

Media Praxis in Constructing Symbolic Space: Intercultural Approach*

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Abstract—The author of the article reviews two major sociological approaches regarding the media construction of reality in the postmodern condition. Z. Bauman's conception of modernity and postmodernity is considered as the conceptualization of the role of media in society's transition from one state to another. J. Baudrillard's conceptions of simulacra and mass are elaborated as significant takes on the comprehension of the contemporary world. Both concepts are considered in terms of their impact on the formation of social relations and the creation of cultural prerequisites for the identification of individuals as well as communities, groups of people in the changed conditions of the contemporary world.

Keywords—*media; communication; construction of reality; mass; modernity; postmodernity; Zygmunt Bauman; Jean Baudrillard*

I. INTRODUCTION

Considering the existing approaches to the interpretation of the functioning of media in society, one shall take into account the existing peculiarities of society itself. Media play a major role in social transformation. Because of them, a communicative space is born with new traits that were unimaginable at the dawn of printed or traditional mass media. The communicative space in the age of postmodernity has traits of a network and is determined by digital ways of preparing and transmitting media messages. The changed character of communications, methods and modes of transmitting media products, the change of the very essence of mass media (namely, the transition from print and visual media to digital means of mass communications) cause the emergence of a variety of theoretical approaches, schools, conceptions, and teachings in sociology for the academic study of such social phenomenon as mass media and the role they play in society and in the life of everyone.

The author of the article considers the most widely-used theories of mass media, which are important for a sociological analysis of media's praxis in constructing social views at the world and models of their transmission to the

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recipients. The conceptions regarding mass media presuppose the postmodern digital networking information society, largely virtualized, and instantaneous, illusory (second reality as described by Niklas Luhmann).

II. CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN CREATING CONTEMPORARY IMAGE OF THE WORLD IN WORKS OF Z. BAUMAN

Zygmunt Bauman provides a sociological reflection of mass media, literally nurtured within the societies of the late "modernity" and "postmodernity". Comparing the modernity, vested in the frame of classical critical theory, with postmodernity, described by the new conceptual constructions, Bauman defines the essential foundations of these two types of reality. The sociologist captures the profound changes taking place in the postmodern world, in particular, in its media sphere. In his "Liquid Modernity", Bauman writes: "It [modernity] appears "heavy" (as against the contemporary "light" modernity); better still, "solid" (as distinct from "fluid", "liquid", or "liquefied"); condensed (as against diffuse or "capillary"); finally, systemic (as distinct from network-like). <...> That modernity was a sworn enemy of contingency, variety, ambiguity, waywardness, and idiosyncrasy, having declared on all such 'anomalies' a holy war of attrition; and it was individual freedom and autonomy that were commonly expected to be the prime casualties of the crusade" [1].

According to Bauman, in the liquid world of postmodernity, media gain enormous power over the collective and individual imagination of the people. Bauman discusses the key role of media in the context of the disclosure of the topic of identity in the postmodern consumer society. He emphasizes society's dependence on advertising, incoming messages, images that are ubiquitous and penetrate into every social sphere. The degree of freedom of consumer choice directly depends on the use of mass-produced goods that are being bought largely due to the media influence. The amazing principle of postmodern society: a unique individuality may only be self-expressed through consumption, so Bauman. Thus, diversity lurks in mass production. This paradox is set by mass media. The images they create appear to be "more real than reality", they are influential, and impress consumers to the degree

that “<...> the desired life tends to be life “as seen on TV”. Life on screen dwarfs and strips of its charm the life lived: it is the lived life which seems unreal and will go on looking and feeling unreal as long as it is not refashioned in its own turn into screenable images” [2].

The elaboration of unreal images by the means of media ultimately brings us to the point of the construction of social reality, expressed in untrue and mythological constructs. This construction arises in the depth of the processes of virtualization of social interactions and the replacement of the reality of the objective world with their simulative forms. The emergence and rapid development of information technologies in the late 20th century caused the widespread society’s informatization and technocratization. However, the new principles of existence of the information society successfully adapt to new objective constructs, quickly overcome technological determinism and transition into the simulative technologies. The reality of the existence of contemporary society is virtualized in the sense that it becomes similar to virtual reality and can be described using the same characteristics. Social phenomena appear as virtual ones if images of real objects (processes) replace institutionally defined actions. Symbolic reality acts as an independent world that doesn’t represent and doesn’t reflect the objective reality. With the spread of gradually improving information technologies and the deepening of virtualization, the artificial world is becoming more and more natural for individuals.

