Educational Consequences of Media Quasi-Rituals

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Abstract: Most research on media moved away from a mere communicative function. The attention shifted to more actors and contexts creating meanings in the forums. A way of enhancing the content of media concept is to associate it to quasi-rituals. The paper focuses on mediatezed ceremonies, worship, rituals, getting transformed when conveyed through media. We comment upon this aspect, the benefit being an insight into how creativity and constraint are combined inside the cultural frame. Recurrent dilemmas in media studies refers to media manipulating the audience. The subtle mediatic manipulation and the viewers' „faith" create addiction and distorted education.

Keywords: education, media, ritual, information, culture.

1. Introduction

This paper comments upon media-communication implying diverse rituals which prove to be modern quasi-rituals. Media-consumption is a quasi-ritual meaning a daily-habit embounding a dangerous and considerable number of hours (much above the European media average). Now people try to counterbalance the previous deficient and flat program during Ceausescu-regime. Fashion clichés, media quasi-rituals, life stereotypy have also roots in the contemporary political, economical or social contexts. Overall the genuine rituals reveal profound and ageless meanings. The quasi-rituals pay tribute to artificiality and lack value. The theoretical background lays on the perspective of Birmingham group and other several new approaches (Podnar 2009). The paper presents briefly diverse kinds of ritualization of the daily media-activities and the specific impact on the Romania audience. The term *ritualization* does not apply to ritualized actions in this paper. We use the root-word

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ritual as tool-term discussing its recent connotations related to media-habits. Therefore, this word is more an attenuated metaphor or a *maligmata* (Dragomirescu 1975: 155). The ritual of the contemporary human being is less and less associated either to tradition or "real important and significant society events" (Marcu 1998: 943). Mircea Eliade specified that ritual needs a special space and time outside the usual one in which new rules and parts are established. Referring to unusual phenomena, rituals derive a kind of limbo in which no meaning can be conceived. After the preliminary stages, the authentic time and space reappear due to a consistent 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). Nowaday behavior can be figured as a ritualistic one as far as it is a pragmatic unsacred act which lacks the misuse of game to shape real-life situations (Kernbach 1995: 541). This statement differs from Eliade's point of view regarding the myths of the modern world (Eliade 1991: 140). Present myths are no longer the groundwork of the spiritual activities and they do not deliver essential truths. They render no epiphanies, extra-mundane experiences or hallowed happenings.

2. Quasi-Rituals in Media

The contemporary media consumption has developed quasi-rituals implying daily futile use of media devices that has grounds on boring waiting or travelling time (airports, stations, underground rides, cab-journey, etc.). The lack of spare time and the intellectual impoverishment has limited people's options. Having the illusion of relevant or efficient actions, people indulge themselves in surfing the internet, reading or monitoring the news about real or fake persons and political, social, cultural or fashionable actions. Infrequent or traditional happenings bring together billions of viewers/auditors under the spell of the screen or display-units. The examples are many and various: terrorist attacks (USA-11th September 2001, Madrid-2004, London-2005, Mumbai-2008, Moscow-2010, etc.), sex scandals (the president Bill Clinton, the president of the International Monetary Fund, the Secretary of State Colin Powell, the president of France, Nicholas Sarkozy, the golfer Tiger Woods, etc.), weddings (Prince Charles and Diana, Prince William and Kate Middleton, Prince Felipe of Spain and Letizia, etc.), divorces (Aga Khan, Hugh Hefner, Jenifer Lopez and a lot of Romanian fashionable persons, etc.), funerals (Lady Di, Pope John Paul II, Ronald Reagen, Michael Jackson, Liz Taylor, Steve Jobs, Nelson Mandela, etc.), child-births of celebrities or memorable maternity moments (Kate Middleton, Kim Kardashian, Elena Basescu, etc.), disasters caused by natural forces or by human/technical errors (Hurricane Katrina, the tsunamis in the Indian Ocean, the nuclear accidents from Fukushima and Tokaimura, etc.), catastrophic predictions (alignments of planets, eclipses, nearness of an asteroid, the end of the world, etc.). The effort to furnish a basis for legitimating ephemeral authorities, fugitive power

positions or training contexts is explicit. It is accompanied by media-messages in order to attract a large audience and to create an interest in such events. The strategy has shaped the belief in perpetuation connoting legitimization as well.

