by the power of the image, which brought the desired result.



Figure 5. Giant hand painted advertising poster depicting a characteristic scene from the movie *The Fall*, 1962.

On the *receiver* side, we can easily realize the identification of the meaning of the image / text message of the movie poster with the intellectual, cultural, age, and social context within which different groups moving spectators were involved, since its interpretation was inextricably linked with the above parameters. From this extrapolation we can understand how the perception of the consumers of post-war Greece was determined not only by the circumstances in which messages of the movie posters were created, but also by the circumstances of his time, and especially the recent past that it might be still experiencing.

Based on all these facts we can say that the concept of myth in the movie posters of the era of our interest can be detected even in the way in which Greek consumers left defenseless the sensitivity to stimuli, promises and dreams that the advertising process provided it profusely. We thus have to admit that the concept of myth in this type of advertising not only did it not exploit, but it did respect this 'weakness' of the Greek audience, as it was a kind of bridge to reconciliation between human aspirations and desires both with their traumatic past and with their monotonous and often clumsy everyday lives (Forty, A., 1987: 9).

5. Conclusion

The case of the Greek post-war movie posters could not be identified with the concept of advertising in the narrow limits of interpretation. This claim can be substantiated by the identification of a lack of fundamental data on the classical concept of advertising as is "the absence of good design aimed at ultimate gain." Behind every poster or giant advertising poster - especially in the first fifteen years after the end of the Civil War, there was no specific design, let alone specific advertiser, designers or a team of them. The painters and then the first unripe graphic designers brought their talent and their own dreams to ply these rare creations today without possibly being aware that in this way they fashioned a new lifestyle and communication technique for thousands of Greeks. Being strongly identified with the new culture, but also with the needs and dreams of a recently 'abused' people, the movie poster was the mirror that just reflected its metaphysical landscaped idol.

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