SEMIOTICS, BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY. THE NEW MEANINGS IN LIFESTYLE

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Abstract: *Modern society is governed by new technologies, by swift and profound shifts, by a new positioning towards gender and sexuality. All these factors generate new meanings and values which society in general would need to perceive and own at full speed. Our vocabulary is enriching itself permanently with terms like „bitcoin" or „fintech", new technologies fundamentally transforming our lives, former meanings and symbols of life. Noticing these fundamental changes, multidisciplinary research of the phenomena, their causes and effects becomes indispensable for the profound perception of the new environment, of the new society, as well as for the process of creation of new policies (of all types) that address new necessities and demands of individuals in adopting a lifestyle aligned to both tradition and modernity, without creating any imbalance or disconnections at social level.*

Keywords: *new meanings, semiotics, new lifestyle*

The purpose of this paper becomes quite conspicuous as soon as we understand the immediately noticeable effects of the new social interactions that take place in the urban environment. Romania's current urban environment, with its new meanings, diversifies social interactions and generates confusion, uncertainty and tension that sometimes seem to be impossible to explain. In a nutshell, in this very environment (and I refer especially to Bucharest area) we meet people of different ages, of heterogeneous cultural levels, different religious beliefs, some of them with a conservative educational background, others with a traditional thinking and others with a modern and permissive education.

To understand exactly what causes the social intragenerational and intergenerational tension that may be felt in Romania's urban environment, the idea of resignification needs to be highlighted and when I refer to this concept I mean the circumstance in which the old symbols and significations, some of them with deep cultural and traditional roots, are counterbalanced, rebuilt, replaced or altered by the new proposals which modernity and the new visual culture push right into the spotlight. The symbolic resignification processes described in my paper may be obviously identified primarily in the urban environment and perhaps accidentally in the rural environment too. Everything that modernity brings forth may represent a sort of evolution and normality, and it is not the triggers of imbalance, confusion and tension *per se* that are urban life's new proposals and approaches, but the speed of the attempts to impose and implement these new proposals and approaches and to replace the extant social and cultural symbols.

To make a long story short, my original assumption is that - socially, at least in the urban environment - there is a number of attempts to symbolically re-signify certain

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elements built based on classic and traditional values, which are massively disseminated amongst individuals and which are nowadays subject to attempts of quick replacement, a fact that generates imbalance and confusion. The process to discover the meaning of a subtext that exists within a text is usually defined in terms of decoding (Beasley, Danesi, 2002: 70). From a semiotic standpoint, both the transmitter and the receiver are supposed to use the same coding in order to be able to understand the same meaning ascribed to the message. A decoder's understanding of a message depends on how accurately the message is decoded. As soon as we understand this particular process of human communication based on coding and decoding, we will also be able to deduct the possible discrepancies, the misunderstandings generated for example by vaping in closed spaces or in means of public transport (just like the media has reported over the past few years).

In this particular case, most individuals understand that smoking is a bad habit and associate it to gestures specific to smoking and to the generation of smoke. At the same time, those who use gadget cigarettes have been persuaded of how beneficial they are by the promotional campaigns and have now developed the belief that vaping is not actually smoking. That is why vaping is decoded differently, starting simultaneously from both the already enshrined code, the one that associates smoking to hazards and bans smoking in closed areas, as well as the new resignified code, which is more permissive and is dedicated to the consumption of such a product.

The past 30 years have brought a multitude of stimuli, cultural, organisational and social factors on the scene of the Romanian society, most of them of a Western extraction (and not only), which all tend to beget a form of acculturation of Romania's social and cultural universe, such process of acculturation being described as a "cultural modification of an individual, group, or people by adapting to or borrowing traits from another culture." (www.merriam-webster.com, 2018)

As a consequence, considering all of the arguments above, the scope of analysis of this paper covers the interdisciplinary realm of the social and semiotic universe, and aims at clarifying the potential socio-semiotic and symbolic communication mechanisms that influence the new inter-human relationships as part of Romania's current urban environment.

