

**Ciurel, Daniel. 2020. *Cultura media. Perspective retorice.*
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Book review

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“Culture” is one of the major, complex and extremely difficult concepts to map in the spectrum of socio-human disciplines. Perhaps, today consciously or not, most of us are “bathing” into the waters of a media culture through the technology and the means of information, communication and socialization that we use in both our professional and personal life.

Rhetorical tools can provide a legitimate and coherent means for analyzing, interpreting and evaluating media messages that we are dependent on, assaulted or seduced. The analysis and rhetorical criticism of cultural artifacts is a valuable and current direction in the field of communication studies both in the United States (Kuypers, 2009; Burghardt, 2010; Foss, 2018; Hart et al., 2018), the birthplace of the domain, as well as in Romania, where we can talk about a “Western rhetorical turn”, insofar as a number of authors (Gabor, 2014, 2015; Băiaș, 2015, 2016; Ciurel, 2019) from the academia of Timișoara systematically began the theory development and application of the means of rhetorical criticism.

In this direction Daniel Ciurel’s work *Media Culture. Rhetorical perspectives*, based on his doctoral thesis in the field of communication sciences, approaches with great courage and authority the subject of media culture from the perspective of the various rhetorical views that are part of the rhetoric criticism. The book consists of three chapters dealing with concepts and theories in the

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sphere of media culture, the perspective of rhetorical criticism and its application in the analysis of media artifacts, interspersed by one section of “Introduction” and another of “General Considerations”. In the final part of “Appendices” we note two sets of mini-dictionaries, which present, succinctly, the main types of fallacies, according to Douglas Walton (2007) and the main classes of arguments in the media studies, conforming to Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca (2012), these are useful resources for the researchers of the field of communication.

The first chapter, entitled “Media Culture – Concepts and Theories” follows Douglas Kellner’s brilliantly opened direction (2001) and describes the basic concepts and theories about media culture within the critical theory of the Frankfurt school, the cultural studies of the Birmingham school, the various postmodern orientations and theories, the meme theory as well as those derived from the media ecology and the theory of technological determinism. The author manages to provide rigorous conceptual borders and pertinent clarifications to difficult and confusing notions, whether he is talking about positive and honest influence (information or persuasion), whether he is discussing the negative and dishonest influence of media messages (manipulation, misinformation, disinformation, intoxication or propaganda) or other explanatory notions, such as media framing, media literacy, media education or culture jamming.

The second chapter, called “Rhetorical Criticism” develops a series of theoretical and methodological aspects of rhetorical criticism. They are also competently presented, after the 5th edition of *Rhetorical criticism: exploration and practice* (2018) by the renowned American rhetorical professor and critic Sonja K. Foss, in a selective way the parts of rhetorical criticism work, which refers to: artifact selection, artifact analysis, formulation of research question, review of relevant literature, essay writing as well as the aspects of the evaluation standards. In order to support his project, the author chooses eight contemporary and representative methodological perspectives in the field of rhetorical criticism and offers them the theoretical-methodological basis. The eight perspectives or qualitative rhetorical methods in communication sciences are: neo-Aristotelian criticism, cluster criticism, fantasy-theme criticism, generic criticism, ideological criticism, metaphor criticism, narrative criticism and pentadic criticism.

The third and final chapter, entitled “Rhetorical Criticism of Media Artifacts” is a practical attempt to demonstrate the usefulness and malleability of the rhetorical perspective in the study of media messages. The above methods are applied to a variety of artifacts of media culture, in the form of nine case studies. The analytical part includes eight case studies, in which the methods of rhetorical criticism are applied as follows: neo-Aristotelian rhetorical criticism in the talk show “Vaccination: for or against”? with the pediatrician Mihai Craiu and the former journalist Olivia Steer, the anti-vaccination activist, of the show “The world

speaks” broadcasted by ProTv; cluster criticism perspective in the reportage “The house with an Alzheimer's patient. The reservation of the lost memory”, broadcasted by Europa FM; the fantasy-theme criticism in a classic Romanian advertisement, the video spot for the alcoholic drink Unirea; the generic rhetorical criticism in the editorial “Boris” signed by the publicist Andrei Cornea, in the weekly *Dilema*; the ideological rhetorical criticism in the video of the song “Clouds of thought” by the Timișoara’s band Implant pentru Refuz; the metaphor criticism perspective in the video of the rap song “Vipers” by Cedry2k; the narrative criticism in the short film “When the light goes out” directed by Igor Cobileanski; pentadic criticism in the analysis of a news story, which refers to the mediated crime in Caracal. The synthetic part includes another case study, the ninth, referring to news from the ProTV television website analyzed and interpreted briefly through all the eight methods of rhetorical criticism listed above.

The paper aims to promote rhetorical criticism in the field of communication sciences as a method of textual-qualitative analysis, and to verify its applicability towards the persuasive-rhetorical dimension of various media artifacts by describing, analyzing, interpreting and evaluating them. To achieve these objectives, the author chooses as research tools textual analysis, case study and bibliographic research. Without circumscribing the polyphonic specificity of media culture to a single orientation, the author considers that by combining various theoretical visions he can provide a better understanding of the phenomenon.

