

ROMANIAN POST-TOTALITARIAN ICONOGRAPHY AND POLITICS: THE TELEVISION CASE

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I say nothing new asserting that there is an inextricable relationship between the overall of political images parading for several years now the TV screens in Romania – i.e. the political iconography as it is reflected by this essential segment of the press – and the overall of opinions, judgments and prepossessions pertaining to the Romanian social groups and structures, which is our cotemporary mentality.

What may be new is the proposal for reading in the development of certain broadcasted images ensembles, very quickly replaced with others, quite seldom coexisting with one another, part of the imaginary of our transition, extending from totalitarianism to political pluralism, in parallel with the transition from media monopoly to media pluralism.

In a public space where the political communication is oversized, where the political man, too, pays his tribute to media ‘VIP-ism’-along with cultured people and stars -, becoming a genuine *homo cathodicus*, where political scenography and political drama lead even to a theatricalization of social communication, there occurs a natural figuration of political imaginary categories for whose decoding one must adopt a new, authentic “image pedagogy”. An image becoming the vital support of the word since communication seizes the imaginary and the inflation of words in democracy renders them trivial, as it is the case of political rhetoric, the political art itself being mainly shaped, starting around the 70’s, by the television. (Roger-Gerard Schwardzenberg, *L’Etat-spectacle. Essai sur et contre le ‘star system’ en politique*, Paris, 1977).

The Romanian case I want to briefly evoke, regarding the relationship of political iconography with the post-totalitarian mentality, can be illustrated by the exceptional situation of

television: a public television, liberated from under dictatorial control in the middle of 22-nd December, 1989, single in the audio-visual landscape of the country until 1992, then entering competition (from 1993 until today) with several private local TV stations – the most numerous in the entire Central and East Europe.

I have precisely spoken of an “exceptional situation” because of the extraordinary fame that has been gained – in a good as well as in a bad way – by “live” television broadcasting, all over the world, of the insurrectional events in Bucharest at the end of December 1989 – thus spectacularly preceding the Gulf War or Moscow putsches broadcasts -, as well as because of the exceptional place that image and, therefore, television have within Romanian democracy boundaries. In this latter case it is all about an inheritance of the special place that the image holds within the popular culture of these “Latinos of the East” Romanians are, extended nowadays into a consumer’s culture of folkloric essence, as is the one having the TV screen at its very core; and this, I add, in a paradoxical contrast with the West, where the prevalence of the word over the image in the traditional culture, has created a climate to be found until today in the development of television (Dominique Wolton, *Eloge du gand publique. Une theorie critique de la television*, Paris, 1990). Not very far from the “visual societies” of a traditional, even medieval type, nowadays Romanian society, dominated by image, with the inherent sacrifice of the idea has made so that, in the very beginning moment of its liberty, by means of television, by means of what has been called the “Romanian telerevolution”, reality overlapped fiction. It has made the imaginary become reality, leading to a sort of “news-show”

which created, in its turn, an authentic “imago-cracy” in the Romanian political and social landscape, especially in the period of great turmoil of 1990-1991. Thereof there have also emerged several iconographic hypostases which make up *an iconography of the freedom* regained after fifty years, but highlighted on a TV screen, for the first time within that public and single television, become, for lots of people, the very symbol of the same liberty. A liberty one finds, in December 1989, acclaimed everywhere, in the very name of the new press institution turned into a “national hero” – “The Free Romanian Radio-Television”- , in the title of the first newspaper issued in Bucharest under the new revolutionary circumstances – “Liberty” -, in the name of the daily belonging to those who had been a decisive factor in the political overthrows, i.e. “Liberated Youth”.

During the few days of the Bucharest insurrection, and in the weeks and months that followed up March 1990 - , the iconography of revolution and freedom was, predominantly, *the iconography of the compact group* behind a table, more often than not accompanied by the Romanian tricolor flag with a hole in the middle, where the ex-communist coat of arms had been, reminder of the first revolutionary emblem from the days when the rising broke out, before the 22nd of December (in time, sometime between 1990-1992 this negative heraldic symbol has come to stand for the new political order set up during the events, and today, ten years later, it has rather become an exotic rarity!).

