Media and the Totalitarian Society: Spectacle, ‘Simulacra’ and the Construction of (un)Reality in Communist Romania

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Abstract

The present article intends to offer a brief analysis of the ways in which the media can be used by totalitarian regimes as a means of manipulation and control with the ultimate goal to secure their political power. The emphasis is placed on a special case of manipulation through media, namely the huge spectacles staged on stadiums and always meant to be shown on television with the purpose to praise the achievements of the party and to glorify the great leader. The spectacle is presented not only as an obligatory part of the ‘personality cult’, but is analysed as a complex phenomenon having as first objective the manufacturing of a new reality to correspond to the utopian project of the perfect communist society. People have to be made to believe that there is no other reality than the one constructed and presented by the spectacle and the huge propaganda machine of the totalitarian regime. Staging, functioning with the merciless precision of clockwork, includes music, poetry, interpretation of historical characters and presentation of heroic events and those special pictures formed with the aid of flashcards or by the rapid movements of the bodies of the participants in the show. The paper aims to prove that these spectacles may be regarded as ‘world’ projections which acquire an ontological dimension of their own and in so doing it analyses the structural components used for their construction. The article starts from various media culture theories, including Guy Debord’s The Society of the Spectacle, but tries to build a model of analysis based on multiple perspectives applying a series of concepts used by postmodern cultural theories, such as Brian McHale’s notion of world projection, Jean Baudrillard’s ‘simulacra’ or Frederic Jameson’s insightful commentaries on the Romanian communist regime.

Keywords: totalitarian society; media; spectacle; simulacra; reconstruction of reality; staging; ontological levels.

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1. Introduction

Media and the totalitarian society, the two concepts placed under focus in the present article, are considered and analysed as elements of a complex equation which brings into play, or rather into dramatic clash, the two categories of actors of the socio-political arena: the governors and the governed. Concentrating on the complexities and the particularities of the relationships between governors and governed, as they are generated by their existence within a totalitarian regime, and on the manner in which these relationships are reflected and constructed by the media, the article is based on the assumption that the media are used as a potent instrument to secure the political power of the totalitarian system.

Starting from this hypothesis, the article sets out to explore the ways in which the media is transformed into a vehicle of the institutionalised ideology, with a view to highlighting the mechanisms of the intricate process by which the totalitarian system, in this particular case the communist regime, has striven to make social, everyday reality correspond to the utopian vision of an ideal, egalitarian society. Special attention goes to the mass spectacle which is discussed as a mandatory part of the personality cult, but also as a theatrical performance during which a new kind of reality is artificially created to sustain the dominant official ‘discourse’ (the ‘metanarrative’) having as primary source the ideology of the totalitarian regime.

The critical lens applied combine concepts belonging to the field of media culture theories, from Guy Debord’s notion of ‘concentrated spectacle’ to Henry A. Giroux’s analysis of the spectacle, or to the field of postmodernist theories, from philosopher and poststructuralist critic Jean Baudrillard, to political and cultural theorist Frederic Jameson or literary critic Brian McHale. In this way, the article intends to build its own model of analysis based on multiple perspectives in order to interpret the realities of a not so distant past. By deconstructing the artificially created world of the totalitarian regime the article aims to prove that the society envisioned by the ‘great leader’ and his party may be characterised as a dystopia rather than a utopia, a repressive system so distressingly similar to the fictional (or not?) world depicted by George Orwell’s novel 1984. In this context, the most important task, which represents at the same time the impetus of the whole endeavour, remains that of bringing to the fore the huge discrepancies existing between the falsified ‘reality’ constructed by the governing body and the reality of people’s daily lives. Trying to shed light on the suffering and daily struggle for survival of the vast majority of the Romanians, our analysis aims at dismantling the carefully orchestrated theatrical representations of reality, staged by the communist propagandistic machine whose most accomplished form is represented by the mass spectacle.

2. The Mass Spectacle and the Construction of (un)Reality

In 1989, Romania managed to emerge from one of its darkest periods in history, marked by the existence of a totalitarian regime. Characterised as one of the most oppressive and humiliating forms of government that has ever existed in Romania, the communist regime saw itself, instead, as the initiator and creator of a new era in Romanian history, called the ‘Epoch of Light’, the ‘Golden Epoch’ or ‘epoch of glory’.

