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FROM "GUILTY PLEASURE" TO CRITIQUE: CRITICAL DISCOURSE STUDIES, REFLEXIVITY AND POP CULTURE

ABSTRACT

This reflexive article traces my trajectory in Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) and pop culture, exploring the recurring tension between scholarly "guilt" and personal "pleasure." Growing up, watching Greek popular TV programs was a cherished pastime among the women in my family, yet it often clashed with the cultural values of our leftist background, which prioritized politically engaged art and critical thinking. I argue that CDS faces a similar challenge, frequently privileging the analysis of elite voices while neglecting the affective dimensions of meaning making. Adopting a more reflexive approach could help CDS become more inclusive, theoretically vibrant, and socially relevant.

Keywords: *reflection, Greek television, ideology, identities, sociolinguistics*

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ΑΠΟ ΤΗΝ «ΕΝΟΧΗ ΑΠΟΛΑΥΣΗ» ΣΤΗΝ ΚΡΙΤΙΚΗ: ΚΡΙΤΙΚΕΣ ΣΠΟΥΔΕΣ ΛΟΓΟΥ, ΑΝΑΣΤΟΧΑΣΤΙΚΟΤΗΤΑ ΚΑΙ ΠΟΠ ΚΟΥΛΤΟΥΡΑ

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Αυτό το αναστοχαστικό άρθρο ανιχνεύει την πορεία μου στις Κριτικές Σπουδές Λόγου (ΚΣΛ) και την ποπ κουλτούρα, διερευνώντας μια επαναλαμβανόμενη πίεση μεταξύ ακαδημαϊκής «ενοχής» και προσωπικής «απόλαυσης». Μεγαλώνοντας, η παρακολούθηση ελληνικών δημοφιλών τηλεοπτικών προγραμμάτων ήταν ένα αγαπημένο χόμπι για τις γυναίκες στην οικογένειά μου, αλλά συχνά ερχόταν σε αντίθεση με τις πολιτισμικές αξίες του αριστερού μας υπόβαθρου, που έδιναν προτεραιότητα στην πολιτικά στρατευμένη τέχνη και την κριτική σκέψη. Υποστηρίζω ότι οι ΚΣΛ αντιμετωπίζουν παρόμοιες προκλήσεις, συχνά προκρίνοντας την ανάλυση των φωνών της ελίτ και παραβλέποντας τις συναισθηματικές διαστάσεις κατασκευής των νοημάτων. Μια πιο αναστοχαστική προσέγγιση θα μπορούσε να καταστήσει τις ΚΣΛ θεωρητικά πιο στέρεες, κοινωνικά πιο επίκαιρες, αλλά και πιο συμπεριληπτικές.

Λέξεις κλειδιά: *αναστοχασμός, ελληνική τηλεόραση, ιδεολογία, ταυτότητες, κοινωνιογλωσσολογία*

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1. SETTING THE REFLEXIVE STAGE

This reflexive paper traces my trajectory across Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), sociolinguistics, and pop culture. My research, focusing particularly on sociolinguistic style and the mediatization of social identities, aims to bring questions that are central to "conventional" sociolinguistics into conversation with the critical commitments of CDS, positioning the discussion within the broader framework of "sociocultural linguistics" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005).

As I wrote this text and looked back over my 25 years in CDS, I recognized some recurring tensions: the need to balance disciplinary expectations with personal interests; to navigate between the pursuit of cultural legitimacy and the simple enjoyment of scholarly work; and to reconcile moments of scholarly "guilt" with genuine "pleasure." Reflecting on these tensions, I suggest that similar dynamics have influenced CDS itself, shaping both its methodological choices and thematic priorities.

Consequently, I propose a CDS that is not only interdisciplinary and problem-oriented, but also more reflexive, one that applies its critical gaze inward as rigorously as it does outward, interrogating its own assumptions, methods, and traditions. Such a shift would allow CDS to evolve into a more socially relevant and theoretically vibrant field, one that not only critiques the world but also critically interrogates the assumptions and practices that shape its own production of knowledge.

2. SCHOLARLY ORIGINS

2.1. Bridging CDS and Sociolinguistics

I was first introduced to CDS during my postgraduate studies at the University of East Anglia in the late 1990s, where I had the opportunity to attend courses and collaborate with Professor Roger Fowler, one of the founding figures of the critical linguistics school, widely regarded as a predecessor of CDS, and known for its strong grounding in Hallidayan linguistics. This experience had a formative impact on my development as a CDS scholar, as my early research focused on media and education discourses (e.g., Stamou, 2001; Stamou & Paraskevopoulos, 2006; Stamou & Padeliadu, 2009; Stamou et al., 2009).

