

## Framing Tradition: The Representations of Greek Traditional Dance in Television

Aristoula Toli<sup>1</sup>, Christos Papakostas<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*National and Kapodistrian University of Athens,  
School of Physical Education and Sports Science  
Athens, Greece*

<sup>2</sup>*University of Ioannina,  
Department of Primary Education,  
Ioannina, Greece*

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**Abstract:** The aim of this study is to investigate the representations of tradition/ folk culture and more specifically of Greek traditional dance, through the case study of the popular entertainment show "Stin ygeia mas" that was shown for 17 years on Greek television. More specifically, the study focuses on the directorial choices and the aesthetic elements that define the show's character and its tributes to Greek tradition. The research methodology is based on the analysis of "audio-visual texts" which consist both of the observation and recording/transcribing of the episodes as well as the production of primary sources through the interview method with informants-participants in the episodes while critical discourse analysis is used. The data are interpreted based on Hall's (1997) 'circuit of culture' theoretical scheme. The traditional/ folk music, the singing and the traditional dance, as derived from the analysis of the research, are the main elements of the composition of the episodes related to the sketching of the folk culture in the context of television. The study explores how cultural representations take place in this entertainment field. At the same time, aesthetic codes and direction choices are highlighted that are used in the mediation process of the subject by the media, while the systematic use of these choices such as local costumes, the number of dancers, and the staging can strengthen cultural identities and stereotypical forms of tradition for the spectacle.

**Keywords:** Media Anthropology, Folklore, Visual Culture, Greek folk dance.

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### 1. Introduction

#### a. Visual culture and media anthropology

Media become vehicles of unifying practices in an environment where the cultural interconnectedness of the masses appears limited and consequently deficient (Eiselein & Topper, 1976). Media anthropology (Spitulnik, 1993) aims to study how media can shape identities by first translating the methods of creating cultural representations into standard or unique circumstances (Dickey, 1997). The ethnographic research utilizing visual imagery and the socio-cultural representations is considered important for anthropological studies (Pink, 2006; Kharel, 2015). Stories, experiences, and methods captured in an image contribute to the understanding of past cultures and locales. This knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation through traditional processes of 'orality'. Complementarily, ethnographic texts and public discourse can find fertile ground to effectively make sense of these visual representations, particularly through television, towards a better understanding of the individual elements and meanings that make them up. Representation is a fundamental issue in the construction of discourse about the past. Discussions about the past reconstruct events that occurred in a different era, distinguishing between past and present. This representation of the past is not the past itself but a present construction shaped by the conditions under which it is produced (in the television locus for example). Memory linked to lived experience, aims to be faithful to the past, while history, a scientific discourse, aims to be true. Memory represents lived time and space, while history represents the place of the historical narrative. Both discourses contribute to understanding the present through the past and vice versa (Phelan, 2018; Filardo-Llamas & Boyd, 2018). Thus, cultural codes and narratives are constructed and recycled according to specific political conditions (Gavriely-Nuri, 2018). The medium's contribution to cultures of memory is made more apparent through programs that center history and tradition, projecting nostalgia for the past (Holdsworth, 2008). The performances often trap the audience in the fallacy of representing reality, as all the elements that make up an event unfold in front of them. After all, the concept of reality is not compatible with that of representation but is constituted to a large extent by the imagination of the viewer/listener. Every culture incorporates sounds, images, words, and symbols, for the individual to perceive the world around him, through his internal mental processes of imagination and subjective analysis (Hall, 1997; Myrivili, 2006). Thomas (2003) refers to the democratization of art through the possibility offered by the use of media – such as dance videos – specifically facilitating the transmission and continuity of a tradition necessary for cultural

reproduction. According to Jansson, all media function as 'image banks' from which the interested public draws specific cultural characteristics according to their lifestyle and preferences (Drinis, 2022).