The constantly-applied **methodology** based on which resignification within the Romanian society is studied and based on which the causes and effects generated by these symbolic reconstructions at social level are observed, is the observation method. Referring to this research method, *Dicționarul de Sociologie* (*Sociology Dictionary*) notes that: "The observation may be direct or indirect, qualitative or quantitative, done in the field or in a laboratory" (Ferréol, 1998: 145).

Starting from this simple description and structuring of the above-mentioned research method, I would highlight here the fact that in my case phenomena have been observed directly, in the field, and the results and conclusions are qualitative ones. The participant observation may only be done by a direct contact with people, by communicating with them permanently or temporarily and by actual tangible participation in the day-to-day activities of these people. (Mucchielli, 2002: 269)

As part of any research, there are some essential elements that may be used to reach a telling result, more specifically a major role is played by the objectivity of the

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researcher and by their capacity to run critical analyses and to correctly understand social interactions, the context and the effects of a certain phenomenon.

Referring to the participant observation method and its inherent qualities, author Valentina Marinescu highlights that:

> Participant observation is oftentimes considered as the purest form of qualitative research because it appears in natural locations and calls from the researcher to understand things from the point of view of a participant in the research process. As part of this approach, the researcher enters the area subject to research and - by observation, discussions and participation in the same activities that research subjects are engaged in - tries to understand the world just like they do. (Marinescu, 2009: 43)

It is instrumental to understand the ways in which the process inside a research method is supposed to be structured and phased; also important is to rigorously pursue the scientific and objectivised scientific application of the conclusions drawn by observing a certain phenomenon. That is the reason why I bring up another definition of the observation suggested by author Septimiu Chelcea, who said:

> […] we will concluded, in broad terms, that the sociological observation is defined as tangible empirical field research and, within a narrower meaning, a scientific method to collect data using one's senses (sight, hearing, smell, etc.) in order to capture the sociological and psychological inference and to be able to check the assumptions or in order to systematically and objectively describe the surrounding environment, the people and the interpersonal relationships, the individual and collective behavioural patterns, the actions and activities, the verbal behaviour, physical objects, the products of the creative activities of persons and human clusters. (Chelcea, 2004: 179).

Further on, I will be lining up, scrutinising and explaining with arguments some of the major resignification processes that have been identified in social, semiotic and cultural terms in Romania's current urban environment. I will be reviewing these elements in a random order and the underlying logic of their presentation is not to be accounted as their hierarchy in terms of how important they are; the sequence is rather generated by the chronological order in which I have noticed, become aware of and noted the respective elements that refer to the resignified processes which I studied.

1. The first element to which fresh value is assigned, a resignified observant, perhaps also by virtue of the effects it has on the comfort and safety of the individuals that live in the urban environment, is the **sidewalk**. Traditionally, this is symbolically an area which is exclusively devoted to pedestrians, a universe that secures the protection and security of persons who are not using transportation. For the time being, a new value has been assigned to the sidewalk, it has a different significance now, it has been "modernised", and therefore it stands for both a pedestrian area, but also as a lane for persons who drive bicycles and/or electric scooters, which generates confusions at social level. The confusion is given by the fact that "sidewalk" is defined differently in cultural terms, and Pierce refers to that in terms of a "*proper significate effect*".

Some persons perceive sidewalks as exclusively pedestrian areas, personal safe havens, while others consider them to be a permissive area that may also be used for vehicles such as bicycles or electric scooters. The potential causes of turning sidewalks into

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a permissive area that may host alternative transportation, not just pedestrians, could be associated to the visual culture which is dominated by the media and the models that the media promotes and, also, by the modern civic trends that refer to new liberties of expression (riding a bicycle in an urban environment is a symbolic form of protest and support of the *environmentally friendly trends*, but also the lack of a consistent development speed of the urban infrastructure enabling the safe movement of both pedestrians and the users of bicycles, scooters and other electric means of transport. The effects generated by re-signifying the pedestrian space stem from a significant increase in the stress of pedestrians, the risk to be exposed to unwanted accidents (electric scooters may ride at speeds of up to 25-30 km/hour) and the annoyance of the persons who must use these forms of transportation (they do not have proper riding areas and conditions).

