MEDIA QUASI-RITUALS OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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Abstract

Most research on mass media, multimedia, even new media, has been moving away from the paradigm that reduced them to a communicative function. Having a theoretic starting point in Van Gennep's analysis[i] *and the points of view of Birmingham group*[ii]*, the attention has shifted to more actors and contexts creating different meanings in the forums/fora. Thus, a possible way of enhancing the content of media concept is to associate it to quasi-rituals/daily media routine (observing how media/multimedia/new media influence human practices, program, habits, etc.) and to the contexts in which various ceremonies, forms of worship or mere rituals are mediatezed. The latter get transformed when conveyed through media and we comment upon this aspect. Due to this approach and further studies, the main benefit might be an insight into how creativity and constraint are combined inside this rather new cultural frame. Everyday use of the media can be seen as an integral part of a kind of magic spell coming over the world. One of the recurrent dilemmas in media studies refers to the extent in which media may determine and manipulate the audience. Is there any more "freedom" in the process of interpreting media messages? The powerful and subtle mediatic manipulation and the viewers' unconditioned „faith" collaborate and create daily addiction. By linking freedom to constraint, the approach provides an appropriate framework to tackle the question of how contemporary media are involved in the social construction of virtual realities, communities, and identities.*

Keywords: quasi-ritual, media, culture, magic, virtual.

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[i] Van Gennep's theory (1908) is presented in details in Bell's interesting contribution.

[ii] *Cf.* Rothenbuhler, E., *Ritual Communication. From Everyday Conversation to Mediated Ceremony.* London, New Delhi: Sage publications, 1998.

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This semi-descriptive essay highlights and comments upon three types of media-communication involving rituals as an umbrella-term: media-consumption as a quasi-ritual or a daily habit; media rituals determined by political, economical or social contexts; true rituals mediated and considered as the reference of the message. Having as background the theoretical perspective of Birmingham group and several new approaches (Podnar; 2001), we present briefly these three categories of ritualization and their particular implications generally and especially in Romania. We use the word "ritual" as tool-term discussing its recent connotations and social or cultural implications. This word is more an attenuated metaphor – *Cf.* gr. *maligmata* (Dragomirescu; 1975, 155). The ritual of the contemporary human being is no longer associated either to tradition or "real important and significant society events" (Marcu, Maneca; 1978, 943). Among many others, Mircea Eliade specified that a ritual needs a special space, a special time outside the usual one in which new norms and roles are established. When they refer to strange, unreal phenomena, rituals have also a kind of limbo in which no meaning can be conceived. But after all these phases, the real time and space are reintroduced due to a coherent pattern with precise social statues. Many may say that an old configuration has been disguised into a new one for a period of time (Eliade: 1991, 127). Contemporary behavior can be considered as ritualistic as far as it is a practical unsacred act which lacks the ludic form (Kernbach; 1995, 541). This statement is considerable diverse from Eliade's point of view regarding the myths of the modern world (Eliade; 1991, 127-140). Nowadays myth is no longer the groundwork of the spiritual life and it does not express absolute truths. It does not render an epiphany, an extra-mundane experience or a sacred happening.

The contemporary media consumption has developed quasi-rituals implying frivolous disclosures, soapy current tragedies, and exaggerated dramas of men of renown. The intellectual impoverishment has limited the freedom of the audience. It has the illusion of witnessing a real event. Rare or recurrent happenings gather billions of viewers under the spell of the screen or display-units. We can illustrate by: terrorist attacks (USA-11th September 2001, London-2005, Moscow-2010, etc.), sex scandals (President Bill Clinton, the president of the International Monetary Fund, the Secretary of State Colin Powell, Nicholas Sarkozy, etc.), the weddings, divorces, funerals, or child births of celebrities (Lady Di, Michael Jackson, Liz Taylor, Jobs Steve, Kate Middleton, etc.), disasters (Fukushima, Tokaimura, etc.), catastrophic predictions (alignments of planets, eclipses, nearness of an asteroid, the end of the world, etc.). The effort to provide a basis for legitimating ephemeral authorities, power positions, training positions is obvious. This social strategy has shaped the belief in perpetuation which implies legitimization as well.