#### **b. Dance on television**

The combination of codes in dance within the screen allows different audiences to selectively decode the image and arrive at a personal re-interpretation, which remains a shared cultural experience. Thus, loyal audiences become active producers of new meanings, personally and emotionally connected to elements of (popular) culture, while expressing social and personal identities within the context of a mediated culture (Stamatiadi, 2022). As early as the 1970s, media facilitated the global spread of dance movements and the consumption of music, steps, bodies and fashion. This process is a key mechanism through which consumer/spectator-based 'youth culture' – centered around music and dance – is shaped, (Harlig, 2014; Dodds, 2004; Murphy, 2016; Belmar, 2016). Particularly in the context of dance on screen, viewers experience the sensation of movement while watching, as if they were performing the dance themselves (Gardner, 1983; Wood, 2016; Dodds, 2014). This kinesthetic response is facilitated by the synchronization of the performer's movements with the music and the rhythm. Spectators draw on their embodied knowledge and kinesthetic sensitivity to connect with the dancer's physicality. Synchronized music and movement evoke a kinesthetic response stimulating a sense of flow and rhythm in viewers. Porter (2016), in her study of the interplay between dance and various creative professionals, actors, dancers, filmmakers, musicians, choreographers, etc., argues that the camera is not merely a recording device but functions as both stage and audience. Aesthetic conventions have characterized artistic genres and movements in cinema and television. For example, the close-up shot became a dramatic technique for conveying psychological parameters and tensions through the performer's expression and expressiveness. Thus, the projected images shape the viewer's perceptions and feelings about dance (Dodds, 2004; Nascimento & Berson, 2000). According to Fiske & Hartley (2003) dance on television is often presented in a simplified and repetitive manner, with limited body positions and restricted timeframes. It is combined with music and singing to add variety to the presentation, serving as a form of tension management for the viewer and offering diversion and escape. Televised dance can be seen as a formalization of dance which includes 'ritualization' and evaluation of social behavior. Continuing in this line of reasoning, YouTube provides the locus within which "text" is produced dynamically through the interaction between users and the work itself, conversing with and drawing inspiration from it, incorporating codes (Thomas, 2014; Manovich, 2009; Chung, 2018; Papakostas, 2019; Papakostas, 2022). Entire shows featuring traditional themes, folk music, and traditional dance are uploaded on YouTube, attracting large audiences that can be quantified through viewership numbers.

#### **c. The circuit of culture**

The application of Hall's (1997) 'circuit of culture' model to television production and regulation reveals the complex and iterative dynamics that shape television content creation and audience reception through interrelated processes. This model emphasizes the importance of shared meanings and the role of language (as the most basic representational system) and representation in shaping cultural values and understandings. It has 5 interconnected phases. In the production phase, creators and producers shape representations, construct narratives, characters and visual elements that reflect and influence social norms and values. These characters and stories contribute to the formation of cultural identities (Hall, 1991), reinforcing or challenging existing norms. Television representations then enter the consumption phase, where the audience interprets and interacts with the content. Audience uptake of the content feeds back into the circuit, influencing subsequent production decisions contributing to a continuous feedback loop. Regulation is more reflective of the regulatory system, government policies, industry standards and social norms shape what can be broadcast, influencing both content creation and audience interpretation. As such, regulation plays a key role in shaping the cultural landscape of television. This dynamic interplay within the circuit of culture highlights the reciprocal relationship between television production and its cultural impact.

## **2. Methodology**

This research constitutes a case study of the popular show 'Stin ygeia mas' (2004-2021), which was broadcasting on both public and private Greek television. The ethnographic data were collected through qualitative methods of observation/ transcription and interviews and analyzed using critical discourse analysis. The episodes of the show related to traditional and folk music, folk singing, and traditional dance, along with the interviews of the informants that were participants to the show, constituted the 'audiovisual texts' that were the focus of this analysis. The interpretation of the results was based on Hall's theoretical framework of representations, and specifically the 'circuit of culture' model.

