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The dialectics of media representation. *Je Suis Charlie* as fetishization of an image

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Abstract: The terrorist attack on *Charlie Hebdo* satirical magazine on January 7, 2015, led to a swift response from media conglomerates in the form of powerful images and narratives that sought to preserve the official mythology and to reverse the effects of the violent terrorist communication. In the dialectics of media representations, the texts are transformed into images and images into icons. We are referring here to the highlighting of the *Je suis Charlie* theme as a particular image that was used as a rallying cry. Analysing the production of symbolic forms, especially in the international media representation with a special accent on headlines and visual and textual images we come to the conclusion that *Je suis Charlie* slogan suffered an ideological transformation, the image becoming a fetish. Hence, we have spotted an iconoclastic reaction from some international media outlets that were suggesting the need for an ambivalent narrative, avoiding an absolute, frozen meaning.

Keywords: *Je suis Charlie*, symbolic forms, fetishization, media, representations

La dialectique de la représentation médiatique. Je suis Charlie comme fétichisation d'une image

Résumé: L'attaque terroriste sur le magazine satirique *Charlie Hebdo* le 7 Janvier 2015 conduit à une réponse rapide de la part des conglomérats médiatiques sous la forme des images puissantes et récits qui ont cherché à préserver la mythologie officielle et à inverser les effets de la communication terroriste violente. Dans la dialectique des représentations médiatiques, les textes sont transformés en images et les images en icônes. Nous parlons ici de la mise en évidence du thème « Je suis Charlie » comme image particulière qui a été utilisée comme un cri de ralliement. L'analyse de la production des formes symboliques, en particulier dans la représentation médiatique internationale avec un accent particulier sur les grands titres et les images visuelles et textuelles, nous arrivons à la conclusion que le slogan « Je suis

Charlie » a subi une transformation idéologique, l'image devenant un fétiche. Par conséquent, nous avons repéré une réaction iconoclaste de certains médias internationaux qui ont suggéré la nécessité d'une narration ambivalente, en évitant un sens figé, absolu.

Mots-clés: *Je suis Charlie*, formes symboliques, fétichisation, médias, représentations

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to pursue a proper analysis of media representation as reported in the account of the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* magazine. While the coverage of special events that are loaded with positive or negative content can be assigned to the dynamics of social ritualisation, in its relationship with the audience and institutions media is acting as a *sacerdot* (Petrof, 2015a ; Petrof, 2015b) and *guardian* (Nossek, 2004). In the particular case of the terrorist attack against the symbolic order as it is specified in this article as the attack on the satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*, there is a need for a distinct approach from a media anthropology perspective. In other words, the analysis seeks to identify specific elements of political, social and religious ritual that media has initiated through a new symbolic space created by a production of symbolic forms in the shape of narratives, mythologies, and iconographies. The transmission of these productions is effectuated via the so-called technological support of mass communication. The distinct purpose of this transmission is not only to inform the public opinion and influence the state institutions but essentially to generate a symbolic construction able to restore the social order affected and endangered by the terrorist event, and further on, to coagulate any narrative and iconographic "leakage" into a uniform, singular, normative production.

In analysing this type of media behavior, our inquiry is taking into account at least two elements. First, we assume that "any type of behaviour may be said to turn into a "ritual" when it is stylised or formalised and made repetitive in that form" (Nadel, 1954 quoted by Elliott, 1981, p. 141). Due to the intrinsic dynamics of media, its ritualistic behavior is already a well documented fact, numerous studies in this respect being more than revealing (Dayan et Katz, 1992; Rothenbuhler, 1998; Lule, 2001; Askew et Wilk, 2002; Couldry, 2003; Rothenbuhler et Coman, 2005; Peterson, 2005; Lardellier, 2005; Cottle, 2006; Grimes, 2006; Nossek et Berkowitz, 2006; Berkowitz et Eco, 2006, 2009; Katz et Liebes, 2007; Nossek, 2008; Sumiala, 2013). Second, the media ritual could be an adequate conceptual tool to explain the mediated "convulsions" caused by a terrorist, disruptive event.

For this research, based on observation and distinction suggested by Elliott (1981) in which "The treatment of such stories is highly predictable from one to another. They share the same formal grammar of treatment and development. In that development, considerable emphasis is put on the symbolic significance or interpretation

of the events. The symbolic as opposed to the representational meaning of the content is high, to borrow Gombrich's distinction, and the role of the authorities and their values visible and commended" (p. 143) we decided to follow this symbolic interpretation of the event, the international press being a fertile field for such ideas.