In response to the idea of revolutionary strength, of momentary national consensus, but of social equality too, bringing together, indistinctly, people coming from different places, with different pasts and a different future, the broadcasted group, invading the TV screen at the least expected hours, with its members often wearing the sweaters they had on in the street – the very sweaters turned, for almost a year, authentic revolutionary “regalia” working on the collective imaginary – has represented a first level of political iconography. Subsequently, there’s been an immediate evolution toward another level related to it,

specific to the months of February-May 1990, a level I would call *the iconography of free debate*. To be more exact, it is the iconography generated by the Provisional Council of National Unity (P.C.N.U.), the first “parliament” of the new Romania; here, the table in the public television studio no.4 was substituted by the hemicycle in the Parliament on the Mitropolitan Church Hill where the democratic debate style was learnt or, for few, re-learnt, where democracy was theatricalized by means of the long nocturnal broadcasts – unique, as far as I know, in the history of European television history - , the parliamentary scene thereby becoming ad hoc a national scene watched by everyone until morning. This iconography also contained the central focus of the image, no longer represented by the random speaker from the “group iconography”, but by the one and only character, the moderator and Council president – enjoying a huge political and iconographic role which had no little impact on his being elected as the first president of democratic Romania. Then there was also the radical opponent and even the “raisonneur”, sometimes in buffoon-like guise, playing the role of “witty fool” rather than that of “foolish wit”.

The leader figure that enhances the group, specific to this second iconographic hypostasis, became very soon – in April and May 1990 – a decisive factor in the first electoral debates and videos ever broadcasted by a TV station in Romania.

Nonetheless one must add that alongside with this, there were also emerged other broadcast iconographies, related to the changes taking place in the Romanian human and political scenery. They could be called either the *macabre iconography*, that of the cemeteries with the December days victims and victims of some alleged massacres (I refer to the disinterment in Timisoara which, for various reasons, has lead to a rapid radicalization anti-Power of the city on Bega, and at home, to the creation of some Western media scenarios detrimental for Romania abroad); or the *iconography of retribution*, with daily broadcasts of images from hall rooms representatives of the Power prior to

the 22nd of December, from power by way of the revolution were being put on trial; or the *iconography of exorcism*, with daily presence, after decades of scientific atheism, of synods serving in bright vestments on all occasions, thing that would soon generate a feeling of rejection from a public who had been ideologically intoxicated the other way around years after years by means of television, and whom the journalists who had but recently discovered such a spiritual "terra incognita" could hardly persuade.

But what has gained ground on the TV screens quite readily – because it thrived everywhere in the social life of the country – in a time of unrest and uncertainty as the whole year 1990 and part of the next one was the *iconography of dispute and street violence*, where large and amorphous groups, always in Brownian motion, often in bloody collision, inculcated upon the population, by means of the TV screen, a state of discomfort and panic which had an indirect impact also on the massive vote for certain political forces and leaders on May, 20-th, 1990. (Well suited for this period of time are Georges Balandier's reflections from *Le pouvoir sur scenes*, Paris, 1992: "in a period of great transformation, when everything is re-set in motion, cultural legacy included, the Power must cope with uncertainty to face situations which it cannot fully apprehend and control").

From the street that had been so well checked during the period of dictatorship there started to emerge, in the embryonic democratic system of the time, challenges convergent with the general crisis of 1990-1991. They manifested themselves by social explosions and implosions that ranged from a perpetual meeting like the one of April-May 1990 in the spot so symbolic for the just happened overthrows that was The University Square of Bucharest – expression of a "demonstration democracy", but also of a political "happening" –, to strikes and marches again "staged" with a certain care, to interethnic confrontations like those of March 1990 in Târgu Mureș or to the violence of the so-called "miners' riots", with cohorts of people in grey uniforms who would periodically befall upon Bucharest, from February 1990 till September 1991.