Setting for itself such a great goal as the construction of a new society ‘multilaterally developed’, the communist regime considered that all its actions and efforts have to be organized and coordinated towards the accomplishment of this goal. In order to make this great vision become real, reality itself had to be adjusted to match the utopian society imagined by the great leader and the party. Thus the creation of a ‘New Man’ who would be perfectly fit for this new kind of society seemed the most natural course of action on the road towards the ‘socialism multilaterally developed’. Having as unique motivation the need to hold the power for itself, the communist regime felt entitled to control everything. Wanting to penetrate into the depths of human consciousness to be sure that there is no ‘seed’ of any idea of resistance or rebellion against the dominant political order, the communists made use of all forms of control and manipulation, including terror.
Aware of the force represented by the media (in the forms existing at the time: written press, radio and the national television) and their importance as a means for the propagation of its ideology, the regime exercised a fierce control over them. The image became one of the most powerful instruments for the construction of the new (un)reality. The obsessive proliferation of false images of happiness and welfare, in all written press (from journals to the few illustrated magazines usually called ‘almanah’ – almanac) and on television, together with the ever present photographs of the Ceauşescu couple, smiling and promising to lead the people directly into the ‘Golden Epoch’, were meant to create the impression that this was and always would be the best form of governance and the best society that ever existed on earth. To sustain this idea, the regime put into practice a carefully organised calendar of national holidays, like First of May, the Communist Party Day, the National Day of Romania – on 23rd August (to mention but a few) that were celebrated by a series of ceremonies and festivals taking the form of parades and mass spectacles.

The spectacle, conceived by the communists as a representative form of the ‘aestheticization of politics’, gathered great masses of people on stadia or other large places (plazas in front of important buildings or rooms inside these buildings). The spectacle consisted of a very well synchronised choreography of thousands of people (including children), dancing and grouping on the ground of the stadium to form various geometrical figures or letters of words, reciting of poetry to glorify the leader and sometimes dramatic representations of heroic events from Romania’s past and present history, which of course was one and the same with the history of the Communist Party and Ceauşescu’s rise to power. Of special importance was the patriotic music and the songs performed by the chorus. The animated pictures made with the aid of coloured cards or by the human bodies moving in perfect synchronicity had a striking visual impact, adding a dramatic effect to the whole performance. Transformed into a multi-media experience with the aid of two forms of visual communication, film and photographs, the spectacle was intended to construct a new reality on the basis of a ‘staged’ reality. The only aim of the ‘dramaturgy’ of the mass spectacle was the ‘aestheticization or, better said, the theatricalization of the current political reality, screen[ing] the apparata of might and blurring the boundaries between the public and the private sphere’ (Todić 2005), between the unreality of a manufactured world and the social reality.

The spectacle in its various forms is not an invention of the communists. It has existed since antiquity, the Greek theatre and the Roman spectacles, which included gladiators’ fights and animals and the re-enactment of battles, being, perhaps, among its most famous precursors. Its first ‘symptoms’, as Simón Marchán Fiz comments, may be traced back to the ‘stagings’ of the absolutist churches and courts and, after the rapid development of the mass media, it culminated in the ‘self-staging of the totalitarian states’ (2012: 166). The spectacle associated with the ‘stagings of power’ and defined as an element of the ‘aestheticization of politics’ reached its ‘paroxysm’ in ‘the stagings of the masses during Nazism’ (Marchán Fiz 2012: 165). During this time, the evolution of the spectacle enters a new phase with the whole concept being redefined ‘… after the local was transcended by the national and international thanks to media coverage in the public sphere, i.e., radio transmission, photography and film, the mass media of the day’ (Marchán Fiz 2012: 165).

At present, the visible ‘isomorphous’ relationships (Marchán Fiz 2012) between fascist and communist regimes makes more easily understandable and identifiable a certain category of the spectacle which may be considered as pertaining to these types of totalitarian regimes. It was the French theorist and philosopher Guy Debord who coined the syntagm ‘concentrated spectacle’ and associated it with dictatorship and bureaucratic economy (Debord 2002: 18). In fact, the concept of political spectacle and the whole theory and critical analysis of this concept owes much to Debord whose main work The Society of the Spectacle (1967) has exerted a great influence on a variety of contemporary theories on society and culture. Debord is the first one to consider the spectacle in all its complexity, conceiving it as phenomenon which reflects social reality: ‘The spectacle presents itself as society itself, as a part of society, and as a means of unification’ and it ‘… is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images’ (Debord 2002: 1). In his turn, Henry A. Giroux considers that the spectacle ‘…emerges in different forms under distinct social formations, and signals in different ways how cultural politics works necessarily as a pedagogical force to serve
the political and economic power of dominant groups’ (2006: 28). Both theorists analyse the concept of spectacle in close connection with the social and political organization in which it appears. The most interesting aspect of Debord’s theory is the emphasis on the spectacle’s complex capacity to acquire the status of the ‘real’, to become a ‘reality’ in itself: ‘[The spectacle] is not a mere decoration added to the real world. It is the very heart of this society’s real unreality’ (2002: 2).

By expressing in symbolic form the whole venture of the communist regime to create a ‘reality’ that will match the grandeur of its utopian vision – of an ideal, just, multilaterally developed society liberated from all its past, present or future enemies – the spectacle becomes the reflector of that social unreal reality. In fact, the spectacle situates itself in a long series of forgeries that make up the tableau of a simulated reality, and becomes in Jean Baudrillard’s terms a ‘simulacrum’, a representation of an ‘original’ reality that has, itself, never existed in the first place. The absurdity and unreality of a world of ‘simulacra’ projected by the totalitarian ideology is accentuated by the personality cult blown to grotesque proportions, the meaninglessness of the dominant official discourse suffused with clichés and the fake numerical reports transmitted by the media which were meant to highlight and praise the grandiosity of the regime’s achievements in all domains, from education, science and technology to agriculture and food supplies. Frederic Jameson (1999), adopting himself the concept of ‘simulacrum’, compares the communist world with Disneyland (which is considered one of the most famous materializations of the concept of ‘simulacrum’).