One can notice the definition of media culture, as the dominant culture of contemporary society as a “techno-culture with a pronounced commercial character, that targets massive audience and relies on manipulation, persuasion and seduction to access and retain audience” (Ciurel, 2020: 131). However, the individual who has to face the dominant messages of media culture, has the power to establish his own identity, lifestyle and values. We can talk about a double reaction. On the one hand, constructive, through media literacy, through a negotiated reading of messages, i.e., through the use of critical thinking and the skills of analysis and interpretation of media messages. On the other hand, subversive, through cultural jamming, through oppositional reading, i.e., by finding a way to resist and counteract the dominant or hegemonic messages in the digital society.

In the second chapter, the author presents appropriately and systematically the theoretical-methodological tools of the main variants of rhetorical criticism. Thus, through a great power of classification and terminological ordering, each approach is rigorous and complex presented for the knowledge, definition and emphasis of the main concepts, the angle of approach, the fundamental analysis units in the study of an artifact, as well as some appreciative and critical remarks.

An explicit reference to the texts of the relevant initiators or authors would provide the basis for a first reading, and a less abstract and general manner, with examples, could facilitate understanding by a part of the uninitiated public.

On regard of the relationship between theory and method in rhetorical criticism, the author adopts a position of conciliation, of mediation between one approach, which considers that the two are distinct and the other which considers that they cannot be clearly distinguished, as they merge into the rhetoric criticism. The same moderate but complex and compromised position is asserted by the author about the way in which the theory provides methods that are used in rhetorical criticism, i.e., whether theory serves criticism or whether criticism serves theory. Thus, the author concludes that “rhetorical criticism must be guided, and not controlled by the theory and method” (Ciurel, 2020: 236), because a genuine criticism “does not consist in the application of a predetermined formula, but involves the intervention of the rhetorical critic, with his assumed subjectivity, but balanced by a coherent and credible argumentation based on sufficient and solid evidence” (Ciurel, 2020: 237). To the extent that it is assumed that this type of rhetorical criticism is an art rather than a science and that the application of the critic’s intuition should be taken into account, then it is legitimate to sketch the ideal robot portrait that defines the rhetorical critic as: a practitioner, a skeptic, a perceptive detective, an imaginative, an eye-oriented combatant always directed by theory, because “the rhetorical critic looks at artifacts insistently and methodically in order to discover rhetorical processes and persuasive strategies” (Ciurel, 2020: 240).

The third part, the applicative one is distinguished by putting critical-rhetorical methods into action, by applying the traditional method, which combines elements of neo-rhetoric based on the classical theory of Aristotle (2004), and by the generic criticism one in which the author excels. The author should be congratulated for the selection of some representative artifacts, which cover multiple genres of media culture and the courage to thoroughly and scientifically research videos, musical pieces or short films, less considered aspects of popular culture in Romania. In addition, the major effort of translation and cultural mediation must be appreciated, taking into account that the application of rhetorical criticism is at an early stage in our country, and the conceptual system in Romania is far from being established. Nevertheless, we consider that too much weight is allocated to the presentation of the methodological part and less to the application, i.e., the actual analysis, repeating the theoretical-methodological aspects of the previous chapter, without a fair and constant provision to original sources such as Foss (2018), and sometimes the analysis seems schematic, as in the pentadic analysis part. To the above remarks, we also mention: the absence of initial research questions, the five parts presented in the first chapter are not applied

rigorously, the neo-Aristotelian analysis is not applied to a speech but to a sequence of a debate, moreover the terms in the cluster analysis are not entirely justified. Although, we consider that the applicative part is distinguished on the one hand by the competence, originality and the variety of symbolic artifacts fully analyzed, and on the other hand by the rhetorical strategies revealed and the persuasive techniques involved in media messages.

The main contribution of the paper is represented by the modification of the principles of media literacy from the area of semiotics to the area of rhetoric studies. The author's main merit lies in development of the link between rhetorical criticism and media literacy, from qualitative research methods in the field of communication sciences and the promotion of a responsible perspective in interpreting various messages of mass communication, definitely demonstrating that "the methods of rhetorical criticism can be used with definite results in the analysis, interpretation and evaluation of artifacts of media culture" (Ciurel, 2020: 355).

The lecturer's work, journalist and media coordinator, Daniel Ciurel is proving to be an extremely useful source in qualitative research in the sciences of communication, in the development of rhetorical theory and a practical authority in developing concrete communication skills, in the spirit of Charles U. Larson's work (2003) namely to become responsible receivers and critics of persuasive messages, to be able to build convincing messages and to become more effective when we try to persuade others.

Taking into account the current public space in which fake news, alternative facts or post-truth become influential terms, we need an amplification of the skills of interpretation and critical decoding of media messages. The media education that the author brings to the foreground is a significant contribution to the development of practical communication skills. This paper is useful to students from the faculties of communication sciences, in the field of public relations, advertising or in the media studies. The paper can also be a valuable landmark for teachers, media experts or professionals, who aim to involve institutions, digital platforms and the communication society towards a rhetorical media education.

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