### 3. Analysis

#### a. Directing and representing the Greek traditional dance on TV, a case study

According to Hall's analysis model above, the goal of television producers is to create an imagery with specific criteria that serve various needs in terms of hegemony. Dance to fit into the context of television must be stylized and modified. In several television productions focusing on traditional dance and music, the tradition is presented as a cultural legacy and often as a folkloric representation. Dance, like other forms of traditional art, is influenced by capitalism, which sometimes undermines creativity. As a result, both tradition and folklore lack thorough examination in their conceptual, theoretical, and methodological analysis regarding their traditional characteristics. This leads to the loss of their "performative (experiential, expressive, and communicative) contexts" and strengthens their entrapment in the propaganda of state power, and selective information about the connection between the present and the past while favoring the commercialization and homogenization of traditional art, promoting a globalized lifestyle (Poulakis, 2010).

#### b. The Greek paradigm

The show "Stin ygeia mas," during its long presence on both public and private television (2004-2021), included traditional music, traditional/folk songs, and traditional dance within the range of its thematic episodes, treating them as a triptych since the presence of one element inherently calls for the presence of the other two. Specifically, traditional music, a dynamic practice of folk culture, constitutes a multifaceted field characterized by fluidity. Within the show's context, it is formed where social forces intersect with media functions and public discourse. In the communicative context where meaning (musical, interpretive, kinetic-dance) is produced, processes are shaped under the influence of various factors. These factors involve the system of dissemination and promotion of musical works, the role of the recording industry, the conscious self-presentation of artists and how they shape their image, the direct or indirect political/institutional influence accompanying representations, the organization of performances and performance style, and finally, the forms of interaction between performers and audience (Oikonomou, 2020, p. 284).

A complex process, involving many participants in various roles, takes place from the conception of a topic to its production and the creation of the final product, which is the thematic episode on tradition. The show consistently maintains a stable structure over time. Each episode begins either with music or with an introduction by the host, who welcomes the attendees and viewers and introduces the topic. Following this, a brief greeting is extended to each guest seated at the main table, and a short dialogue takes place between the guest and the host. Often, the focus shifts to the musicians, with a clear priority given to the singers, as well as to the representatives of cultural associations and dance groups who support this television gathering. The official guests come from the artistic field, the political scene, and more broadly from what is referred to as the television network. The conversation, which varies from serious political discussions to lighthearted and humorous exchanges, is followed by music, singing, and dancing, which are open to the participation of all 'VIP' guests (those seated at the central table). This process continues for an average of three hours. The host coordinates the flow of conversation and the sequence of activities in the show. Many episodes are person-centered, inviting specific individuals who serve traditional music and singing, and folk culture, and who have contributed to it, 'leaving a legacy for future generations' as the presenter refers. Generally, tributes to singers such as Sofia Kollitiri and Chronis Aidonidis are structured around their discography, which is closely associated with their names and artistic careers, while the conversation revolves around them, primarily through the words of their collaborators (musicians).

#### c. Cultural representations

##### 1. The scenery

The production of the show did not always have a permanent studio. In the early episodes of 2004, the set resembled more of a 'koutouki' or tavern, with large barrels dominating the background behind the orchestra. Additionally, the tables were arranged in a semicircular layout, with a backdrop resembling a grocery store. The tables were covered with tablecloths and abundant goods and drinks, while the frame was completed by Greek flags hanging from the ceiling, reminiscent of an official celebration or national holiday. Specifically, in the episode aired on 21/11/2004, apart from the set design and the dimmed lighting as much as possible, the distinguishing sound is the 'klarinadiko' style, meaning the clarinet's intensity overpowers the other instruments. The orchestra also included electric and classical guitars, drums, and a keyboard. In this episode, the clarinet virtuoso was Panos Plastiras. Another interesting element is that the guests smoked freely in the studio, enhancing the sense of camaraderie and relaxation supported by the space, which had been transformed into a nightclub through the chosen scenography. More specifically, the theme, angle, and focus, along with the use of color and lighting and the editing style, contribute to the depiction and aesthetic realization of the content. This undoubtedly has extensive implications for dance, where the moving body, with its particular spatial, temporal,