Mainly the Western societies have developed the media-related rituals and they even try to embosom them in a larger process, that of bewitching the world. "The illusion technique" (Lipovetsky; 2008, 49) develops addiction and social perceptions which assert beliefs, interests, fervors that coin quasi-models, quasi-heroes/heroines, etc. These have nothing in common with the originator model creating paradigms in antiquity. The real myth or ritual created models for the whole society – "As Gide noticed very well, Goethe was completely aware of his mission to achieve an exemplary life for the rest of humanity. In everything he did, he tried to create an example. In turn, in his existence, he imitates the

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behavior of god and mythical heroes, unless it was impossible to repeat their lives" (Eliade; 1991, 134-135).

The actual audience is educated in the spirit of cine-narcissism being encouraged to watch, to film, to record, to identify itself with the screen-people because they lack real heroism, fairness, creativity, art, conceit, wonders, etc. Instead of the Great Time, *illo tempore*, the contemporary society consists of epigones bringing into existence minor texts in a new wooden language or keeps silence in an "intellectual vacuum" which enhances the vulnerability to manipulation (Huizinga; 1998, 66).

Thus, nowadays, the ritual is a daily habit of the modern man brought to grips with spiritual, emotional and axiological inanity. Media-consumption has become an explicit routine. It expresses one of the many clichés of the individuals' day-to-day life. It consists of watching the news, a favorite movie, TV serials, divertissement shows, sport events, etc. In this way, the little spare time is wasted because this kind of facile communication between virtual communities. The ignorance is developing and suffocates the human spirit which is no longer able to understand the valuable works, the great philosophical themes and spiritual values. The mind is asphyxiated by a "totalitarian kitsch" (De Koninck; 2009, 60), affection is debased and the individual's freedom is derided. "Human subjectivity can develop only to the extent that various materials come to arouse, to stimulate and to concern. In the absence of objects that may determine the beginning of inner emotions, the most archaic excitements and representations will come into prominence and will cohabite with a very sophisticated performance" (Anatrella, T. *apud* De Koninck; 2001, 59). The daily media-consumption has a possible positive influence when it is a way to keep in touch with the national civilization and language. It discloses feelings, thoughts, points of view upon value systems, ways to impose their own identity for Romanian people living abroad.

First, the latter appeared and influenced the life-style in Western countries; nowadays, they exist in Eastern Europe, in Romania too. We insist upon Romanian ritual tradition and contemporary spoiled use. For both cases, the examples are significant and we comment upon them trying to achieve a parallel perspective highlighting similarities and differences. This attempt is necessary because mass media, multimedia and new media are always proposed as a cultural framework, but too often they are far from it. In many occasions, they harm tradition and civilization affecting mentally the population. The freedom and the constraint of thoughts and of interpretation are in a precarious balance that favors manipulation.

Contemporary society examines and interrogates the present in order to find more consistent arguments and reasons for offering answers to the questions regarding the current relations between society, individuals and tradition. After the frenzied seventh decade of the twentieth century, the Western world and particularly the intellectuals stood against the invasion of consumer-goods. The further "consumer society" (Baudrillard; 2005), established and strengthened meanwhile, is found in the same rational assessment of the conditions, forms of existence, and extent to which one may talk about a culturally traditional space or only a consumption-space under the influence of multimedia and new media. The semantic field denouncing the "cultural reverse"[3] encompasses more words, phrases or collocations

[3] Habermas, J., *Storia e critica dell'opinione publica*, Laterteza, Bari *apud* Sartori, G., *Homo videns. Imbecilizarea prin televiziune şi post-gândirea*, traducere de M. Elin, Bucureşti, Humanitas, p. 11.