III. POSTMODERN DISCOURSE: JEAN BAUDRILLARD ON MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION

Jean Baudrillard’s conception of the simulative world is one of the most original takes on how the construction and transmission of media images and messages, lacking the objective content but defining the mediatization of society, occur. The French philosopher devotes a significant part of his work to the consideration of mass media and their role in public life. His hyperreality theory is inseparable from the consideration of the social world, which hosts the objective processes of virtualization, simulation (i.e. the replacement of real facts and events by the artificial ones), and media construction of the models of perception of the world. Let us dwell on Baudrillard’s views, whose social theorizing offers a unique insight into media.

First of all, let’s define the concepts of “sign” and “simulacrum”, which are of the greatest importance to Baudrillard. In European culture, the sign acted as an object, property, or relationship, acting as a representative of another object, property, or relationship. The emphasis was on representation, on the indication of something else, invisible but contemplated. Thus, the sign recorded the absence of the presence of something real, authentic.

In the postmodern era, there is a crisis of representation, and postmodern comprehension of simulation and simulacra is a theoretical reaction to this crisis, an attempt to hold the reality under the new conditions. Gilles Deleuze made an attempt to free the simulacra from the ancient semantic attachment to the models: “The problem is no longer

concerns the differentiation of the Essence from the Visibility or the Model from the Copy... Simulacrum is not just a degenerate copy, it is a positive force denying the original, the copy, the model, and the reproduction” [3]. Baudrillard gives the definition “simulacrum” philosophical and ontological meaning.

In his *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Jean Baudrillard presents the historical logic of the development of the “three orders” of simulacra, replacing each other in the European culture starting from the Renaissance and to the present day: forgery (from the Renaissance and to the Industrial Revolution), production (in the industrial era) and simulation (“the dominant schema in the current code-governed phase” [3]). While the simulacra of the first two orders still retain a link to the real things, on the third order simulacra lose any similarity with the objective world. In his *The Transparency of Evil: Essays in Extreme Phenomena* Baudrillard adds the fourth order — the fractal (or viral, or radiant) stage of value. The philosopher compares the fourth stage to cancer, which duplicates and multiplies its own cells [4].

Yet, traditionally established social institutions do not decay at the last stage but are instead being unobtrusively replaced by their imitations. Therefore, hyperreality embraces both social institutions and cultural artifacts. The traits of the third order of simulacra imply the disappearance of sociality in the sense of modernity and suggest the replacement of social control by its simulation.

Herewith, the most important place in the postmodern world is occupied by mass media and circulating flows of media information. Society is steadily included in the information and communicative space, created and constantly reproduced by media corporations. Society is thus constantly receiving and answering messages in the state of a neverending referendum, not interested in obtaining in-depth knowledge, reflection, and analysis of the messages. “The entire communications system has passed from a complex syntactic structure of language to a binary system of question/answer signals — perpetual testing. Tests and referenda are, as we know, perfect forms of simulation” [5]. This kind of “regime” and the state of society are determined by modern media. Any given TV program, including but not limited to political shows, opinion polls, election debates, etc., expressed through media, appears as question/answer even if it isn’t obvious at the first glance.

Since media are the main producers of information, structured so that messages predict (and impose) the answer to the questions posed, and the problems discussed are also predetermined, media are the main producers of simulacra. A problem that is being discussed, a conflict that is to be resolved, a social fact, etc., become a language game. Reality is being questioned, tested by a person, at the same time “testing” a person back. Since every message is a variation of codes, the subject’s task is to decode and interpret the information. However, decoding appears in the form of a diverse range of solutions with each individual offering different visions and making choices.

Sociology of postmodernism asserts that our way of communication with the world is in general similar to reading, “selective decoding”. Yet, this also means exposure to the process of breeding carried out by media. According to Baudrillard, the best socio-psychological simulacrum, modeled by media, is public opinion — “not and unreal but a hyperreal political substance, the fantastic hyperreality which survives only by editing and manipulation by the test” [6]. The semantic significance of the messages received is also determined by media, by produced and transmitted information. The process of receiving and processing of information by a recipient is largely regulated by media themselves, namely by the ways, means, and methods of the content’s selection, its editing, goals, political objectives, desired results, etc. Public opinion is being formed systematically and consistently, depending on the goals of its production and the needed degree of manipulation of the target audience. As a result, a person is almost unable to distinguish the objective reality from its simulation, imitation, subtle substitution. There emerges an issue of obtaining true knowledge, because in the information society the gap between truth and falsehood, between the posed question and the expectation of an answer is almost gone.