and dynamic characteristics, is central to the aesthetics (Dodds, 2004). In the second studio of the 'Stin ygeia mas' production, the space is quite large, with a noticeable distance between the musicians and the tables. Behind the main table is a bar filled with bottles of drinks that serve as decoration, conveying the atmosphere of a cosmopolitan entertainment venue. Behind the musicians' stage, there is a painting by the folk artist Theophilos with a Byzantine theme, and on the right, there are several portraits of notable Greek musicians. Additionally, the stage is spacious enough to accommodate all the musicians without them overlapping in the wide shots. The shots in this studio are bright and clear, mostly with white lighting. The dance group invited sits at their own table to the left of the set, in a prominent position that indeed gives the feeling of an entertainment center where dancing will take place. Moreover, there is a strong presence of floral decorations, and generally, the set looks welcoming. The decoration brings to mind a house courtyard, a grocery store, a tavern, etc., creating a mix of references. There are many frames and photos of old Athens, and even Plaka is depicted on a large canvas, with a glass wall resembling a window into the city. Overall, the scenography in this studio is striking. From 2007 onwards, the studio and scenography are finalized, with appropriate decorations for special episodes (e.g., March 25th or Carnival).

## 2. The dance groups as a key element of the composition of the TVshow

The dance groups invited by the show usually serve as a living backdrop (tableau vivant) for any action taking place in the foreground (Schwartz, 2016). The participating dancers are numerous, filling the studio space. Additionally, distinct dance groups are invited to represent specific regions such as Pontus, Crete, Cyprus, and others. This ensures that in every segment where one of the dance groups performs in the foreground, there will always be dancers in the background and behind the main table of the guests, filling the frame. With few exceptions, they will be wearing their traditional costumes. When they are not dancing, the dancers either sit at the back tables, singing and clinking their glasses, enjoying their participation, or they remain still, either serious or smiling, depending on the conversation taking place in the foreground. Often, at the beginning of the show, the dancers stand in a semicircular arrangement on the set, wearing their (folk) costumes, so that the colors and diversity of the garments are clearly visible, as well as the numerical strength of the young people actively preserving tradition through dance. In the end positions of the table, usually at a distance from the presenter/ host, sit singers, musicians, and presidents of cultural associations. At the appropriate moment in the flow of the show, corresponding with the appearance of their dance group, they are given the opportunity to highlight their work and activities. Generally, episodes dedicated to tradition can be easily identified by viewers with a simple 'zapping,' even if the sound is muted because of the crowd wearing the traditional clothes. The informant 'S.S.' emphasizes regarding this topic: "Firstly, there is a huge mosaic of colors, just from the image you see, all this wealth arrayed in one shot, in one image, in one location. It is something incredible just as a visual experience for the viewer." The distinguishing feature is the element of the costume, which is very characteristic and immediately refers to the local traditions throughout Greece. Therefore, the composition of these episodes involves another parameter, that of the costume, with implications for the commercial aspect of this phenomenon. A very important factor in the success of the show and the overall aesthetic outcome is the direction. The informant 'G.P.' refers: *"Have you seen a TV control room? [...] 8 cameras, it has 8 buttons. The director must be sharp, moving from the general to the specific. When he doesn't get a good specific shot, a soloist's seat, a turn, a smile, a flirtation, something, he goes to the general shot. When he spots a good moment from someone or a very beautiful girl who can make a nice frame – the best frame is a beautiful girl, even in political shows, it doesn't matter if she's talking about politics. So, only a talented director can make this distinction. If the shots he takes are all general and a jumble, the show won't turn out well in the end. He has to be sharp, able to see all 8 screens and shout: 'On 8, on 2,' snap, snap! [...] The aesthetic outcome in most of Spyros's shows, I think, was good!"*