Mainly the Western societies have developed the media-related rituals. They are in fact quasi-rituals of daily life through which audience gets the impression that participate in events, protocols and extreme natural phenomena. People are bewitching by glamour, luxury, fashion, pain, fear, joy, pride, etc all of them being received through media. "The illusion technique" (Lipovetsky 2008: 49) amplifies on addiction and social perceptions which undertake beliefs, interests, fervors. Quasi-models, quasi-heroes/heroines, erroneous importance are caught up by the naïve manipulated audience etc. This process has nothing in common with the originator one creating paradigms in antiquity. The real myth or ritual has shaped real valuable models for 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 behavior of god and mythical heroes, unless it was impossible to repeat their lives. (Eliade 1991: 134)

People are educated in the spirit of cine-narcissism. They watch, film, record, identify themselves with screen-people because they lack real greatness, fame, creativity, artistry, skills, miracles, wonderments, etc. Instead of *illo tempore*, the contemporary society consists of epigones generating minor texts in a new wooden language or keeping silence in an *intellectual vacuum* which aggravate their vulnerability to manipulation (Lipovetsky 2008: 49).

Currently, the ritual is the habit of the contemporary man brought to grips with spiritual, emotional and axiological inanity. Media-consumption induces to explicit routine. It exemplifies one of the many clichés of the individuals' day-to-day life; each fellow is used to watch the news, a favorite movie, TV serials, divertissement shows, sport events, etc. Every office or home-arrival coincides with a turn on of a media device (laptop, tablet PC, desktop, etc.). Many portable devices join people during their walks, journeys, readings, and meals. Thus, the little spare time is wasted and the loneliness becomes more pronounced. A shallow and runaway communication comes in sight between virtual communities. The ignorance is amplifying and it annihilates the spiritual side of men which is no longer able to assign a value or to understand the profound meanings, great philosophical themes. The mind is asphyxiated by a "totalitarian kitsch" (De Koninck 2001: 59), the feelings are perverted and the individual's freedom is lost. People realize what they are doing, but they do not realize the long-term consequences.

> 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. (Huizinga 1998: 66)

The daily media-consumption has possible positive influences: keeping in touch with the national civilization and language (especially for the scattered minorities with a common origin), disclosing feelings, thoughts, points of view, value-standards and national or individual features.

The media quasi-rituals appeared and they had an impact upon life-style in Western countries; nowadays, they are developing in Romania too. We insist upon Romanian ritualistic tradition and the actual misuse. We comment upon both geographical media touches. A parallel perspective may highlight similarities and differences. Such an attempt is useful because mass media, multimedia and new media are always submitted to a cultural framework, but with very few reasons. Quite frequently, they interfere with tradition and civilization having a bad mental impact upon people. The freedom and the constraint of thoughts and of independent interpretation are in a scarce equilibrium. The manipulation is encouraged.

Contemporary society is searching for more consistent arguments and reasons in order to find the 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 established "consumer society" (Baudrillard 2005) 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" (Sartorini 2005: 10) encompasses more words, phrases or collocations being far-away of their basic meaning and acquiring a pejorative value: sub-culture, mass culture, manea (a specific kind of song found inside the gypsy community), glamour, red carpet, show, model, starlet, to rate, freelancer, analyst, host show, wow-biz, can-can, fan, season, etc.

Although the *video-child* (Sartori 2005) hardly speaks and reads, little audience rejoices high-quality intellectual shows (e.g. H.R. Patapievici, G. Liiceanu, A. Pleşu, D. C. Mihăilescu, Eugenia Vodă, C. Stefănescu, P. Magdin), original approaches, outlooks, abstractions, interviews. These are obviously different. They often stand for as a form of resistance to the actually popular patterns used to socially embed these individuals (an adjustment like a Procustean bed). People are presented as items of media-guru paradigm. This idea may be found in the approach asserted by Birmingham School and it is also present in more recent theories (Kellner 1995: 41). People have to face a fancy combination of self-appropriation and manipulation. The genuine ritual performer is not aware of the fact that the symbols, structures, models, anti-models, strategies, foretokens, paths for interpretation, etc. are not plainly given, but also produced as rituals through media-activity. This does not mean that the

people conveying the media-messages do not know what they are doing. The concerns and worth included in the rituals breathe there for a long time. There are a lot of theoretical attempts to define the contemporary practice of ritualization and other social activities in a similar way to J. Austen's speech acts (performatives) (Turner 1989). The next quote is 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). Rituals occur apart of habitual schedules and normal spaces.

In Romania, another aspect is relevant and different too. Due to low quality media productions, glutted with vulgar or modish subjects, this kind of themes last even in the time-loop of an ancient 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 overwhelmed by these characters over-imposed as a kind of model, and who are enacting stupid parts to the injury of the true ritual. The casual quasi-ritual fades out the traditional one. The modern, lay ritual put the religious one into the shade. Ordinary facts emphasize fake contexts. The disssociation is superficial and weak. This incongruous effort to adapt for new narratives is of no value; it depicts a grey, eventless world, allowing very few or no interpretations on behalf of the audience.

