THE SEMIOTIC CONSTRUCTION OF WOMEN'S IDENTITY. THE EXAMPLE OF POLISH COMMUNIST PRESS DISCOURSE

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Abstract. The aim of this paper is to examine the semiotic resources used in the representations of women as found in *Trybuna Ludu*, the official voice of the authorities and the communist party in Poland. The main focus of the analysis was to examine the level of agency, or its absence in the representations in question. The time period this paper takes interest in is that from 1948 to 1955, which marks a salient stage in Polish political history, namely that of the building of the Stalinist model of socialism. The analysis involved examining the images in terms of the following: representational meaning, interactive meaning, kinds of participants and agency and action. It also considered personalisation aspect of the images. The findings suggest a rather consistent, though collectivised rather than individualised, image of women as active actors, with the relationship established between the represented and the viewer being social, at times more impersonal, but consistently one of equality.

Keywords: semiotic resources, identity, representation(s), press discourse, Polish.

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to examine the semiotic resources used in the representations of women in the Polish communist press discourse. In particular, the paper explores the images found in *Trybuna Ludu*, the official voice of the authorities and the communist party in Poland, published from 1948 until the social and political changes of the year 1989. The time period this paper takes interest in is that from 1948 to 1955, which marks a salient stage in Polish political history, namely that of the building of the Stalinist model of socialism. Within this time period a representative year 1950 was chosen as capturing the essential processes involved in the building of the new system, when it was still very much a work in progress. The paper thus looks at the visual representations of women as found on all the pages of all the issues of the newspaper from the year 1950.

It is important at this stage to note this paper's understanding of one of the key terms, namely that of identity. In general, the paper subscribes to a discursive view of the term in question. More specifically, it uses the premises of one of the discourse-based frameworks, namely that of critical discourse analysis:

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> Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a Foucauldian-inspired, interdisciplinary branch of linguistics that attempts to explore the ideological workings of language in representing the world. CDA begins from the determinist premise that language is not a neutral or transparent medium that unproblematically reflects an objective reality. Rather, it is a form of ideological practice that mediates, influences and even constructs our experiences, identities and ways of viewing the world (Benwell and Stoke 2006: 44).

The work within the CDA approach, regardless of the particular methodology used, which indeed is very diverse, operates on the basis of two major assumptions: first, that analysis always focuses on the language of texts, paying close attention to their linguistic detail, and second, that the proper understanding of language under analysis is contingent on considering the social, cultural and historical contexts of its occurrence (Benwell and Stokoe 2006: 44). Identity work then is done in discourse or more specifically, it is in the grammar of language that identity is formed (Benwell and Stokoe 2006: 44). Aligning with such a view of identity, this paper sets out to explore the visual patterns, or what some practicioners call 'grammar' (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996, 2006) of representations of women, paying particular attention to the semiotic resources used and does so using the method of visual semiotics, the details of which are explained in the following section.

2. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The above-mentioned method of visual semiotics originated in Halliday's theory of social semiotics and systemic functional grammar. Halliday's inquiry (for example, 1976, 1978) led him to pose that language has evolved to serve, what he called, social "(meta)functions". He refers to the three kinds of semiotic work performed simultaneously in the following way (1976: 25):

> Since language serves a general 'ideational' function we are able to use it for all the specific purposes and situation types involving the communication of experience. Since it also serves a general 'interpersonal' function we are able to use it for all the specific forms of personal and social interaction. The third, 'textual', function is actually a prerequisite to the effective operation of the other two.

Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2006), whose set of ideas serves as the analytical framework in the present case study, have shown how the functions in question are realized visually in any given image, be it a newspaper front page, a painting or a single photograph (Jewitt 2009: 29). Following Halliday, they extend his idea of the three "(meta)functions" to images and differentiate between the representational, interactive and compositional meaning.