Additionally, the more complex the set and the composition of people in the studio, especially when there is the element of dance – which includes moving images and costumes, as well as a large crowd – the direction is the most crucial factor that visualizes all the individual elements and ties the final visual outcome together. The transformation of a live body into a screen body is mediated by the director. The various characteristics that a director perceives as central to the dance may differ radically from the vision or interpretation of another director, as the entire process of visual perception and interpretation is subjective and multifaceted. The television mechanism can construct spatial relationships that could not be recreated on stage between a dancing body and a viewer. Additionally, it can manipulate temporal factors through the process of "post-production" editing. Depending on the style of recording/filming, the viewer may feel a greater sense of participation in the event, as if seeing the events from the performer's perspective. Moreover, the idea of performance highlights an element of "stage constructiveness." This means that the individuals appearing on television are not simply natural/real but are actually constructed and framed by the television mechanism (Dodds, 2004).

The dance ensembles for the show "Stin ygeia mas" are very important of its success, as they provide the human resources needed for the composition of such an entertainment program. Additionally, cultural associations, which inherently represent cohesion and collective action, channel people into the production for their promotion and the showcasing of their work. The benefit to the production of this partnership with the clubs is to meet their needs at zero cost. Entertainment, as a thematic genre intertwined with the mode of entertainment mainly through music, singing, and dancing, is structured around a participatory framework (Nahachewsky, 1995) that gives the impression that all attendees are eating, drinking, singing, dancing, and ultimately celebrating together, bringing this festive atmosphere into the homes of the viewers. The large numbers of participants also carry symbolic significance, drawing parallels to folk culture and community practices such as local feasts, customs, and rituals in which the participation of all community members was almost mandatory.

### **3. Dance and music repertoire**

The concept of folklorism is associated with forms of folk culture that are aesthetically pleasing and impressive, delighting audiences both visually and audibly. These forms, although originating from folk culture, acquire new uses outside their original cultural context and cater to large and diverse audiences. This definition of folklorism perfectly aligns with the re-presentation of traditional elements through television, particularly in the context of entertainment programs, as in the case studied here. Additionally, a key characteristic of folklorism is the concept of performance, which is also a common feature of the television landscape. In this context, performance intertwines with the notion of repertoire. The repertoire involves the assembly of a body of dances (sometimes interconnected and sometimes not) that are intended for presentation/performance, out-of-context stage use, for teaching purposes, or any other "folkloric use" (Papakostas, 2013b, p. 722). When repertoire is linked to modern processes within the framework of folklorism, or when it is intended for (stage) presentation, it aligns with the viewing of the dance phenomenon and thus takes on a positivist and technical composition. According to Nitsiakos (2003), traditional dance is primarily linked to the concept of locality, with the community being its main exponent through a range of cultural codes. Locality exhibits mobility in space and time and is therefore not a static category but is constructed through dynamic processes. Papakostas (2013b) defines the concept of repertoire as "a rigid, static, closed in vitro construction where the movement itself, the form, and the structure of the dance are prioritized over the historical, social, and cultural context" (p. 722). This is especially true for presentations in performances, festivals, and events. The criteria for a dance to be included in a repertoire are its dynamic movement or the accompanying music and song, its adaptability and ability to change in order to meet stage requirements, and even the costume that can adorn it. These individual elements are capable of captivating and maintaining the audience's interest in a way that creates an exotic sensation resulting from contact with otherness. However, the otherness in question is an artificial and constructed version of reality that does not undermine national identity. The classification within the repertoire is a hegemonic process with clear boundaries and specific rules, aiming to construct and showcase a "dance geography," rather than an analytical construct that highlights dance as a cultural phenomenon (Papakostas, 2013b, p. 724).