Before moving to the practical analysis, a brief remark is required about how the de-contextualized journalists are conditioned to act when the event became public. This observation is based on the Nossek's (2004) analysis who assumes that journalists and editors are wearing a pair of indigenous "bifocals" when reporting on international news: one is national, the other professional. What "lens" will define the narrative depends on certain factors: "(1) the type of event (some form of political violence, namely war, terrorism, political assassination, etc.); (2) the location of the event (is the locality relevant to the domestic politics and foreign policy or international relations of the journalist and media's nation state?); and (3) the event context (the timing of the event and its local and international context) ... Only when the event is defined as either 'ours' or 'theirs', can the journalist decide whether to apply a professional or a national patriotic 'frame' ..." (p. 349-350).

Particularizing the analysis at the social-historical level of the terrorist event on January 7, 2015, in Paris, some procedural observations should be taken into account before tackling the dynamics of media representations. At one level, the way media reported the event could be perceived as a form of journalistic solidarity. Traumatic and terrorising situations do have the ability to standardise not only the appearance of the reports but the content as well (Berkowitz et Eko, 2006, p. 1). At a deeper level though, "engagement on the issue by other news media represents something larger: the maintenance of the journalistic paradigm and the sacred right of the journalistic culture in which it resides" (*idem*). Maintaining the paradigm of journalism and the sacred right of French culture are predictable and identifiable features. French media representations are stemming from a clearly defined vision regarding major issues specific to a terrorist event (freedom of expression, sacred and profane, secularism, cartoons tradition, Islam, violence). However, this is not the case with the international press that is not directly involved and affected by and displays an ambivalence on these issues, the production of symbolic forms being quite diverse. Following Elliott's idea (1981) who suggests that "The analysis of ritual can then be placed in 'a class-structured, conflictual and pluralistic model of society' rather than a unitary, integrated consensual one" (p. 142) the purpose of this analysis is to identify the dynamics of media representations in such a conflictual space. In fact, it is a symbolic space created by the international media.

1. Methodology

Pertaining the methodology, we have inclined toward a qualitative analysis given the fact that our aim was to identify those iconographic and narrative themes in the international media, the very themes that are the most visible, influential, explicit and within one month remained stable in the journalistic accounts. Particularly, it is

an empirical analysis conducted exclusively through the Internet and new digital technologies. We have opted for this solution not only for purely practical reasons but especially for having the opportunity to access a variety of sources and then select them according to the objectives pursued. Thus, *Flipboard* app¹ available for smartphones and tablets, was used for this purpose. Employing an iPhone, over 4000 pages of content were “flipped”² and gathered under the following categories: *News, Religion, Islam, France, Cartoons, Free Speech, Tragédie à Charlie Hebdo, Terrorism* to identify those pages related to *Charlie Hebdo* attack. Subsequently, on the personal account it was set up a category generically labelled “Charlie Hebdo” where for one month, between 7 January to 7 February 2015, more than 400 articles were chosen. Using the website www.flipboard.com all collected content could be perused in a larger space such as computer screen (see Annex n°1). Afterwards, on this website we have completed the selection of articles. Certain criteria were behind this selection. First, the sources that gave just a factual report of the terrorist attack were removed. However, some were kept for the historical and social contextualization of the event. Second, as we have previously argued, the focus was English sources, these journalistic accounts having priority in this research. Thirdly, even within the English sources another selection was operated.

Specifically, we identified those major media outlets that have the ability to produce and transmit consistent iconographic narrative and symbolic forms, complex, constant and conflictual. Following this process, we reduced the number of articles to 110. That did not mean a dismissal of the French sources. We kept a certain percentage of the content for three reasons: (1) to confirm the trend of national media to generate a unified, consensual, normative production of symbolic forms into a space that being frontally attacked by an disturbing event tends to contract and concentrate into one point, the journalistic production being sucked into a “black hole” of national, partisan, official mythology; (2) the need to contextualize the socio-historical event that occurred, some reports in the national press being used as benchmarks for marking the analytical “territory”; (3) although we did not undertake a comparative study, the French sources served though as a “contrast agent” for a better view of those details in the narrative and iconographic flow, distinct to international media.

After analysing these 110 articles we identified six principal themes. Embedded in a complex narrative discourse, they have been outlined as follows: *Je suis Charlie, the freedom of expression, the semantics of terrorism, the hermeneutics of Islam, the clash of civilisations, and the semiotics of blasphemy*. Due to the limited space of

¹ *Flipboard* is a social-network aggregation, magazine-format mobile app localized in more than 20 languages. The software collects content from social media and other websites, presents it in magazine format, and allows users to “flip” through their social-networking feeds and feeds from websites that have partnered with the company. (Source: Wikipedia).

² *flip*, whence comes the name of the application means browse, given that in order to access the content the index finger mimics the same movement when touching the screen surface look through digital device. For the smartphone the movement is vertically from bottom to top or vice versa if to return to the previous page and for the tablets the movement is horizontally from right to left or vice versa if going back to the previous content.

this article we shall address the first theme only, *Je suis Charlie*, the others being the subject of other approaches. Those narratives, iconographies and myths were pursued as they were represented in the international media and served as ideological material in the production of symbolic forms.