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2.2. Representational meaning

Representational meaning is about the depicted participants related to one another through visual syntactic patterns. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2006) differentiate between two kinds of pattern, namely narrative and conceptual patterns. The former represent participants in terms of actions and events and are characterised by the presence of a vector (Jewitt and Oyama 2001: 141–143). The vector then specifies what kind of "doing" or "happening" takes place in a given image and the kind of relation between the represented. A narrative structure which has both the "actor", i.e. the participant from which the vector emanates, and a "goal", i.e. the participant at which the action is directed, is a "transactive" action, while the "non-transactive" structure contains only an actor and a vector. "Reaction" on the other hand, is created by the "eyeline", a special kind of vector. Similarly to actions, reactions can be "transactive", i.e. representing the person looking and the object of their gaze, and "non-transactive", i.e. representing only the person that is looking. Conceptual structures, in contrast to narrative ones, do not contain vectors (Jewitt and Oyama 2001: 143–145). They represent participants "(…) in terms of their more generalized and more or less stable and timeless essence, in terms of class, or structure or meaning" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 79). There are three major kinds of conceptual structures. Classification structures bring participants together on one space to show that they share certain characteristics or belong to the same category. Symbolic structures, in turn, are those where the meaning or identity of one participant, the "carrier", is established by another participant, the "symbolic attribute". The latter has one or more of the following features: it is endowed with greater degree of salience, it is pointed out by means of a gesture, or is conventionally associated with symbolic values. Analytical structures, on the other hand, relate participants in terms of a part-whole structure. Two participants are present in analytical structures, namely the "carrier" (the whole) and the "possessive attributes" (the parts). The inclusion or exclusion then of certain possessive attributes defines the whole in analytical structures.

2.3. Interactive meaning

Interactive meaning is about the relationship between images and the viewer. The relationship in question can take a number of forms, all of them depending on the combination of the three factors: contact, distance and point of view. "Contact" can be realised as either the "demand" or "offer". The former occurs when the represented requires something of the viewer, while an "offer" means no contact is established as the viewer observes the participants in a detached way. With respect to "distance", which is the "size of frame" of shots (Jewitt and Oyama 2001: 146), the basic distinction is made between a "close-up" suggesting an intimate/personal relationship, a "medium shot" which suggests social relationship and a "long shot" suggesting an impersonal relationship between the viewer and the represented. The third factor, "point of view", can be realised through the use of vertical and

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horizontal angles, where a low angle suggests power over the viewer, eye-level suggests equality between the viewer and the represented, while a high angle suggests the power of the viewer over the represented. The last aspect of interactive meaning has to do with modality, i.e. the reality value of the represented. Depending on the definition of modality applied such as scientific or naturalistic modality for example, a given image is deemed to be more or less true or real.

2.4. Compositional meaning

Compositional meaning involves the three signifying systems realised simultaneously in any given image. The first system, information value is about the positioning of elements on the page. Depending on their placement, the elements are then endowed with a different value. Salience, the second signifying system is realised by making some elements on a page/in an image more visible than others. An element can be made to stand out due to a number of factors, such as size or colour contrast, for example. Finally, framing is about connecting or disconnecting elements. The former can be achieved by the absence of framelines or empty space between elements, while the latter is achieved by the presence of the features in question.

The dimensions of visual analysis presented above constitute an inventory of semiotic resources, each characterised by a certain meaning potential, which as such are used to represent social actors. Apart from the representational and interactive meaning considered in the present analysis, there are two more meaning potentials taken into account, namely these concerning the kinds of represented participants and the agency and action in images. The former has to do with visual individualisation or visual collectivisation, i.e. it concerns the fact whether the participants in an image are represented as individuals or groups. Regardless of whether participants are "individualised" or "collectivised" visually, they can also be categorised either in terms of cultural or biological attributes or a combination of the two (Machin 2007: 119–121). Depictions of the participants in an image can be also generic, which is done through stereotypes, or specific. Such individual or stereotyped portrayals are of course a matter of degree. Finally, exclusion of certain categories of people is as crucial as representation of others, especially when the reasons for such non-representation are to be considered. The last semiotic resource for depicting kinds of participants has to do with agency and action in images. Machin (2007: 123–127) demonstrates how Halliday's categories for analysing action and transaction in language can be used in images. Following Halliday, Machin (2007: 124) examines visual representation of the following processes: material, behavioural, mental, verbal, relational, and existential. Examining images using Halliday's process types as an analytical tool, claims Machin (2007: 124) can be revealing when it comes to the level of agency or its absence (for more detailed discussion of process types see for example, Halliday and Matthiessen 2004 or Eggins 2004).