#### **d. The procedure of production**

Culture is often associated with the development logic that focuses on the commercialization and promotion of media as a fundamental productive force, while simultaneously serving as a means of policy making. The set of cultural practices is perceived as an exportable product for consumption that can be capitalized on, in a process of transforming, first the practices and then the customs, values, beliefs, and perceptions of a group from a repository into a commodity offered for economic, political, and ideological exploitation. In this context, the concepts of authenticity and folklorism are connected to the mythologization of folk culture, its instrumentalization, and its ideological use, while performances and representations constitute aspects of an inherited tradition (Potiropoulos, 2022). The informant 'G.P.' suggests that a tribute show of this kind, which often balances on stereotypes, should use a different "perspective" each time to cover its themes, with the help of a scientific advisor and through systematic organization. This would highlight different special topics related to tradition in each episode. However, this is not typically the goal of an entertainment show. In contrast to long-term and systematic planning, which would be ideal, the production of the show tends to rely on last-minute solutions, considering that episodes are often set up just two or even one week before filming. The main reason for this is to ensure low costs. The budget is a constantly discussed concept in television channels and is, of course, inversely proportional to the commercial success that all tribute shows aim for. Medvedieva and Novak (2022) propose the term "McDonaldization" to describe the influence of fast-food corporate culture on television production processes. This trend is characterized by the creation of content designed to satisfy the viewer's needs as quickly as possible, with the aim of achieving maximum results. In this context, there is an attempt to standardize content to create a recognizable identity, while fostering a media culture (Hall, 1997).

Regarding the aesthetic setup of the show, 'G.P.' notes: "You need the crowd, and you need a soloist somewhere in the middle. But if you don't include the group with their traditional costumes to set the scene, it doesn't help the direction. You and I understand that this means nothing; the essence lies in the experiential. However, you can't make a show with only people who have the experience, you need the setting too!"

This last excerpt highlights the producers' rationale behind setting up the show. The message that needs to be created, communicated, and consumed by the audience must be clear and easily digestible, especially when the show targets a general audience. Therefore, the composition of the image, which naturally influences the content, has the ability to convey meanings directly. In this case, dancers in traditional costumes serve as a medium for decoding and translating the generated meaning. Simultaneously, with the way the show produces content in the specific episodes studied, the use and establishment of stereotypical forms become inevitable. For the overall composition of the television image, various semiotic codes with diverse social connotations are intertwined, creating a multi-modal and multi-semiotic type of "cultural text" (Fiske & Hartley, 2003).

### Epilogue

The visualization of the theme "tradition" leads to the systematic use of more easily digestible and clear visual references, such as the use of local costumes by the dance groups (Vrelli-Zachou & Macha-Bizoumi, 2016). The use of these costumes enhances the sense of cultural identities by visualizing a "traditionality" with a direct reference to materiality (Anttonen, 2018; Oikonomou, 2020). At the same time, this political/aesthetic choice takes on a positivist and technical composition within the framework of the folkloric phenomenon and the management of tradition in general (Kakampoura, 2023). More specifically, the show is structured based on two alternating sections: the 'speech section' and the 'action section.' In the first speech/dialogue section, which usually precedes, though not always, the decoding is facilitated through discourse, providing a general overview of the episode's theme. In the action section, musical performances and the participatory framework of the dance phenomenon are included, which are dominant elements for the overall composition of the show's content and aesthetic. Television can either activate certain representations or influence how identities are portrayed, dictate production practices, and ultimately shape consumer patterns and habits. In the specific research field of the show "Stin ygeia mas," the stage of regulation pertains more to cultural policy, which can make elements of folk culture visible and highlight various aspects of it, showcasing dynamic social practices such as traditional music, dance, and song through mediation and intermediation (Poulakis, 2010, 2015). The fragmentary management and presentation of culture and its transformation into a spectacle for consumption in this context are directly linked to commercialization and marketability as the primary goal of television productions (Papakostas, 2007a, 2013a). Dance, therefore, is connected to the spectacle in the sense of folklorism as it is presented as a result of regulation and management by authoritative forces through choices, adaptations, and modifications by individuals (production team) who are "outside" the folk tradition (Giurchescu, 1994).

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#### Author Profile

**Aristoula Toli** has just completed her Master's degree in the interdisciplinary "Dance Studies field" at the School of Physical Education and Sports Science of National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. She also holds an undergraduate degree from the same department, specializing in Greek traditional dance. Since 2010 she has been working as a dance instructor in cultural associations and dance groups, actively engaging in fieldwork research and organizing cultural projects.