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being far-away of their basic meaning and acquiring a pejorative value: sub-culture[4], mass culture, manea[5], glamour, red carpet, show, model, starlet, to rate, freelancer, analyst, host show, wow-biz, can-can, fan, season, etc.

We wish to handle an interesting aspect from our point of view. Although the "video-child" (Sartori; 2005, 10) hardly speaks and reads, in the particular occasions, a small part of the audience enjoys (high) cultural or intellectual quality shows/broadcastings (e.g. H.R. Patapievici, G. Liiceanu, A. Pleşu, D. C. Mihăilescu, Eugenia Vodă, C. Stefănescu, P. Magdin), the new, original meanings, perspectives, theories, interview or discussing proceedings, which are obvious different, sometimes standing for as form of resistance to the general, actually preferred patterns, serve to socially embed these individuals (a kind of adjustment like a Procustean bed) and to bring them forward as items of the same paradigm of media guru. This idea existed also in the outlook imposed by Birmingham School and it is recurrent in other more recent theories (Kellner; 1995, 41). In fact, we deal with a strange combination of self-appropriation and manipulation. Usually, the ritual performer is not aware of the fact that the symbols, structures, models, anti-models, strategies, foretokens, paths for interpretation, etc. are not simply given, but also built as rituals through his/her very activity. This does not mean that the people conveying the message do not know what they are doing, but certain blindness exists in the way in which rituals develop themselves. The meanings and values included in rituals have been there for a long period of time. Many of them are creating during the practice and the process is blind to its own role. There are many theoretical attempts to define the contemporary practice of ritualization and other social activities in a way similar to J. Austen's speech acts or performatives (Turner; 1989, Bell; 1992). A specific quote might be eloquent: "In a very preliminary sense, ritualization is a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian activities" (Bell; 1992, 74). So, rituals occur apart of common schedules and ordinary spaces.

In Romania, another aspect must be considered as well. Due to low quality media productions, impregnated with vulgar, trivial or fashionable subjects, this kind of themes outlast even in a loop of time of an older, more important ritual. For example, through Holy Week and Enlightened Week (before and after Easter), during Christmas time, insignificant actions of the so called VIPs have a good grip on the audience. We do not refer only to tabloids and tittle-tattle shows; the whole media environment is dominated by these characters over-imposed as a kind of model, and who are enacting stupid roles to the injury of the true ritual. The daily quasi-ritual blurs the classical ritual. The modern, profane ritual put the traditional, religious one into the shade. Ordinary facts contribute to accentuate a fake, flat framework. The resolution is superficial and weak. This ridicule effort to fit new narratives is of no value; it depicts a mono-vocal, smooth world, allowing very few or no interpretations on behalf of the audience.

Therefore, we wish to emphasize the more and more aggressive and frequent presence of a different kind of ritual in which the audience, although may detect intention, creativity, social action, and interplay, even a recall of the initiatory state of chaos, of the golden age, of

[4] We refer to the meaning "obscure culture".
[5] A specific kind of song found in gypsy-community.

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the characteristics of rituals (fixity, formalism, balance, reliability, symbolic repetitions, etc. - Rothenbuhler; 1998). But it cannot be asserted that one or another strategy per se delivers a ritual. It might be either a common, repetitive one (e.g. watching the favorite series on Sunday evening) or an infrequent one (e.g. a royal wedding), a cyclic one (world/European championships); it might be either something watched with intense, emotional involvement (e.g. documentary, movie, concert or interview of high quality standard) or watched with detachment, shallowness (e.g. commercials, daily political debates, incidents, facts of life, etc.).