One point regarding the above discussion of framework needs to be clarified at this stage. Each of the semiotic resources discussed, such as "contact" or "point

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of view" is characterised by a certain meaning potential. Section on the analysis results will deal with the description of the meaning potential and its implications with regard to the data under analysis. One only needs to mention that it is impossible to determine the meaning potential of a given resource exactly (Jewitt and Oyama 2001: 135). It is however, possible to say what kinds of meaning a given resource allows us to convey. Moreover, the relations established by an image are symbolic and not real, which in consequence may give rise to ideological meaning. When discussing the multimodal principles of layout, Kress and van Leeuwen (1998: 190) make the point in question:

> Such structures are ideological in the sense that they may not correspond to what is the case either for the producer or for the consumer of the layout. The important point is that the information is presented *as though* it had that status or value for the reader, and that readers have to read it within that structure initially, even if they then produce a reading which rejects it.

Having discussed the various dimensions of visual analysis, let us now turn to the actual research question, the procedure as well as the analysis results.

3. RESEARCH QUESTION AND PROCEDURE FOR THE ANALYSIS

The idea for the present case study originated during the work on a bigger project examining political transformation in Poland (Łazuka-Dolan 2012). The project looked at a number of crucial periods in the Polish political history between 1944 and 1991. A social semiotic analysis of the three different newspapers (*Trybuna Ludu, Trybuna* and *Wyborcza*) was then undertaken within the specified time period. The first of the periods under analysis, namely the year 1950, revealed prevalence of images of people involved in work as found in the already mentioned *Trybuna Ludu*. What was also striking was the fact that some of the images in question appeared to show women as active participants in what, in a lot of cases, seemed to be the new social roles. Such "active" portrayals have already been confirmed in the existing research (see for example Bucher's 2000 study on the media coverage of women in the former Soviet Union, Armstrong's 2001 study on the portrayals of women in the Polish press in 1978, 1988 and 1998, or Kaneva and Ibroscheva's 2011 study of visual representations of women in the Bulgarian communist press). As such those images contributed to the mobilising function of the media whereby their [the media's] "(…) task was to deliver enthusiastic support for the construction of socialism and the defence of the motherland" (Sparks and Reading 1998: 43). The present case study then decided to examine the representations of women as found in the Polish communist press more closely in what were the formative years of the new political system in Poland. The images

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and what they represented were undoubtedly part of the official propaganda during the period of the building of the Stalinist model of socialism (1948 – 1955), of which 1950 was chosen as the representative year in the present analysis. Kaneva and Ibroscheva (2011: 3) in their above-mentioned study of visual representations of women in the Bulgarian communist press point to "Soviet photojournalism", whose purpose was to "document *and* envision Soviet society" (David Shneer 2008: 9 cited in Kaneva and Ibroscheva 2011: 3). The images under analysis in the present study were no doubt examples of such a particular journalistic style. The style in question constituted part of a greater media apparatus whose "(…) potential as an ideological instrument" (McNair 1991: 44) had long been recognised and on whose exploitation "(…) the survival of the Soviet state depended" (Barghoorn 1964: 4 cited in McNair 1991: 44). In general then, the aim of the study was to examine how women were discursively represented and how their resulting representations were closely connected with the ideology at the time which defined women's identities in such a way as to accommodate them within the existing political status quo. More specifically, the study aimed at examining a range of semiotic resources used in the representations of women, while the main focus of the analysis was to examine the actual level of agency, or its absence. The resulting analysis offers an insight into the official propositions on the role and place of women in the Polish society at the time when the building of the new political system was still in progress.

Regarding the analysis itself, one considered the images featuring women as found on the pages of all the issues (1.01.–30.12.1950) of the newspaper from the year 1950. In total 150 images were analysed. They were divided into three groups: (1) those presenting women as individuals or where an individual woman was the main character in an image by making her, for example, the most salient part of the image, (2) those presenting women in groups, and (3) those presenting both a woman/women and a man/men in a single image. Each group was then analysed in terms of the following: representational meaning, interactive meaning, kinds of participants and agency and action. The analysis also considered whether or not the represented women were personalised, i.e. whether they were identified with their name or surname or both in the accompanying captions, if there were any. Moreover, one also examined whether the verbal part of the image corresponded with what the visual presented or whether the two levels of meaning contradicted each other, for example. The above-mentioned compositional meaning was not considered in the present analysis. A remark needs also to be made concerning the categorising of the images as representing a particular type of structure. When examining a variety of images, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006: 107–109) speak of embedding, whereby a single picture can contain more than one structure. Which of them are major and minor is then "(…) determined by the relative size and conspicuousness of the elements" (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006: 107). In the course of the present analysis a small number of images revealed such a multidimensional structure. In such cases, it was the more salient structure which decided about the final category.