In the early 2010s, my trajectory shifted toward an academic position in sociolinguistics, a field that, in the Greek context, was traditionally

aligned mostly with the Labovian variationist paradigm, emphasizing linguistic variation and identity. This turn led me to more "established" sociolinguistic topics, such as the representations of sociolinguistic styles linked to class (Stamou, 2011), youth(fulness) (Saltidou & Stamou, 2014; Stamou & Saltidou, 2015; Stamou et al., 2012a; Stamou, 2013, 2018a, 2018b, 2023; Stamou & Christou, 2017), and gender (Stamou et al., 2012b; Stamou & Dimopoulou, 2015) in Greek TV commercials, series, and films.

My focus on these texts reflects a broader effort to bridge a gap between sociolinguistics and CDS. Influenced by the ideology of authenticity (e.g., Coupland 2003), mainstream sociolinguistics often dismisses pop culture as "inauthentic," favoring naturally occurring speech. At the same time, CDS has largely prioritized political and print media discourses, often overlooking popular and entertainment genres. Consequently, everyday and mundane discursive practices, despite their political significance in reflecting and shaping dominant ideologies, have remained critically underexplored. As I have recently argued (Stamou, 2024a), moving away from the traditional CDS's focus on elite discourse and turning attention to the realm of pop culture is essential. Such a shift can shed light on how political issues are interpreted in everyday, emotional, and personalized ways, often leading to their trivialization. Moreover, unlike the overt seriousness of political and news discourse, the humor and lightheartedness typical of many forms of pop culture may serve to reproduce hegemonic meanings under the guise of seemingly "innocent" laughter.

2.2. Pop Culture as "Guilty Pleasure"

But how did this keen interest in pop culture come about? I grew up in Thessaloniki, Greece, in a family that valued education and maintained a strong left-leaning political orientation. My father was a university professor of biology, my mother studied English literature, and my grandmother worked as a court secretary. Despite this intellectually rich environment, watching Greek popular TV series, family sitcoms, and even soap operas was a beloved pastime among all the women in my family, my sister, mother, grandmother, aunt, and myself included. Yet, this viewing was often accompanied by a sense of "guilty pleasure," as it seemed to be at odds, not only with the ideals of our formal education, which emphasized the consumption of "high culture," but also with the cultural values rooted in our family's leftist background, which valued politically engaged art and critical thinking. In contrast to my father's preference

for filmmakers such as Tarkovsky, Buñuel, Godard, and Antonioni, our affection for mainstream television carried a subtle sense of transgression, something enjoyed but rarely discussed openly. In retrospect, this tension closely resembles what Gerrard (2017) identifies in her study of teen drama fandom: a co-existence of guilt and pleasure, especially among women engaging with feminized, popular media. Like Gerrard's respondents, I too had learned early on to "apologize" for my enjoyment.

Later, as I developed an academic identity shaped by CDS —arguably an unsurprising path given my family's intellectual and political values— I began integrating scenes from Greek television, film, and advertising into my sociolinguistics teaching. These materials proved effective for illustrating more abstract concepts such as "standard variety" and "hypercorrection," and I soon noticed that this part of the lecture was always particularly enjoyable for both my students and me. This led me to begin analyzing popular Greek TV programs more systematically, aiming to approach them from a critical perspective. As these once "favorite" programs gradually came under critical scrutiny and became legitimate objects of academic study, the "forbidden" pleasure they once represented within my family acquired a new kind of validation. Still, the broader social perception that such topics are not genuinely "serious" persists, and I find myself, at times, subtly internalizing it, occasionally questioning the academic worth of my work, even as I remain fully aware of its critical significance.

3. MY RESEARCH TRAJECTORY IN CDS

3.1. Textual Analysis

Trained within a firmly grounded Marxist tradition of CDS, I initially approached audiovisual pop culture texts using the tools and assumptions shaped by my academic lineage. My formal introduction to CDS at the University of East Anglia, where I was immersed in the tradition of critical linguistics, instilled in me a strong commitment to systematic textual analysis and the study of ideology. Over the years, my analyses, though focused on pop culture, often bore the marks of this "orthodoxy," consistently drawing on Fairclough's (1992; 2003) sociocultural approach, Halliday's (1994) Systemic Functional Grammar (particularly the transitivity system), and van Leeuwen's (1996) social actor theory. Given the nature of the data (i.e. TV series, commercials, and other audiovisual fiction), my work also extended beyond verbal language to visual discourse,

analyzed through Kress and van Leeuwen's *Grammar of Visual Design* (1996), a "Hallidayan-inspired framework for visual communication" (Stamou, 2013, p. 331). These methodological choices echo, in a sense, the early research steps of CDS as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), namely, mostly understood as a Marxist-inspired text-based analysis.