The collective psychology conditions created by the iconography of the challenging group in violent motion consequently generated on the one hand, just as in any crisis period, a personalization and a dramatization of Power, and, on the other hand, a reaction of the "silent majority", the "subtle Romania" who, under such circumstances, was more than ever in need of unifying symbols like the Church or the Army – hence the latter earned in the poles, as well as the ever frequent presence of such institutions in special public television broadcasts like "Spiritual Life" or "For Our Homeland". *șPro Patria*

As a matter of fact, the political space will gradually set its elements, from presidency and government to parliament, unions, parties which, even if they did not have an appropriate communicational strategy, before the general elections of 1992, they knew how to develop a suitable political iconography in public as well as in private television from 1992 till now.

However it is true that being in want of a powerful and obvious crisis, like that of 1990-1991, the period between 1992-1996, encompassing the second and the third electoral moment of post-totalitarian Romania and corresponding to a relative internal and external political stability of the country, did not really develop a too varied or spectacular political iconography; I would be tempted to add, – one so characteristic for the Romanian public mind, as the political iconography of the television had been in the first years after 1989.

What we have got now in our audiovisual landscape, most frequently in the public one (for reasons I will not go into here) is an *iconography of order*, in sharp contrast with the older *iconography of dispute*. In fact, it is about the daily representation, especially on public television, with or without a ceremonial character, of important public persons, of the political people elected by universal vote – the president of the republic, senators and representatives –, or of those appointed in the Executive – for ever around the same round table suggesting the "council": compared to the preceding period, the space allowed in television broadcasts to this latter

governmental segment, to our political structures, is awkwardly large, in detriment of the older debate iconography of parliamentary type which proved to be extremely instructive in the years 1991-1992.

I would be inclined to relate the same *iconography of order* to a certain *national-patriotic iconography* which seems to be deeply rooted in Romanian spirituality and mentality on a popular level, perhaps also as a recollection of some rural festive rites, part of the theatricalization of some collective manifestations (they are not necessarily reminiscent of totalitarianism, though they were in vogue during dictatorial periods, from the pre-war-one of King Carol the Second to "The Chanting of Romania" from the Ceau^oescu decades, such an iconography gradually calling upon the visualization of some national feeling key-concepts like "orthodox belief" and "Romanian spirit", the "Latinity" and "Dacism", the "historic mission of the Romanians" and others).

By the way, to me it seems not without significance that it is this very "iconography of order", extremely frequently bringing into focus faces of political leaders guarantors for the social tranquility – may they be representatives of the Power (more often) or of Opposition – is absolutely incompatible, in the Romanian scenery, with a certain tonic and necessary *caricatural iconography* resembling the much savored French show "Bêbête Show", daily charge, parody and skit of the political people from the Hexagon; the failure of such a television enterprise, quite awkward actually, presented in

the winter of 1990-1991, in a show of a political party in opposition back then, points – for now at least – to the Romanian public's lack of receptivity for such an approach on public television (on a private channel, a "Chestiunea Zilei"- show having a relative impact!), despite the fact that this genre is present with a certain, limited success in the written press.

A second component that recent years' politics brings into the "telepolitics" scenery is that – propagated to the extreme by the private TV stations – I would call it the *dialogue iconography*, which complements, both psychologically and visually, the *iconography of order* by seating one or more debaters, face to face, political people and journalists; it is the ever obvious proof of Romanians' interest in "talk show", i.e. in the "show of conversation", of the idea, fortunately adding itself up to the image and balancing the sometimes devastating impact of the latter.

The above reflections, coming from a historian of the image determined by circumstances to dwell upon the evolution of the Romanian contemporary audiovisual, but also – at a given moment – to make important decisions in the very contact area of the political iconography with the political act, the way it was publicized by the newly democratic public television of Romania a few years ago, will maybe serve, in the future, to the necessary theoretical exegesis on one of the most representative electronic press cases of this half of Europe, in the last decade of the century that is coming to an end.