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For example, in an image where a vector was present but where a sense of the image being posed prevailed, the category ascribed was that of "conceptual". Finally, regarding the mixed gender images, the above-mentioned dimensions were considered only with respect to the representations of women. The following section gathers the semiotic resources identified in the course of the analysis and comments on their meaning potential.

4. ANALYSIS RESULTS

The present section starts with the presentation of findings. Tables 1–3 below contain the findings in question for the three groups of images. What follows is a short commentary on the semiotic resources identified.

Individual images	TOTAL 60
Narrative structures (50)	Conceptual structures (10)
Material (41) (*39) Behavioural (8) (*8) Mental (1) (*1)	Existential (9) (*9) Behavioural (1) (*1)
Interactive meaning – semiotic resources (most frequent categories)	
Offer (46) Medium (33), Long (14) Eye level (37)	Offer (8) Close (5), Medium (4) Eye level (8)

Table 1
Images of individual women, (*) = 'personalised' images

Group images	TOTAL 47
Narrative structures (43)	Conceptual structures (4)
Material (33) (*6) Material/behavioural (1) (*0) Behavioural (7) (*3) Verbal (1) (*1) Mental (1) (*0)	Relational (3) (*1) Existential (1) (*0)
Interactive meaning – semiotic resources (most frequent categories)	
Offer (40) Long (16), Medium (13) Eye level (18), High (10)	Offer (2), Demand (2) Medium (2) Eye level (3)

Table 2
Group images, (*) = 'personalised' images

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Mixed images	TOTAL 43
Narrative structures (36)	Conceptual structures (7)
Material (19) (*12) Verbal (6) (*5) Behavioural (9) (*5) Mental (2) (*2)	Existential (6) (*4) Behavioural (1) (*1)
Interactive meaning – semiotic resources (most frequent categories)	
Offer (25) Medium (13), Long (12) Eye level (26)	Demand (3) Long (4) Eye level (6)

Table 3
Mixed images, (*) = 'personalised' images



Image 1 *Trybuna Ludu* 29.07.1950



Image 2 *Trybuna Ludu* 6.03.1950

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Warszawska matka kładzie podpis pod apelem

Image 3 *Trybuna Ludu* 18.11.1950



Robotnica — inspektorem kontroli technicznej

Tow. Starczewska, czołowa prządka z PZPW nr 6 w Łodzi po otrzymaniu awansu na instruktora, mianowana została obecnie inspektorem kontroli technicznej. Na zdjęciu tow. Starczewska przy pracy Foto AR

Image 4 *Trybuna Ludu* 16.06.1950



Żniwa rozpoczęte

Image 5 *Trybuna Ludu* 8.07.1950



Posłanka na sejm Ludowej Korei

Czoj Sung-hi, słynna tancerka koreańska, posłanka na Sejm Koreańskiej Republiki Demokratycznej (Korea Północna) z ramienia Komunistycznej Partii Korei

Image 6 *Trybuna Ludu* 12.07.1950

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Image 7 *Trybuna Ludu* 29.12.1950



Image 8 *Trybuna Ludu* 15.06.1950



Image 9 *Trybuna Ludu* 9.06.1950



Image 10 *Trybuna Ludu* 6.08.1950

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Zakłady im. 22 Lipca w Warszawie

Warszawska fabryka cukrów i czekolady „Wedel" została przemianowana w dniu Święta Odrodzenia na Zakłady im. 22 Lipca. Na zdjęciu pracownice pakowalni Zakładów przy pracy
Foto WAF