In more recent work (Stamou, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2023, 2024a, 2024b), my theoretical perspective has evolved to integrate interactional discourse analytical (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005), post-variationist sociolinguistic (Coupland, 2007), and multimodal (inter)action analytical (Norris, 2011) approaches to identity. These have been combined with Halliday's transitivity and van Leeuwen's social actor analysis to better account for a more nuanced understanding of how identities are mediatized as they locally unfold within the context of TV (audiovisual) fictional discourse. This synthetic approach addresses a significant gap in CDS, which has traditionally focused on how social practices represent collective identities in written texts, often neglecting the micro-level interactional processes through which identities are actively constructed. At the same time, this shift aligns with the broader evolution within CDS, from a focus on written and largely monomodal discourse to an increasing interest in the multimodal semiotic resources involved in meaning making, as prioritized by multimodal CDS (e.g., Machin, 2013).

3.2. Associating the "Linguistic" with the "Social"

As an inherently interdisciplinary approach, CDS fosters a productive dialogue between disciplines such as linguistics and social theory, which is precisely what sets apart CDS from other discourse analytical approaches (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). But how is this integration of linguistic and social dimensions through detailed textual analysis made? In Fairclough's socio-cultural approach, the meso-level of discursive practice mediates between the micro-level of text and the macro-level of social practice, including particular modes of social meaning making, which are realized through specific linguistic and semiotic resources. Central to this is the concept of "discourses," as influenced by Foucault (1972), referring to distinct representations of the world within a social practice. These discourses make available specific identities (or "styles" in Fairclough's terms), through which social actors are positioned within a given practice.

The identification and delimitation of discourses is "an analytical exercise," which "entails understanding discourses as objects that the

researcher constructs rather than as objects that exist in a delimited form in reality," conducted "with the aid of secondary literature that identifies particular discourses" (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 144). In other words, we determine relevant discourses by drawing on specific social theories related to the topic at hand, and then trace these discourses through textual analysis.

For instance, in Stamou (2018a), I analyzed how youth and their language practices are represented in a Greek family sitcom. This analysis was informed by sociolinguistic literature on youth language, with a particular focus on its public stigmatization through the lens of the "standard language ideology", an ideology perpetuated by the "dominant bloc" of the media and entertainment industry (Lippi-Green, 1994; Milroy, 2001). Through this study, I sought to build a bridge between CDS and the field of Language Ideology. CDS stands to benefit from engaging more directly with language as a site of social inequality, while Language Ideology research could, in turn, draw valuable insights from CDS's tools for detailed textual analysis that uncover how language ideologies are discursively produced and sustained.

At the same time, to identify competing discourses about young people, I turned to sociocultural perspectives on youth (Bucholtz, 2002; Moje & van Helden, 2004). Two discourses were distinguished. On the one hand, the dominant "adolescence discourse" conceptualizes youth as a universal, transitional stage toward adulthood, portraying adolescents as incomplete beings. On the other hand, the "youth discourse" emphasizes young people's agency, foregrounding diverse, context-specific identities shaped through peer affiliations rather than opposition to adults.

3.3. Critiquing the World through Ideology and Power

The defining feature of CDS, however, is its critical stance: unlike other discourse approaches, it goes beyond description and interpretation to explain how and why language functions in specific ways, with the aim of uncovering ideologies and power relations (Fairclough, 1992). Heavily influenced by Marxist theory, the concept of "ideology" plays a central, but variably interpreted role among different CDS scholars. While Fairclough and Wodak (1997) emphasize ideology as a dominant representation of the world that reproduces social inequality, van Dijk (1998) conceptualizes ideologies as group-based systems of shared beliefs (see also the Introduction of this Special Issue).

Engaged with the Fairclough's approach within CDS, my own perspective has aligned with the Marxist understanding of (dominant) ideology as a tool for legitimizing the status quo. In line with the Marxist tradition, I also conceptualized power as a societal force that extends beyond economic dominance to include ideological control. This control is exercised through what Althusser (1971) termed "Ideological State Apparatuses", such as the media, advertising, and the entertainment industry, by means of the ideological mechanisms of the (Gramscian) "hegemony" and the (Althusserian) "interpellation."