2. Another resignified element that we will find in Romania's urban communities is the "**traditional student**" (dedicated to learning, eager to develop, careful about their personal development, in search of professional experience, the sort of person who respects educational institutions and their conventions) now turned "modern student" (with less of a *penchant* to embrace the elite culture, rather influenced by the urban culture and the media, and willing to work in areas and fields that are totally unrelated to their educational background). I have often heard female students of journalism and communication confessing quite optimistically that they had found jobs that were unrelated to their training, such as hairstyling or nail art.

It is possible that a major role in redefining the notion of student in symbol and social terms may be played by the topic tackled by Lazăr Vlăsceanu in his *Sociologie și modernitate* (*Sociology and Modernity*) in which he identified a number of transformations that had occurred throughout Romania's academic environment and that have rather turned students into customers, while professors have turned into some sort of entrepreneurs working for an academic institution that now appears to be a profit-oriented corporation. (Vlăsceanu, 2007: 250-251)

After all, semiotically speaking, should higher education be massified and introduced in a logic of fashion and consumption, we would assist *de facto* to a conventionalisation phenomenon, defined as:

> […] a joint cultural process whereby innovative and non-conventional codes are eventually adopted by most people and hence become conventional. This process may be connected to an elitist art style, let's say Impressionism, who slowly became accepted by the masses until it became the conventional manner of rendering nature in a painting" (Fiske, 2003: 109)

The causes for resignification and for the identity reconstruction of the Romanian academic environment could reside in the appearance and existence of the online environment that could provide a false perception of the alternative (free of charge) and quicker access to information of academic level (without being capable of structuring it depending on its importance and authority), but also in the transformation of educational institutions into profit-oriented institutions or the desire of undergraduate students to speculate on their new relationship and connection to educational institution from a new position, since they are not only undergraduate students, but also customers.

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Another major factor could be represented by the realities of the labour market that the academic environment does not understand and deliberately ignores and that - for the time being - seem to be incapable of matching the actual requirements of a rapidly-changing and permanently-re-technologized labour market (new occupations appear, others disappear, some jobs involve new skills, for instance social media, IT).

Of course, a major vector in symbolically reconstructing the current society is held by the engine called consumerist logic, which is brought in the spotlight by models and publicity. Actually, in *Societatea contemporană, între comunicare artefactuală și stil* (*Contemporary society, between artifactual communication and style*), I was mentioning that the permanent renewal and consumption are a synthetic outcome generated by the existence of fashion and fashions. (Marinescu, Podaru, 2017: 65)

The defining trait taken up by the society as a whole and transferred to the symbolic and semiotic area of contemporary culture that manages to destabilise the old symbols and their connotations is, as far as I am concerned, the very idea of quickness and permanent renewal that fashion has managed to impose in all areas of society, including in what concerns symbolic communication.

Under pressure from the "society of the spectacle", just as it Guy Debord presented it, the role of the media has become so important and universalised that no other area of the contemporary society, be it industrial or cultural, could avoid taking over the *show* model imposed and generalised by television and no only. For that purpose, the authors write that: "The spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its *colonization* of social life. [...] The growth of the dictatorship of modern economic production is both extensive and intensive in character." (Debord, 2006: 28)

For that matter, I consider that both the new notion of "school" and the new notion of "family" or the new smoking habits or, why not, the pole of influence in the realm of information being shifted from the traditional press to *bloggers* and *influencers* are all placed under the effect of the speed of the social and semiotical changes imposed by the logic of fashion and the logic of the spectacle, that are all generalised at global level. This is how the resignification and the assignment of new symbols to elements that had been tradition until not so long ago becomes unavoidable.