Image 11 *Trybuna Ludu* 28.07.1950


Produkcja penicyliny w Czechosłowacji

Czechosłowacja jest jednym z niewielu krajów, które własną produkcją pokrywają zapotrzebowanie na penicylinę. Plan na rok 1950 przewiduje trzykrotne podniesienie produkcji penicyliny w stosunku do roku 1949. Nadwyżka przeznaczona będzie na eksport, przede wszystkim do krajów demokracji ludowej. Na zdjęciu badanie biologiczne wyprodukowanej penicyliny.
Foto Czechopres

Image 12 *Trybuna Ludu* 19.02.1950


Świetlica w Białym Dunajcu

Czytelnia w świetlicy w Białym Dunajcu, uruchomiona w domu, w którym mieszkał Lenin
Foto AR

Image 13 *Trybuna Ludu* 3.01.1950


Przydział mieszkań dla robotników stolicy

W dniu 31 grudnia ub. r. odbyło się w gmachu Centralnej Rady Związków Zawodowych w Warszawie wręczenie przydziałów mieszkaniowych 73 przodownikom i racjonalizatorom stołecznych zakładów pracy. Na fotografii moment wręczenia przydziału mieszkaniowego przodownicy pracy Stanisławie Adamczyk. Przydział wręcza przewodniczący CRZZ tow. A. Zawadzki
Foto AR

Image 14 *Trybuna Ludu* 26.01.1950

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4.1 Images of individual women

The analysis of representational meaning, revealed an overwhelming predominance of narrative structures, of which the majority were material "transactive" processes. In all of them also, women were "actors", actively engaging in actions resulting in a concrete outcome, such as operating heavy building machinery (see Image 1 'The first woman – operator of the heavy building machinery') or driving a vehicle (see Image 2 'Woman – tram driver'). With regard to interactive meaning in narrative structures, the majority of participants were presented in a way that allowed the viewer to observe them from the side (see Image 1 and 2). The semiotic resource of "distance" suggests, on the whole, a social relationship or, though in a smaller number of cases, even an impersonal kind of relation, while presenting most women participants at eye-level implies equality between them and the viewer (see Image 3). Regarding personalisation, almost all participants were identified with both their name and surname. Their personal details would often be accompanied by the mention of their profession and/or position they held in a company/plant. They would also be often addressed as 'comrade' (see Image 4 'Female worker – an inspector of technical control'). There were only two exceptions to that tendency and they are worth noting here. The former (see Image 3) generically refers to the represented woman as 'Warsaw mother', making her an example of a general category. The latter (see Image 5) presenting a woman carrying a sheaf of crop, leaves her unidentified, while the accompanying headline 'The harvest has begun', makes the woman almost symbolically stand for the effort of gathering the harvest. Though very few, conceptual structures are also worth mentioning, especially those taken at close range, which were the only close-up images identified in the group. Interestingly, all 5 of such images presented persons of merit representing both Poland and other allied countries. Image 6 featuring 'Czoj Sung-hi, a famous dancer, a member of Parliament of the Korean Democratic Republic' is a case in question. It is the combination of a close-up and eye-level that makes the images of, otherwise serious personas, more approachable and down to earth, even though we are invited to observe them in a detached manner. Finally, one more image seems worth mentioning, namely one featuring a long shot of Raymonde Dien (see Image 7), described in the heading above as a 'French heroine'. The image has got the cartoon-like character and as such is the only image in the data set characterised by a low degree of modality. The choice of modality adds, it might be said, to the symbolic, almost iconic meaning of the represented participant.

4.2. Group images

The analysis of representational meaning reveals similar patterns to those found in the previous group analysed, whereby one notes an overwhelming