Therefore, we emphasize the more aggressive and frequent presence of another kind of ritual in which the audience, although may detect intention, creativity, social action, and interplay, even a retrace of the primary state of chaos, of the golden age; the specific features of the rituals are emphasized: fixity, formalism, balance, reliability, symbolic repetitions, etc. (Rothenbuhler 1998). But no one can state that one or another strategy per se activates a ritual. It might be either a recurrent one (e.g. watching the favorite series on Sunday evening, playing games on a portable gadget) or an infrequent one (e.g. a royal wedding, a political international summit), a cyclic one (world/European championships, summer and winter Olympic Games, political campaign and election days); it might be either something watched with intense, emotive engagement (e.g. documentaries, movies, concerts or interviews) or with detachment, indifference, lack of attention (e.g. commercials, daily political debates, incidents, facts of life, etc.).

Our main concern is related to the events ritualized through mediation in comparison to those considered traditional rituals, but reaching our knowledge via media. Regarding the latter, in our opinion, the value, quality and significance of a ritual live-performance is modified by broadcasting. For example, an Easter church-service from Bucovina is attractive and interesting for a foreigner, even congenial for native people, but it is only a large, merry range of images appealing for attention. Instead of a very profound and subtle emotional, intellective activity, media offers an

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inferior mundane activity. The aim was to emphasize the authenticity and to develop the performance into a more peculiar one, but the result is a trivialized disclosure.

> Pressée par la multiplication des images, la nouveauté technologique et la demande culturelle de sociétés occidentales, la sémiotique doit néanmoins résister à l'ivresse des images et garantir le sérieux heuristique procure par la réflexion théorique. (Hénault 2004: 5)

The outcome which cannot be denied is that a lot of people receive this *message* as a ritualized one, due to their daily routine of noticing every media detail, and they confound an activity exposed to the lens of a camera to a real, sacral one, because they are under the spell 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: 40-52).

We do not agree with those interpreting media and all the ritualized activities related to it as acting like 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: 194-208). We consider 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 ordinary opinions, emotive experiences. 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 shaping identities and virtual groups. The audience seems to be coherent. According to us, 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 in Eliade's work; Mircea Eliade's concept *anakuklesis* refers also to an eternal coming back of something that existed once upon a time (Eliade 1992: 108). According to this theory, recurrently, a new Socrates appears, willing to sacrifice himself for the Truth. Anachronic knights fight periodically for valuable causes, proving that the Christian aspect is remittent. It is not at random that Saint Augustine 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

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numen is displayed and the whole variety becomes hallowed, being impossible to distinguish between the holy animal and the profane one (Arhip 2013: 348-365).

The ritualized activities or events may enter different reception contexts. According to intellectual, educational and spiritual standards, each mediated ritual generates a cognitive scheme which might be analyzed in relation with a household. Nowadays 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). 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 (Guţu-Tudor 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 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). The Lost Heaven is a universal motif, but it focuses mainly on regaining initial

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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, and Hades (Chevalier, Gheerbrant 1995). He is capable to blow off 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 create a space momentarily avoiding everyday duties. Why this effort on behalf of Orpheus? To assume as a basis, daily life is shallow, dull, and full of conformism built on identification or projection. Orpheus attempts to bring to life the foster, valuable and meaningful rituals capable to harmonize the cultures.

Quasi-rituals offer curious reasons for 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.

3. Conclusions

Media have caused an accidental fragmentation of contemporary man's life. It is divided in repetitive units more or less similar to the current ritual practice. Mass media, multimedia and new media have isolated human beings in virtual communities and make them tributary to automatism, life-clichés, fake models, quasi-heroes, etc. Freedom is strangely cut or confined 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. 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. Media quasi-rituals and media-routine compound the problem of ignorance and spiritless stereotyped behavior according to fashion. The education system cannot control or

neutralize this spiritual downfall. It is itself a factor of alienation and it must expose a new relation between public and private. The so called bedroom culture and the politics of the living room have determined a multiple personality especially for young people. It is expected to face an increasing level of media-offer during the next decades. Changing patterns of media related activities is compulsory and an immediate conception of a new way of human interaction is urgent. Besides this aspect, the new technology is not suitable in any teaching-context and it has positive and negative effects upon the educational process. The teachers must focus on relevant knowledge and adequate tools.

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