To « protect » therefore the text from possible “deterioration” whenever a paraphrase is employed extended quotations from selected sources were applied. To achieve this goal, the following techniques were used. First, a content analysis to capture significant elements of reporting - in this matter the headlines and the textual images were analysed. Second, based on the analysis we identified the myths that were fixed in the form and the content of these reports. Finally, after collecting all materials for one month, after the attack happened, some keywords were examined that could indicate the « news frames » either of a national or of a professional nature.

Further on, the following sources were used in our analysis, both from English and French media outlets: *Le Figaro*, *Libération*, *Paris Match*, *Le Monde*, *Le Point* followed by *The New Yorker*, *Slate*, *The Independent*, *The Huffington Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Atlantic*, *BBC*, *CNN*, *The Spectator*, *Salon*, *The Telegraph*, *The New Republic*, *The Daily Beast*, *Forbes*, *Der Spiegel*, *New Statesman*, *Russia Today*, *China Daily*, *Deutsche Welle*, *Foreign Policy*, *Prospect Magazine*, *National Journal*, *BuzzFeed News*, *Rolling Stone*, *Montreal Gazette*, *The Star*, *The Indian Express*, *International Business Times*, *Financial Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Politico*, *Al Jazeera*, plus some websites which may enjoy the same notoriety as the above sources but are sufficiently influential in the online space. However, for this particular article only some of them were engaged, due to the limited space.

2. Results

Je suis Charlie is a popular theme, in this direction most of the iconographic and narrative representations being displayed in the national and especially the international media. Created by French artist Joachim Roncin and posted on Twitter an hour after the terrorist attack, the text became viral on the social network and used over 6,500 times per minute (*The Telegraph*, 09.01.2015). It became one of the most popular labels in the history of Twitter (*CNNMoney*, 01/09/2015) rapidly extending outside cyberspace in the written form of banners, badges, displays and various signs. In one word the image created by Roncin quickly became « an international rallying cry for free speech, and a symbol of resistance to terror and solidarity with its victims » (*The Atlantic*, 01.16.2015). However, in the international representations the very idea of solidarity has proved problematic because shortly after *Je suis Charlie* was launched as a civic self-contained « brand » media began to release the antithesis too in the explicit form of the “Je ne suis Charlie” or in different formulas that explain the lack of identification.

In “We Are Not All Charlie” (*The Atlantic*, 08/01/2015), the author suggests that

despite the ubiquity appellation not all are Charlie: “Much of Europe, which, as a political entity, is not fully grappling with the totalitarian madness of Islamism, is not Charlie. Certainly much of journalism is not Charlie. Any outlet that censors *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons out of fear of Islamist reprisal is not Charlie”. Even Barack Obama was marked in this category as “negationist” because of his ambivalent position toward Islam: “If the future does not belong to those who slander the prophet of Islam—in other words, to people who speak freely and offensively—then it belongs to those who would suppress by force any criticism of religion. This is not an American idea, and it certainly isn’t Charlie”. Goldberg’s conclusion is rightly Manichaean: either become Charlie or there is no future.

What does it mean to be Charlie? On the same line of analysis but contextualized to the realities in Lebanon is the observation made by Ghaddar in the article entitled “Are we really Charlie Hebdo?”. The Lebanese author laments the lack of solidarity with the victims of similar events occurring in Lebanon: “What did we really do when Samir Kassir and Gebran Tweini were murdered? What do we do any day that a fellow journalist is threatened or intimidated? A few articles get published, some activists on social media talk about it for a couple of days, and then we all go back to our pathetic everyday lives, waiting for the next death, the next threat, and the next censorship. ... we do not have the right to be part of #jesuischarlie and say that we care until we start with ourselves” (*NOW*, 9/01/2015). In her appeal to the Lebanese public the author is distancing herself from the predictable temptation of “the clash of civilizations” theme, usually the dominant narrative in the Western debates, designating the territory of the real conflict within the space of values and secular beliefs, a conflict that should concern all of us: “It is not about “Europe vs. the Terrorists” or “The West against Jihadists.” It is about all of us — liberals — against all of them — fanatics. It is about freedom of speech and those who want to silence us.... Therefore, it is not enough to condemn, to tweet solidarity or #jesuischarlie to show the world that we are the good guys “ (*NOW*, 9/01/2015).