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prevalence of narrative structures. Similarly also, images of women in groups present them as active agents involved in, what in the majority of cases, were material "transactive" actions, such as working in the field (see Image 8 'Work at the beetroot plantation') or working in a chemical laboratory (see Image 9 'New health care staff'). The patterns of interactive meaning differ in some respects, though. The semiotic resource of contact remains the same, allowing no contact to be established between the viewer and the represented. In terms of distance, the data presents a more balanced picture whereby the images suggest both an impersonal and a social relationship, with the former slightly outnumbering the latter. Regarding the third factor, that of point of view, a considerable number of images introduces a relationship of equality between the viewer and the represented. However, a number of images was also noted which suggested the power of the viewer over the represented participants (see Image 10 'Fruit and vegetable processing plant'). Compared with the previous group of images under analysis, a change is also noted regarding personalisation, whereby in the majority of images here the represented were unidentified with either their name or surname. This non-personalisation took two forms: the participants were referred to as belonging to a certain group, hence emphasizing their categorisation and collectivisation. Image 11 referring to the represented as 'workers of the packing section at the Plant' is a case in question. A more extreme case of non-personalisation is exemplified in Image 12 where the caption describes what is in the image not in terms of its participants but only the activity they are engaged in: 'In photo biological examination of the manufactured penicillin'. Thus, the human participants in the image, though represented visually, are excluded from it when it comes to its verbal description. The few images which personalised the represented human participants included those representing either women of some merit, contributing to the country's growth, or women in 'unusual' professions so far reserved for men, or involved/taking part in innovative projects, such as a painting course for female construction workers or reading and writing courses for women. Finally, the obvious collectivisation in all the images representing women in groups is further emphasized through the participants' wearing the same clothes, performing the same actions and/or striking the same poses (see for example Images 8, 9, and 10).

4.3. Mixed images

The least frequent, mixed gender images, display the same pattern as the other two groups with regard to representational meaning, whereby narrative structures far outnumber conceptual ones. Among narrative structures, material processes were again the most frequent. However, the roles played by women in these processes differed slightly, whereby in 6 cases out of 19 women were assigned the

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role of a Recipient, i.e. 'the one to whom something is given' (Eggins 2004: 220). In such cases women were portrayed as receiving various benefits from the state, for example, a bankbook, an award or were allocated an apartment (see Image 13 'Allocation of apartments for the workers of the capital'). The remaining material processes featured women as active agents. One noted also a significant, in relation to material processes, number of behavioural processes, in which women and men were portrayed as acting without a material outcome, standing, sitting or reading (see Image 14 'Community club in Biały Dunajec', for example). In terms of interactive meaning, mixed images also display essentially the same patterns as the other two groups, with participants establishing no contact with the viewer, a social or an impersonal relationship (distance) but one also of equality (eye level). Images displaying conceptual structures, though insignificant in number, contained 4 examples of "demand", whereby the symbolic contact was established with the following: the female USSR ice-skating champions and the referee of the games, the two scientists Mr and Mrs Curie, the delegates for the congress of the Bulgarian Social Democratic Party and the first Polish woman engine driver. These were the only "demand" images identified in the data set.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The present paper looked at the representations of women as found in the Polish communist press discourse. It examined these representations in terms of representational and interactive meaning, kinds of participants and agency. It also considered the personalisation aspect of the representations in question. As the analysis results demonstrate, the overall image of women that emerges is generally a very consistent one, whereby women are presented as indeed active actors involved in activities which produce a concrete outcome on the world. This agency has not only been apparent but confirmed in the kind of processes (material "transactive") identified and verbally expressed in the accompanying captions and how the two layers of meaning, i.e. visual and verbal, corresponded as opposed to contradicting each other. The represented women did not (except for some minor cases) address the viewer directly, keeping him at a distance rather, even though the relationship was, on the whole, that of equality. The relationship in question did only become closer/more intimate in cases where the images represented individuals or groups of merit at a close range or in the form of a "demand". Numerically however, such cases constituted exceptions from the general rule. To answer the specific research question, the image of women is that of active agents relating to the viewer in a rather impersonal manner. The finding then confirms what the above-mentioned Kaneva and Ibroscheva's study of the Bulgarian

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communist press pointed to, namely, the "symbolic glorification of the socialist woman-worker-activist" (2011: 14), which as such was a very restricted model, solely bound to the public sphere, that women could use while constructing their self-identity (2011: 14). At the same time, the general portrayal of women that emerges is that which presents them as examples of a more general type. This is despite the frequent cases of individual reference in the case of images presenting women as individuals, and which was further emphasized by non-personalized portrayals of women in groups. Visual categorization achieved through presenting women as wearing similar clothes, being engaged in similar activities, etc., be it in the case of individual or group images, seems, on the whole, to be more salient than the concrete individual reference. As such the images matched the ideological world created and represented by the newspaper, which saw an individual and their interest as those which could and should be sacrificed to those of the state. It was the work of the many towards a greater good of the country and a new system that was being built at the time that seemed to transcend their individuality.

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