A pertinent explanation that could enable the understanding of all these sorts of symbolic transformations and resignifications is brought up by Daniel Bougnoux in his *Introducere în științele comunicării,* who - starting from his own theories, but also invoking Pierre Lévy's statements - says that the only religious and ideological messages that used to govern the world disappeared once the world wide web appeared, meaning a virtual universe that led to the disappearance of the "world" (the unique world) as it used to be understood traditionally, and once this unique world became fragmented in a myriad of separate new worlds. (Bougnoux, 2000: 140-141)

After all, once traditional vectors vanish (religion, school, authority), we are witnessing an escalation of the paradigm associated to understanding the world through the attributes of diversity and heterogeneity, as well as that associated to simultaneous dialogues that are never governed by rules, in which voices overlap and are mistaken one for the other, and everything becomes so medleyed in a buzzing background noise that messages become impossible to understand.

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3. Getting back to one of my previous ideas, I'm bringing up again the symbolic repositioning of **traditional smoking** in the area of electronic cigarettes that are promoted in the form of a less dangerous option for the human health, compared to the consumption of traditional cigarette, which brings the consumption of nicotine closer to *inter alia* the *high-tech* world by the very manner in which it is being used. The old connotations of traditional smoking "disappear" further to the publicity and PR campaigns that push the usage of electronic cigarettes in the spotlight and speak of the healing features of vaping, which could bring some benefits to users. Moreover, there are also attempts to promote the idea that vaping is acceptable in closed areas too, including in public institutions.

This sort of promotion of the new e-cig gets closer to semiotics, to fetish signs that - if used by the universe of publicity and commodities - lend some magic and healing properties to products. (Sebeok, 2002:145-150)

4. Especially the urban area and the large metropolitan areas are now rebuilding the **male identity.** Traditional masculinity is about to become extinct in the urban environment and this is associated to the disappearance of physical work that used to be indelibly associated to masculinity back in the past, but also to the new cultural and aesthetical trends, which are all elements repositioning modern men fundamentally.

An example referring to the physical involution of men is presented in Peter McAllister's *Manthropology, The science of why the modern male is not the man he used to be,* in which he proves with scientific examples how twenty thousand years ago Australian Aboriginal men regularly ran at speeds rivalling, and probably exceeding, the top speed of the current one-hundred-meter world record holder, Usain Bolt, all barefoot and in difficult conditions without any food supplements, training or special equipment. (McAllister, 2010: 22-23)

Nowadays, most young men have lost their robustness and the athletic physique of the old generations, while their posture and movements are marked by fragility. Sports enthusiasts or men concerned of their athletic image are a minority of the urban environment. More specifically, the masculine attitude and image of today's young men gets dissociated from the symbolic imagery of traditional masculinity.

We need to highlight Ted Polhemus's statement, the one who invokes James Laver, who noted that back in the past men's clothing used to suggest hierarchies and social status, while women's apparel was used to stimulate sexual attraction. Polhemus says that, in spite of all that, nowadays men's clothes become ever tighter and *moulés,* while artists show off their jewellery and the brands of their clothes, just like women used to do in the past. This is why Ted Polhemus is wondering whether James Laver's statements continue to be valid nowadays. (Malossi, 2000: 51)

5. Even **human relationships and interactions**, unless their traditional forms disappear altogether, are modified under the impact and the influence of social media and the online environment. Nowadays, dialogue partners are no longer using facial micro-expressions, such as blushing or pupil dilation, the sort of reaction that usually comes up in traditional face-to-face meeting, but are posting emoticons and smiley faces that have no pre-established value and are incapable of oozing any subtlety. Nowadays, dialogue partners are no longer capable of treating one another in a bespoke manner, they may not pull out any personalised smile and are unable to shake each other's hands. Instead of flirting and

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peeking glances, young people are after the *likes*, and get flattered whenever their posts are appreciated with this sort of technological gratification. This is how encounters, dialogues, emotions, relationships and uniqueness are resignified, reinterpreted, and rebuilt by means of the online universe, the one that generates the impossibility to verbalise ideas coherently and, moreover, the impossibility to cope with being nervous in front of an audience, which many students have confessed to be experiencing. All of these elements generate - at the end of the day - stereotypical thinking patterns and dilute creativity.