From an American perspective now, under the headline “I Am Not Charlie Hebdo”, the journalist David Brooks captures the double discourse when it comes to freedom of speech in America. That kind of militant satire practiced by *Charlie Hebdo* would not be possible in the United States due to an internal mechanism of self-censorship beginning with the academia and ending with anti-discrimination organizations. Hence his surprise vis-à-vis the manifestations of solidarity with *Charlie Hebdo*: “Public reaction to the attack in Paris has revealed that there are a lot of people who are quick to lionize those who offend the views of Islamist terrorists in France but who are a lot less tolerant toward those who offend their own views at home” (*The New York Times*, 08/01/2015). The theory advanced by Nossek could explain the “duplicitous” of the American public space but somehow suited to those grass root producers of symbolic forms like a public or an audience. Once the terrorist event has been labeled as being “foreign” then they apply the “professional” lens (Nossek, 2004). This perspective allows them to be attached to a form of expression seen as “heroic” on the outside but “scandalous” within as long as this is

not reproduced in their territory. This solidarity is a simulacrum generated by the media that produces the illusion of identification through a proxy: a pencil, a sign, a sign or flag, meaningless signs when reproduced and transformed into different territory. Although Barthes (1977) believes that representations are not just “simple agglutinations of symbols” (p. 32) but generators of own meaning production, the “original” image transposed into a new context does not automatically reproduce the meaning; it is created or recreated only to the extent that the audience shares the same values and act in this regard. In other words, *Je suis Charlie* transposed in the American space lacks the “aura” not just because of the process of reproduction itself but primarily by re-territorialisation of the symbol in an entirely different public space: “whatever you might have put on your Facebook page yesterday, it is inaccurate for most of us to claim, Je Suis Charlie Hebdo, or I Am Charlie Hebdo. Most of us don’t actually engage in the sort of deliberately offensive humor that that newspaper specializes in” (*The New York Times*, 08/01/2015).

In the same note is written the editorial signed by Cas Mudd who under the headline “No, we are NOT all Charlie (and that’s a problem)” argues that the symbolic parade on the social networks under the “flag” *Je suis Charlie* is insubstantial for three reasons: “[First]... Many people are not Charlie exactly because Charlie Hebdo would criticize all religions and all politicians, irrespective of their ethnicity, gender, ideology, etc. ... Second, many people are not Charlie because they believe that democratic debates should be “civil” and not upset people. ... Third, and final, many people are not Charlie because they are afraid” (*Open Democracy*, 07/01/2015). In other words, *Je suis Charlie* is emptied of meaning in a space that does not allow a total identification with all the citizens and all the attitudes: “we should live up to our slogans and truly embrace freedom of speech for all, including anti-Semites and Islamophobes! Similarly, we should criticize and satirize all, from atheists to Christians, from Jews to Muslims, and from Greens to the far right” (*idem*). In these media representations, *Je suis Charlie* is presented as the symbol of freedom of expression, total, frontal and conflictual, the other hermeneutical details vis-à-vis the limits of legality, appropriateness or sensitivity being completely irrelevant, especially in a case of a *force majeure* such as that of a terrorist attack. In this setting, the prevailing narrative is that of a perpetual conflict where the mere formal participation with flags, pencils and slogans is not enough. Through substantial involvement at the local level and the transformation of any attack on freedom of expression in a definite social movement similar to *Je suis Charlie* there is hope and future for the secular and democratic values.

But not all journalists believe that the fight against fundamentalism, bigotry and extremism can rally behind *Je suis Charlie*. The executive producer for *Al Jazeera English* has openly expressed his skepticism vis-à-vis the dominant narrative in the European space wondering if that terrorist attack was really against freedom of expression and whether *Je suis Charlie* could have an alienating feature indeed. In the email sent to reporters, he offered other hermeneutic perspectives: “*This is a clash of extremist fringes... *Was this really an attack on “Free speech”? Who is attack-

ing free speech here exactly? Does an attack by 2-3 guys on a controversial magazine equate to a civilizational attack on European values...? Really? *Danger in making this a free speech aka “European Values” under attack binary is that it once again constructs European identity in opposition to Islam (sacred depictions) and cements the notion of a European identity under threat from an Islamic retrograde culture of which the attackers are merely the violent tip of the iceberg” (*BuzzFeed News*, 10/01/2015). Following different reactions from the reporters in the field it was observed within a division relating to how to interpret the attack on the French publication. A solution of “compromise” adopted in fact by many journalists is that expressed by an *Al Jazeera* reporter in the following formula « I condemn those heinous killings, but I’M NOT CHARLIE”.

On the same note goes the journalist from the *Daily Beast* with an article entitled “Trolls and Martyrdom: Je Ne Suis Pas Charlie” when he says that “I join with those who call for grief at the deaths of twelve human beings—but I’m not down with mourning the work that Charlie Hebdo was doing or standing up and saying “Je Suis Charlie,” like what they did was a holy mission” (*Daily Beast*, 09/01/2015). The issue of identification is also problematic for the *Salon’s* journalist that under the headline “The problem with “Je Suis Charlie”: That kind of solidarity comes with baggage”, suggests a semantic “baggage” attached to the motto Je sui Charlie: “So what does it really mean to say” I Am Charlie Hebdo”? It can run the gamut from “I am a defender of free speech” (see above) to “I think Islam is ridiculous and dangerous” to “I am a rabid French chauvinist” (*Salon*, 11/01/2015). Instead, other journalists under the same aegis “Je Ne Suis Pas Charlie” bring to the public a different argument against the inopportune slogan.