But as we have stated from the very beginning, we focus more on events ritualized through mediation in comparison to those which are usually considered traditional rituals reaching our knowledge via media. Regarding the latter, in our opinion, the value, quality and significance of a live performance of a ritual is altered by broadcasting. For example, an Easter church service from Bucovina is congenial for a foreigner, even for a native, but it is only a large, merry range of images appealing for attention. Instead of a very profound and subtle emotional, cogitative activity, media offers a mundane activity with a lower status. The intention was to magnify the authenticity and to develop the performance into a more special one, but the result is a trivialized disclosure. "Pressée par la multiplication des images, la nouveauté technologique et la demande culturelle des sociétés occidentaux, la sémiotique doit néanmoins résister à l'ivresse des images et garantir le sérieux heuristique procure par la réflexion théorique" (Hénault, Beyaert; 2004, 5). The consequence which cannot be denied is that a lot of people receive this "message" as a ritualized one, due to their daily routine of observing every media detail, and they confound an activity exposed to the eye of a camera to a real, sacral one, because they are under the spell of the presence of media at mediocre or normal activities. It is not through what is presented, but "through what is implied that media are most effective in conveying a certain picture of reality or a certain set of values" (Tonejc; 2001, 137).

We disagree with those considering that media and all the ritualized activities related to it are acting as tools for approaching the world in an effective way. "The world view and lifestyle were legitimated and authenticated as ideal models of the world. This is the reason for seeing them as a model of living in the world." (Alexander; 1997, 201) We appreciate that the present television and, partly, its worthy rival, the internet, express only a positive or negative evaluation due to similar characteristics discovered at other people when we come across the screen/monitor deluding common opinions, emotional experiences and interpretations. This is an affective evaluation. The attraction grows directly proportional to the degree of similarity (Chelcea; 2002, 77). Maybe only the positive prefigured relationship might be considered a type of attraction close to that wielded by rituals. It is true that media have become the main *locus* of building identities and virtual communities. The audience seems to be coherent. In our opinion, this is agreeable only for domestic relationships, peer-groups talks, but not for all individual standpoints which is the case of genuine rituals.

All well-known rituals, having deep mythical roots, that of the cyclic alternation of seasons for example, takes place disregarding media presentation, political regimes, poets or commentators' imagination and words. Because of so many trivial incidents presented as events and ritualized via media, one of the principal and the most important planet happenings (e.g. renewal of spring) is thrown into the shade. Another example may be found

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in Eliade's work; Mircea Eliade's concept (*anakuklesis* – Eliade; 1992, 108) refers also to an eternal coming back of something that existed once upon a time. According to this theory, recurrently, a new Socrates appears, willing to sacrifice himself for the Truth. Cyclic, anachronic knights fight for valuable causes, proving that the Christian dimension is reiterative. It is not at random that Saint Augustin assiduously wrote about a Jesus Chris existing in each of us. The ritualized event via media is kind of a new zoomorphism or totemism; the deity is displayed and the whole variety becomes hallowed, being impossible to distinguish between the holy animal and the profane one (Arhip; 2012).[6]

On the other hand, the ritualized activities or events enter different reception contexts. According to intellectual, educational and spiritual standards, each mediated ritual develops a cognitive scheme which might be analyzed in relation with a household. The contemporary influence of television over Romanian people is grievous. For example, a sociological survey (performed by IRES) focused on Easter broadcasted church service. It has revealed the following mean results: 7% Romanian people believe that this holy feast celebrates Jesus' birth and 4% do not know its significance. However, it has become a commercial feast for many individuals. Mainly, the ritualized event has overwhelmed the ritual which implies among others: 40 days of fasting, doing good deeds, being humble, in a better mood and peace of mind, to attend all the church services, to encircle the church, to light candles and to bring the light into houses, etc. Nevertheless number 40 by itself has inserted many mythical meanings almost forgotten: it stands for a period of waiting, preparing, difficult proofs, punishment, etc. (Chevalier, Gheerbrant; 1995, 34). Conversely, quasi-ritual is synonymous, in many contexts, with routine, ignorance, laying out merchandise, fashionable exhibit, and libertine gestures.