Reality is falling apart due to its constant reduplication as media materials (a variety of codes and messages, copied cultural artifacts, repeated tropes, and so on) in hyperreality, as a world of self-sufficient and non-referential signs. The world around is being aestheticized, transformed into a conglomerate of images, semiotic space, depending on the fate of the goods (whether the consumer of media). In the over-the-top aesthetics of images, it is impossible to see something real, existing, only the shadow of something disappearing is noticeable. It is worth of noting that the reproduction of simulacra, their anesthetization occurs in concert with the basic principle of postmodernity, i.e. the statement and image of the distinctive properties and attributes of an object. Simulative images are created by modeling differences, diverse connotative traits of the real-world phenomena.

The trend towards hyperreality was already noticeable in realism and surrealism. Yet postmodern simulation is significantly different from the simulation found in modern and pre-modern (traditional) societies — postmodern simulation has something new, heuristic within it. A copy is not necessarily paler or worse than the original. Simulation, however, isn’t to be attributed to manipulative processes: at the center of manipulation, there is always some objective reality while in a postmodern simulation there can be no attribution to reality whatsoever. The simulation creates a special structural game, located outside the dichotomy of authentic/inauthentic.

With reference to the concept of hyperreality, of special interest is the comprehension of the mass in Baudrillard’s works. The mass is also associated with media and media influence. However, the main trait of the mass is its indifference, inability to social interaction, silence, and apathy to social, political and cultural activities. According to Baudrillard, the mass cannot be viewed as a sociological

category because it’s not identified with any real social group, community, population. The mass doesn’t produce the phenomenon known as social consciousness. The mass is a result of the disappearance of the social as the integration of individuals into the community. The social has turned into indifferent, structureless, unpractical black holes of consumers.

Black holes of the mass implosively absorb and destroy any meaning and content, serving as the conductor of irrationality, spectacular and, often enough, destructive. Once again, sociality is replaced by simulacra: the economy has become the production of demand, and religion is a mere sequence of rituals, real social interactions are replaced by their imitation. An individual is also vanishing in the mass: he is absorbed in totality and the implosive ability of destruction, the ability to self-express but the inability to self-identity.

Modern media and their products beget the mass, thus destroying anything social in it. The information transmitted is no longer valid, as it carries no meaning and is devoid of real communication basics. Media stage communication. So, information decomposes meaning, turning the social into a kind of nebula, doomed not to the growth but to entropy. Thus, media are not the engines of socialization but on the contrary, the implosion of social in the masses.

The effect of media on the mass is akin to hypnosis eliminating the meaning of the transmitted knowledge. Baudrillard refers to that process as the violence of analysis and interpretation. The violence against the mass is impossible because the mass is so inert, disoriented, and immune to meaningful ideas that it turns out to be immune to the semantic meaning as well. Mass, according to the French philosopher, has even more media properties than media per se. It is mass who captures and absorbs media for entertainment reasons, not vice versa. In this regard, mass is a powerful medium, using their practices and ritual actions for their own purposes.

Communication, social interactions, mass, media, simulacra, and simulative processes are thus locked in a vicious circle of hyperreality. But the communication is also unreal but staged and is, in fact, a “giant process of simulation”. At the same time, Baudrillard stresses that often enough socialization is measured by susceptibility to media messages. An individual is uncommunicative, turned off from society if he/she doesn’t feel the media impact [7].

Thus, the deepening virtualization of contemporary society causes the processes of replacing the realities of the objective world with their simulative forms and media myths. Such principles of illusory presentation of reality are implemented in the social construction of worldview transmitted to the audience by media.

IV. CONCLUSION

Numerous theories and approaches to the study of mass media originate within society and, accordingly, reflect the social and cultural alterations. Media theories bear the imprint of virtualization of social activities, informatization,

and technocratization of society, the creation of a specific media space with an illusory, artificially constructed basis.

Jean Baudrillard covers in his works on hyperreality and simulacra the basis of media construction of the models of the world. His major idea is that there is no more natural (i.e. genuine, authentic) reality existing. Instead, there is a hyperreal world, which is a space, created and bolstered by media. Hyperreality tends to create a total model of the world, which is the cornerstone of communication. The world around us is being replaced by media messages and symbols, constantly growing in numbers, and turning into models and images, then transmitted to the masses.

The key issue of postmodernity in media communications is the decoding of incoming messages. Poststructuralists (as well as postmodernism in general) put forward this fundamental thesis: there is nothing outside the text.

Information from the standpoint of the reviewed concepts belongs to a sphere of media texts, carrying certain meanings and forms. Therefore, the purpose, meaning, and goal of a text should now be sought in a reader. Thus, more active force is given to the subject, capable of analyzing information and not to a passive spectator, losing his identity and uniqueness in the constant flow of information.

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