In the “Spare a Thought for Those Who Are Not Charlie” Rosa Brooks considers that there is a discrimination and politicization vis-à-vis the victims of terrorism: “If you want to be mourned by millions of marchers and eulogized by dozens of reverential world leaders, apparently you need to be Charlie Hebdo — and no one in Nigeria makes the cut” (*Foreign Policy*, 15/01/2015) then continuing to count the victims of terrorism close to the date of January 7, 2015, in Mogadishu, Pakistan, Lebanon or Mali without the minimal benefit from the media coverage. Her conclusion is predictable: “Yes, we should mourn the deaths at Charlie Hebdo, and stand up for free expression and a world safe from terrorist violence. So go ahead, wave your pencil in the air. Be Charlie, if you must. But while you’re at it spare a thought for all the non-Charlies out there, too” (*idem*).

However, Scott Sayare from *The Atlantic* in “What Je Suis Charlie Has Become” turn the argument against France. There is no need to look abroad to see that not all victims of terrorism benefits from the same publicity. In this regard, the journalist indicates the southern France where in 2012 seven French citizens of Arab and Hebrew origin were killed, the journalist wondering why there was not a similar

reaction to this atrocity, why no one bore the sign "Je suis Myriam"³. The argument is that of identity and proximity: the population in its majority "did not "identify" with minority soldiers or practicing Jews. It has identified, instead, with the staff of *Charlie Hebdo*, mostly white men and women devoted to an unstinting indictment of religion ..." and the terrorist attack was far away from Paris, "the seat of French political and cultural power" (*The Atlantic*, 30/01/2015). The coverage of *Charlie Hebdo* attack would reveal a schism regarding the identification: "France in its entirety is not Charlie, just as France in its entirety was not represented at the march on January 11. Missing were the Arabs, the blacks, the young people from the poor banlieues, and the Muslims, many of whom see in Charlie not themselves but the majority's self-righteous bully, and who see in laïcité not a principle of equal treatment but a device of discrimination and hypocrisy".

All these journalistic reports that question the "legality" of the motto bring to the fore the problematic issue of identifying with *Je suis Charlie*. This slogan either cannot be regarded as an incarnation of Western or European values since *Charlie Hebdo* is not considered a symbol of France and the freedom of expression due to its narrow niche where the publication is stuck, either the slogan reflects a mixture of variegated attitudes and beliefs that could degenerate into a huge anti-Islamic movement or the coverage and internationalisation of the slogan is conditioned on political and ideological grounds, most victims of other terrorist acts being utterly ignored. What these ideas have in common is the attitude towards the sacralisation of the *Je suis Charlie*, a sacralisation of the profane, an attitude expressed very well in the following words "the march, the slogan, and the ideology they celebrated have been sacralized, posited as the fundamentals of a new national unity, a renewed patriotic self-confidence" (*The Atlantic*, 30/01/2015) and in the jeremiad "When the only thing you're reverent of is irreverence, when the only thing you hold sacred is the idea that nothing is sacred, well, ... , you get one long continuous blast of pure offensiveness and taboo-breaking for taboo-breaking's sake until all taboos are broken and there's nothing left to say" (*The Daily Beast*, 09/01/2015). From these examples and highlighted words⁴ it is obvious that the journalists in the Anglosphere are presenting themselves as official "prophets" reacting to the new French national mythology through a denunciation of the "idols". They are "inspired" to warn the people of the danger of idolatry, thus disintegrating the new « golden calf » in the ashes of the iconoclastic images.

3. Analysis and interpretation

Images do have the ability to polarize the attitudes, and this is due to a certain, basic ontology: "The best evidence for the life of images is the passion with which we seek to destroy or kill them. Iconophilia and iconophobia make sense only to people

³ It is the story of Myriam Monsonégo, a six-year girl shot in the head by the assailant who opened fire against a Hebrew school in Toulouse on 19 March 2012.

⁴ The bold letters are not found in the original text; they are our addition to outline the religious language.

who think images are alive” (Mitchell, 2013, p. 90). Apparently, the "vitalistic" thesis proposed by Mitchell is not a hermeneutic caprice specific to art critics that permanently are in search for new meanings but reflects a deep concern for the dialectics of image either as iconoclastic rhetoric or as iconophile manifesto. Eventually, this is the polarizing effect of the image: “Images lend themselves equally to being displayed and venerated and to be desecrated and destroyed” (Belting, 1994, p. 1).