For example, in Stamou (2013), I examined how the presence of depictions of young people and "youth language" in Greek TV commercials functioned ideologically, as enabled marketers to interpellate young people directly through the appropriate selections in personal pronouns and transitivity patterns. At the same time, the "silent" and consensual workings of hegemony to accept the dominant ideology were achieved through the visuals (e.g., adults' disapproval of young people's lifestyles and talk through facial expressions) and the humorous framing of commercials.

That said, in my more recent research (Stamou, 2018a, 2018b, 2024a, 2024b), I have also adopted a more neutral and descriptive conceptualization of "ideologies," understood as socially shared worldviews or belief systems. Beyond the case of language ideologies associated with youth language, as previously discussed, my work has extended this approach to broader ideological formations. For instance, in Stamou (2024a, p. 6), I examine "the ideological perspective(s) from which identities are constructed, specifically, the discourses drawn upon in their construction." In this context, ideologies are approached in a way that aligns with Foucauldian notions of discourse, that is, as historically situated systems of meaning that shape and constrain how identities are articulated.

More broadly, my use of the concept of "ideology" reflects a wider tendency within CDS. While ideology remains a key concern, often grounded in the Marxist concept of dominant ideology, it remains a multi-accentual term, employed in diverse ways. Nonetheless, it is frequently treated unreflexively (my own work included), with its specific usage not always clearly articulated.

4. CRITIQUING THE WORLD AND OURSELVES

As I reach the end of this brief reflexive account of my research in CDS over the past 25 years, I return to the foundation of my training at the University of East Anglia, where immersion in critical linguistics fostered a strong commitment to systematic textual analysis. These tools proved invaluable in illuminating the ideological mechanisms embedded in seemingly trivial texts such as TV series, films, and commercials. Looking back, however, I see that my commitment to these "serious" methods served at times a dual purpose: they helped legitimize my focus on pop culture by highlighting the critical weight of my analysis. This reflection has illuminated how my early feelings of ambivalence about enjoying pop culture informed not only the topics I pursued but also the ways I engaged with them. While the materials I analyzed came from spaces of shared, often feminized, domestic pleasure, my analytical stance reintroduced disciplinary boundaries that constrained more open, affectively engaged readings. In privileging ideological critique, I sometimes overlooked the emotional resonance and alternative interpretations, such as irony, resistance, or identification that these texts might invite for diverse audiences, including myself.

A similar ambivalence is visible in my evolving approach to the concept of ideology. While Marxist accounts of dominant ideology offered a powerful framework for analyzing the reproduction of social hierarchies, I gradually moved toward more pluralistic understandings, treating ideologies as discursively produced worldviews. However, this conceptual shift was not always accompanied by explicit reflection. Much like my engagement with pop culture, these transitions reflect a broader negotiation between a desire for academic legitimacy and openness to alternative, affectively grounded perspectives.

I believe that this negotiation between legitimacy and enjoyment, or between guilt and pleasure, is not unique to my own work, but reflects a broader dynamic within CDS. This is evident not only in the analytical stance often adopted by CDS scholars, but also in the kinds of topics and texts traditionally deemed worthy of critique. One recurring criticism targets the tendency to adopt an overtly political stance that privileges the analyst's voice, positioning the researcher as a kind of political vanguard, seemingly detached from the discourses they examine (e.g., Bucholtz, 2001; Rogers et al., 2005). Such a stance echoes the logic of traditional ideology critique in the Marxist spirit and often fails to account for the researcher's own cultural embeddedness and the affective dimensions of meaning making.

Moreover, CDS has historically focused on the analysis of elite voices, such as those found in political, news, and professional discourses, domains widely regarded as "serious" and ideologically consequential, while often overlooking texts from pop culture and entertainment (Stamou, 2024a). These patterns reveal an implicit hierarchy of legitimacy, wherein the pleasures, emotions, and meanings derived from pop culture are frequently marginalized or dismissed.

In this light, I see reflexivity, not as a methodological add-on, but as a central epistemological commitment. It invites scholars to interrogate not only the texts they study but also the frameworks, emotions, and histories they bring to that study. As Billig (2008) has argued, the critical gaze must be turned inward as well as outward. For me, this has meant acknowledging that theoretical rigor did not resolve my ambivalence toward pop culture; instead, it shaped how I navigated my research terrain.

Looking ahead, I envision a more inclusive CDS, welcoming to complexity, affect, and ambivalence. A CDS that treats pop culture not only as an ideological apparatus but also as a space of lived meaning. A field that recognizes how scholars' own cultural experiences inform their research trajectories and values theoretical diversity as a strength. By embracing complexity and confronting our own investments, we can produce research that is not only critically engaged, but also self-aware about the discourses we analyze, but, more importantly, about the researchers we become in the process.

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