In a way, exposed as they are and referencing themselves almost exclusively to the online environment, the young generations build for themselves a culture which relies on immanent values taken from this very universe, which generates a loop and sort of culture which is referenced to itself alone, and not to other information from outside of it. Theoretically, this sort of approach may generate a paradoxical circumstance where young people find it impossible to understand and decode myths, even if - as Lévi-Strauss said - there are myths shared by the entire humankind (love, hatred, revenge) that may be transmitted in any language since they go beyond translation, however poor such translation could be. (Lévi-Strauss, 1978: pp. 247-252) Yet there is a prerequisite, more specifically in a certain culture the idea of a myth should be brought up, alongside the online environment, the computer games and their ancillary universe (movies inspired by video games), only benchmarked against the above-mentioned online culture and placing the stress on certain attributes of the virtual characters while refraining to touch upon many of the traditional myths encountered in the fairy tales and stories of the past.

The topics for discussion and the review of the elements that I red-flagged above as socially resignified could have also included elements of interest that have suffered some changes while influencing our everyday life in a tangible and significant manner. I could have also brought up and reviewed the way in which traditional shopping (and shopping as a pastime) has been replaced to a large extent by the online shopping, with all of the implications that this new consumption method brings about (for instance, the impossibility to feel the texture of fabric and to actually see the quality of the products in general and the possibility to shop alone, unattended and without mixing with a crowd). Society as a whole transforms itself and brings some proposals in the spotlight, as well as some reinterpretations of certain traditional components of the everyday life, such as Uber becoming an alternative to taxicabs or the new fashion models that are strange, asymmetrical, sometimes overweight, as a challenge to the idea of the glamorous models who are so specific to the world of fashion and to runway shows, which is something that was done not so long ago. Traditional holidays are no longer celebrated with piousness and modesty by family members spending time together at home (Easter, for example), but in a club or discotheque; therefore, the traditional value of this celebration is invalidated, it only becomes a form of entertainment, under the levelling pressure of conventionalism and consumerism.

The list may continue with the explosion of the selfies, which countermands the idea to be photographed by somebody else. Even this sort of consumption of the image proves that individuals distance themselves from the collectivity and isolate themselves while enjoying sharing their own personal pictures with strangers in the online environment, while classic photos were taken while spending time with family and friends and shared

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with the closes friends, so the symbolic communication by photographs changed its trajectory radically.

Actually, the symbolic interactionism, based on which we could say that even this paper relies to some extent, is the one that:

> [...] underlies the importance of the symbols that convey meanings in the interactions amongst individuals, [...] people refer themselves to the social world based on the significance that this world conveys to them; significance appears and develops in the process of social interaction […]. (Petcu, 2014: 260)

All of these approaches and distinct interpretations of the contemporary world prove beyond any doubt that Romania's urban environment generates a series of different cultures and refers itself to them. This is actually the starting point of all existing forms of resignification, because the existence of the varied cultures and the values that they generate propose diverse ways of life and differentiated codes based on which the social environment is understood.

Referring to the definition of culture and to its role played at social level, Yuri Lotman said:

> […] culture is not a repository of information, but an extremely complex organisation body which stores information, while permanently preparing for this purpose the most efficient and compact means, which receives fresh information, codes and decodes messages and translates them from one system of signs into another. Culture is a flexible mechanism of knowledge and of complex organisation. (Lotman, 1974: 18)

The oppositions that exist and may be perceived socially and semiotically, the elite culture vs. popular culture, traditional masculinity and femininity vs. the new modern identities, traditional media vs. the universe of influencers, etc. are all generating confusion and problems of adaptation at social level but not necessarily - just as I have said above - through the proposals that they bring up, but rather through the speed at which they rebuild and resignify the elements of the social discourse.

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