The icon becomes the currency for all secular or religious transactions, the motivating force in the social and political sphere because it is only through its presence there is a mediation between the government and the citizens: “... the theocracy of the visible becomes the key to all authority ...” (Modzain, 2005, p. 166). In this context, the genuine dispute is revolving around this issue – how to manage, to control the image, the power of the icon and thus to monopolise the visual economy and with it even the truth: “Truth is in the image, there is no image of truth. ... It is because this image has power that it is necessary to defend and protect it. It is not because it is true that it has power. It is because it has power that it becomes true, that it must be true” (p. 201). The iconoclasts do not reject the power of the image; they just want to control it. The image is power, and there is no power without the image (Modzain, 2005, p. 158) the one who controls the form also controls the substance. If the icon can be managed, then the image will be subject to the authority who did that possible according to the consubstantiality principle – to represent itself the image is dependent on the icon, but the icon would become a hollowed object without the presence of the image. In this setting, in the name of visibility and usefulness, the support that is artificial and material becomes even more important than the substance or the natural image. Thus, the icon replaces the image and in religious language this is pronounced idolatry.

On the other hand, like the ritual, the icon has an integrator role, bounding audience in a social construct. The icon serves as a symbol for order, providing “a sense of origin, destiny, and participation in that order... furnishing a context where the individuals can locate themselves” (Goethals, 1981, pp. 33-34). The sacred image is the very tool that can mediate between sacred and profane and media generates icons to mediate this relationship. More than that, the image as allegorical, symbolical entity possess a mysterious life, an aura (Benjamin, 1939); it is a fetish object generating signs that for the viewer may seem indecipherable as a hieroglyph (Marx, 2007). If the medium is the message (McLuhan, 1994) is that because the icon has a life of its own. It can generate a production of meaning of its own in the sense that the image itself (let us call it the "pure" image, either as a representation or as something else) must transmit a series of messages. Sometimes a signs is not generated *a priori*, and indeed the image contains signs they are not always explicit (Barthes, 1977).

Although they are visual signals, codified in a hermetic language their textual understanding is not the priority here but the transfer of power and value. The image has power and the user feels protected and empowered in its presence. Even the

prohibition to look at the image⁵, is based on the magic, sacred character of the image which the iconophile must take into account if she wants to stay in the protection space of her fetish.

A fetish is an object assigned with an intrinsic value specifically because it is a manifestation of power. Even if the production is human and material, basically is a representation of a supernatural; the materialization of this authority in the shape of an object does not diminish its power because it was transferred along with the production of the object. When the fetish no longer generates protection, power, luck, it can be abandoned or destroyed since remains just a devoid object. The fact is that the image has a propensity to this fetishisation process, and media is largely contributing in this regard.

A first observation about the fetishisation of the image in the context of media representations is how the national and international media used the image as text and visual image in the production of symbolic forms. We are referring to the highlighting of the *Je suis Charlie* theme as a particular image. In this aspect, there is a production of images where media is trying to convert the event from news and journalistic narrative into a visual image. In this respect, *Charlie Hebdo*, freedom, blasphemy, Islam, terrorism and conflict are not just fundamental narratives specific to the production of symbolic forms but mostly “projected” images from media space towards the public space for what might be called the iconifying of the social space (Goethals, 1990). This is the point when the image becomes an icon: “Terrorism, both the spectacle and the word, seems to have emerged as the idol of our time, demanding the “ultimate sacrifice” both from the terrorists and from those who mobilize the world to stap it out” (Mitchell, 2013, p. 190). The manner in which, for example, international media treats these topics, sometimes in contrast with the French representations confirms an actualisation of the old iconoclastic conflict. Specifically, statements like “freedom of expression is not an absolute”, “Je ne suis Charlie”, “Islam is a victim”, “the blasphemy should be regulated”, “terrorism is a consequence of imperialism” and the “clash of civilizations” are just a few examples of iconoclastic strategies aiming to overthrow the dominant images provided by the national press and some international media outlets, images perceived by others as already fetishized.

The fact is, as mentioned above, that always would be an ambivalent position vis-à-vis the image itself. However, when the image coagulates its meaning and becomes normative and frozen as an icon, the iconoclastic reaction is becoming visible. The media has the potential to coagulate the meaning of an image through an iconifying representation that may even lead to the elimination of the meaning production. In this context, it could be mentioned the media reaction toward the iconifying of the victim’s terrorist attack. Although there were a total of 12 victims only fallen cartoonists were represented in the production of images and from these just the image of the four – Charb, Cabu, Wolinski and Tignous – succeeded in the

⁵ That was the case with some fetishes where no gaze was permitted (see C. de Brosses, 1972, p. 174)

visual and textual iconography (*Slate*, 12/01/2015; *Le Point*, 07/01/2015; *The Huffington Post*, 07/01/2015) and sometimes only Charb's image was uplifted as the final symbol.