So, a ritualized event is domesticated into the society of family life and shaped by present complex technology. Following the strategy of focusing on ritualization rather than rituals, one may notice a new train of events and circumstances. In 2007, 30.000 Romanian people encountered Second Life phenomenon and the Romanian town, New City. Leaving apart examples of religious implications this time and linked to Second Life, we brought forward a sample of an electoral activity, a virtual referendum for the president's quietus. Not having as background an old, genuine ritual, this attempt drew the attention of few citizens (1861 persons), most of them acquainted with online and offline activities, of several media companies and no politician, inclusive of president himself (Gutu; 2008, 150). But this is only a beginning, probably the first form of a new media quasi-ritual with which the whole audience will get accustomed in the future.

Finally, both ritualized media production and mediated rituals constitute part of a process of re-enchantment of the world. A historical comparison may be drawn. The Enlightenment period was equivalent with progress, innovations, rationality, lucidity, legitimacy, authority, etc. It is the so called Age of Reason and it is opposite to Romanticism and Modern Age. Modern Age brings back the magic sense of an alternative safety fuelled by progress, science, technology and modernization. In a certain way, it is a kind of compromise. It is an attempt to reverse the mythical, romantic safety, the heaven on earth

[6] More philosophical aspects and Romanian media-examples were presented in another essay of ours published in 2012.

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either shaped well by religion or by scientific advance. Heaven is also the first spiritual center and the origin of any tradition, and ritual, it is the place in which Earth and Olympus convey (Chevalier, Gheerbrant; 1995, 19). The Lost Heaven is a universal motif, but it focuses mainly on regaining initial spiritual quality. People are searching for foundations beyond human constructions. It should be obvious that media related activities, as well quasi-rituals, constitute an attempt of invoking a spell over the world. It is a modern counterpart to the ancient myth of Orpheus. He is a seducer at all the levels: Heaven, Earth, Ocean, Hades (Chevalier, Gheerbrant; 1995, 385). He is able to banish angers, beat down resistance, but most of all he enchants. The world is bewitched. Orpheus stands for a transcendent ideal which is difficult to find in the similar media practices trying to configure a space momentarily escaping from everyday duties. Why this effort on behalf of Orpheus? To assume as a basis, daily life being shallow, dull, and full of conformism created through identification or projection, he attempts to bring to life the foster, valuable and meaningful rituals capable harmonize the cultures.

On the other hand, quasi-rituals do not justify social exclusion. If someone does not watch the evening match or series, he or she is looked upon as a traitor and he/she is excluded from morning coffee discussions or gossips during the lunch break. In our opinion, quasi-rituals and media related practices try to assess a virtual reality and even a virtual community, but it cannot equally contest the genuine rituals. In a way, it is the same distinction as in the case of love *vs.* idolatry. From the viewer's point of view, the beloved object is redeemed of side attachments, is pure; meanwhile, the idolized object is dissonant and devaluated. As many of our examples belong to religious semantic field, we may add the following final observation: the deity of a loving believer is warm, full of mystery and affection. On the contrary, a devotee's god is kind of spoiled metaphysical creature, very sensitive in front of all types of tributes and fake submits. If love implies a mutual communion and the difference are transformed in complementary continuity, idolatry connotes break, distance and obedience. There is an obvious correlation with the relationship between genuine ritual and quasi-ritual.

Conclusions

1. Media have caused a fragmentation of contemporary man's life. It is divided in repetitive units more or less similar to the current ritual practice.
2. Mass media, multimedia and new media have isolated human beings in virtual communities and make them tributary them tributary to automatism, life-clichés, fake models, heroes, etc.
3. Freedom is strangely controlled by an overwhelming media diversity. Constraint is found in sub-mediocre media products which cause a low-intelectual level for the audience. The clairvoyance of choice is minimal.
4. Quasi-rituals assume the risks of many damaging factors: manipulation, moral decay, spiritual impoverishment, excessive vulgarization, degradation of aesthetic perception, isolation, low ability to socialize, virulence, aggressiveness, incitation to verbal and physical violence.
5. Media quasi-rituals and routine compound the problem of ignorance and spiritless stereotype behavior.

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