Specifically, during the Republican march the partial picture of Charb's face focused on his glasses was used as a symbol of protest against the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*. Added to this it was the ubiquitous visual sign *Je suis Charlie*. Here we are dealing with images and symbols that are treated as icons and to which some media outlets reacted in an iconoclast manner. For example, "Je suis Ahmed"⁶ failed to impose itself despite repeated attempts by a narrow segment of the public and the media. However, the media partially invoked the alternative slogan in an attempt to balance the dominant iconography that now become official (*The Herald*, 19/01/2015; *Daily Mail*, 09/01/2015; *The Independent*, 13/01/2015).

However, as we pointed out earlier in the article when we analysed the media representations of *Je suis Charlie*, the iconoclastic reaction was observed mostly against this slogan. Here are some examples, just from the headlines: "We Are Not All Charlie" (*The Atlantic*, 08/01/2015); "Are we really Charlie Hebdo?" (*NOW*, 9/01/2015); "I Am Not Charlie Hebdo" (*The New York Times*, 08/01/2015); "Trolls and Martyrdom: Je Ne Suis Pas Charlie" (*Daily Beast*, 09/01/2015); "The problem with "Je Suis Charlie": That kind of solidarity comes with baggage" (*Salon*, 11/01/2015); "Spare a Thought for Those Who Are Not Charlie" (*Foreign Policy*, 15/01/2015); "A la recherche des « je ne suis pas Charlie »" (*Bondy Blog*, 19/01/15) whereas at the content level the iconoclasm being more pronounced and refined.

In "L'hommage unanime de la presse nationale" *Paris Match* presents on a black background a series of 32 images of the front pages of the national press (see Annex 2) which describes succinctly as follows: "In the French press, a tribute to the 12 dead including the renowned cartoonists after the Kalashnikov attack on Wednesday in Paris committed against 'Charlie Hebdo' newspaper is expressed in black backgrounds and drawings. "We are all Charlie," is the newspaper "Liberation" headline. The reference brandished by many marchers at the rallies from Wednesday night is very often found in daily headlines. "Freedom murdered," claims "Le Figaro" that publishes photos of six of the victims: cartoonists Cabu, Charb, Honoré, Tignous, Wolinski and the columnist Bernard Maris. In an editorial entitled "War", the editor of the newspaper announces "a real war, conducted not by the murderers of the shadow but by methodical and organized killers, whose quiet savagery ices blood" (*Paris Match*, 08/01/2015).

It is interesting to note the construction of meaning in these images where keywords that appear in combinations of black, red and white colour with photographs or cartoons related to the tragedy or simply a black background with the word NON (no) serves to indicate the one way only sign of this conceptual "avenue" (see Annex n° 2). In this context expressions like *freedom*, *assassination*, *murder*, *Nous sommes tous Charlie*, *Je suis Charlie*, *press*, *barbarism*, *solidarity* become buzzwords. Add

⁶ It is about Merabet Ahmed, a Muslim policeman murdered in the street by the two terrorist brothers.

to this the images of the four emblematic cartoonists Cabu, Charb, Tignous, Wolinski, the “Je suis Charlie” sign or even some graphic details of the terrorist attack (glass penetrated by bullets, the street occupied by police cars) and even elements from the vigil attended by the crowd (candles, flowers, pens, inscriptions and participants on street at night). In all these constructed symbolic forms we are dealing with a production of meaning that is dependent on the circumstantial and tragic aspect of the terrorist attack, all representations in the national press reflecting the dramatic symbolism of the assassination of the very idea of freedom, the idea that is materialised in the production and transmission of graphic signs (cartoons) through real people.

However, the meaning produced with this formula is not fluid, changeable or negotiable but has one feature only – is frozen in text and images that do not allow ambiguity. It can be said in this connection that the national press almost “sealed” the production of meaning for at least two reasons: (1) due to the state of exception as a result of terrorist attack, paradoxically, the freedom of expression is “suspended” in the sense that alternative⁷ interpretations of events could obscure the dominant narrative already confirmed through media representations, the symbolic order being in danger of disintegration and the audience in need for a symbolic centre of power that can relate to; (2) because the object of the attack was not just the publication itself, or even the human casualties but the sacred concept of freedom then the meaning of the production of symbolic forms should be locked since the sacred cannot be negotiated or understood but accepted as such or rejected as a single, normative, absolute construction of meaning. In particular, the television is operating with direct communication with specific reference points and visuals, images that freezes ideas in a solid form, the meaning being coagulated (Petrof, 2015a, p. 192). That means that the visuals images become absolute compared with the textual ones, imposing a limitation on the audience, thus affecting the possibility of scepticism (Weber, 1991, p. 154).

Conclusions

This research was focused on how the production of symbolic forms transmitted through media representations were materialized in the case of the terrorist attack on *Charlie Hebdo* magazine with a specific interest on *Je suis Charlie* slogan. When social order is threatened or affected by destabilizing acts of political or religious violence media initiates a ritual that seeks to restore the order and generate a spirit of solidarity among the audience thus reconfirming the dominant narrative of society. The role of media can be likened to that of a *guard* who is called to preserve the symbolic order from disturbing elements and with that of a *sacerdot* that mediate the

⁷ Beyond the official accusations, it might explain why the expression used by Dieudonné « Sachez que ce soir, en ce qui me concerne, Je me sens Charlie Coulibaly » was immediately challenged and contested by the authorities and the media has initiated a boycott against the French comedian.

relationship between sacred and profane giving to the public the certainty by restoring the social balance.

Specifically, we sought to identify how the media initiates this ritual that it is at the confluence of mediatisation of the terrorism as a “necessary” act of journalistic choreography and the ideologisation of the public space as a communicational strategy. Media seeks to protect the public sensibilities by defusing threats and alarmist messages produced by the terrorist communication, calming the spirit of the audience through images and narratives to restore the confidence, normalcy, thus reconfirming the democratic values and the resilience against terror (Nossek, 2004, p. 327).

In the case of those violent, disturbing events that threaten the social order media is mobilised automatically as an instinctual response of society's “immune system”. When being attacked by “pathogens” that initiates aggression at the cellular level of society media must, therefore, respond immediately and efficiently, protecting the social organism. However, this organic, natural reaction does not lack ideological connotations mostly because the intervention of media in society is realized on a complex ideological repertoire, ideology in this sense being that mechanism by which the social construction of reality is produced.

Not only television has this effect but any visual or textual representation that uses icons instead of images, narratives instead of reports. The international press employed the same strategy as the national one but temporarily and strictly contextualized in the very time and space allocated to the dramatic event. On the first day of the attack, the international press followed the model of the French media requiring a precise, normative meaning through visual, explicit depictions. However, alternative views began to appear several days after when the event was converted from an image into a text, the meaning becoming immediately fluid. “In direct contrast to the visual image, the text employs a different form of communication, an indirect contact where the vagueness of the language, ambiguity of the writing and possibility of doubt permit individuals to see things in a new way, to germinate new ideas that can be transferred into culture” (Petrof, 2015a, p. 192). Hence in the recurring themes of international press the text plays a fundamental role, images losing their normative effect created in the aftermath of the attack.

Image fetishism is a phenomenon that belongs to the historical dialectic of the evolution of the image in the collective imagination, but it is also a modern practice thanks to the particular means of mass communication, media being able to generate a production of visual symbolic forms that could become normative. The image is no longer seen as “transparent, windows of the world” but more like a sort of signs that represent a constructed appearance. The image is not what appears to be but what was constructed to represent. Behind this process of mediation is concealed “an opaque, distorting, arbitrary mechanism of representation, a process of ideological mystification” (Mitchell, 2003, p. 8 ; see also Petrof, 2014).

In the circumstances of *Charlie Hebdo* attack on January 7, 2015, the international press highlighted a category of those who do not identify themselves with the *Je suis Charlie*. Because its ideological meaning the slogan was seen as not being representative of those who do not share the mission statement of the French publication or for those who although they suffered the same violent treatment have not been sanctified in eternal images. On the other hand, the media suggests that although there could be a majority of people who would not identify themselves with the ideal materialized in *Je suis Charlie* motto, despite their statements, marches, and appearances sympathetic with the French magazine, they are not quite Charlie. These representations in the form of narratives and iconographies establish the ambivalence of this famous slogan and its fetishization as a normative, absolute image.

In media representations, *Je suis Charlie* become such a fetishised image, employed by national media and some international press as a communicational and ideological strategy to preserve the symbolic order in society in the aftermath of the terrorist attack. However, some international media outlets approached the slogan from an iconoclast perspective in order to de-mistify it and to engage the audience in an open dialog, that image and narrative production would stay ambivalent and fluid.

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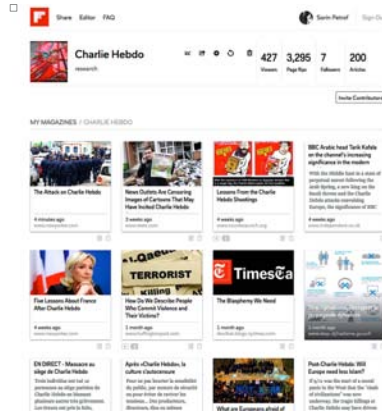
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Annex n° 1. The *Charlie Hebdo* category of articles as an example of how they were accessed and selected



Annex n° 2. PARIS MATCH, « L'hommage unanime de la presse nationale », *Paris Match*, 08/01/2015 and LES ECHOS, « Charlie Hebdo: la presse française et internationale bouleversée », *Les Echos*, 08/01/2015