The critique of the representation of reality in the form of the concentrated spectacle may be pushed even further by an analysis of its structural components in the light of Brian McHale’s postmodernist theory on ‘world-projection’. As a part of the dominant discourse about reality authored by the totalitarian regime, the spectacle is attributed the significance of the only valid representation of reality. Claiming thus an ontological status for itself, the spectacle may be viewed as a projected world which makes great efforts at engulfing the real world. Literary postmodernist critic Brian McHale presents a very incisive analysis of the elements and strategies which have the effect ‘… of foregrounding the act of projecting a world…’ (1996: 12). The most obvious signs of the unreality or fictional nature of the constructed world are what he calls ‘the internal contradictions’ (1996: 12) expressed usually as a transgression of the codes (conventions) on which one relies to interpret reality. These codes are related especially to the understanding of the fundamental coordinates which make up an universe, namely time, space and the ‘characters’ populating that universe.

A close analysis of the communist regime’s endeavour of world-projection reveals the ways in which a series of elements destabilize the constructed ‘world’ from within. These elements, in a very succinct form, may be presented as it follows:

- representation of time as time-continuum or mythical/cyclical time, as a result of the blurring of the boundaries between the real time and the time of the spectacle. During the spectacle several temporal lines and universes intersect one another and become a time-continuum in which the heroic past becomes the eternal present considered as a series of glorious accomplishments of the party and the ‘supreme hero’ and ‘beloved leader’. The temporal rhythm as suggested by the ‘tableaux vivants’ of the spectacle is established by the rhythm of the collective enthusiast work of thousands of people moving in absolute harmony. The separation between public, standardized time and the subjective time of the human mind is not recognized, as the human mind has to be under a total control.

- the place of the spectacle, the ‘stadium’ represents in itself a highly symbic space or a ‘heterotopia’. Recent sociological studies (Stadium Worlds, Frank and Steets 2010) consider the stadium as a ‘lens’: ‘Stadium and the way [it] is built and used, always reveal something about the condition of society. Social, cultural and economic trends are condensed within, as under a magnifying glass’ (2010: 281). Along similar lines, Christopher Thomas Gaffney sees the stadium as a ‘symbolic representation of place’ (2008: 23) or even as an ‘iconographic representation of political ideologies’ (2008: 24). In the light of Michel Foucault’s theory about space (Des Espaces Autres, [Of Other Spaces] 1967), the stadium may be analysed as a special kind of place, a ‘heterotopia’. Heterotopias ‘…are something
like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia, in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are represented, contested and inverted’ (Foucault 2008: 17).
The stadium of the mass spectacle may be considered a heterotopia or a paraspace, as it confronts a real world with its (fictional) representation or ‘double’ (McHale 1996: 3). At the same time, the stadium is a space where the crowd is simultaneously ‘looking at…’ and ‘looked at’, a space where it is both a character of the spectacle, a subject and an object of ideological control and manipulation.

- transgression of the boundaries of identity by the projection of a collective identity and the dissolution of the individual self within the mass. Another important transgression of boundaries takes place by ‘mythification’, ‘…when real world entities… move from the profane realm to the realm of the sacred’ (McHale 1996: 36). Ceaușescu himself may be seen as a real being who undergoes ‘mythification’ since he is presented as the direct descendant of the great warriors and heroes of the past, starting with Burebista and continuing with Mircia…the Great (actually the Old, but because its infelicitous association with weakness and the old age, the ruler’s historical name had to be changed!) and Mihai Viteazul (Michael the Brave).

These elements (which have been only very briefly commented upon) are evocative of the absurdist manner in which the totalitarian regime from Bucharest tried to shroud the dramatic reality in a thick fog of lies. The society they created was not a utopia, but a dystopia (as the one imagined by Orwell in his novel). Behind all the theatrics and the manoeuvrings of the communists, lied the crude reality of an oppressed people forced to live in an enclosed system resembling a concentration camp, fighting everyday with the misery of a controlled distribution of food and of all other services.

3. Conclusion

The article aims to present a particular case of manipulation through media, namely the mass spectacle used by the communist regime in Romania, and builds a new model of analysis based on multiple perspectives (media culture theories, poststructuralist and literary theories) which has never been used before. Drawing on Guy Debord’s theory of the spectacle, the article also applies the newest sociological studies (Giroux 2006, Gaffney 2008, Frank and Steets 2010, Marchan Fiz 2012) and analyses the spectacle as a complex, paradoxical phenomenon which reflects and at the same time creates a new kind of reality or, in fact, unreality. Inspired by the poststructuralist and media theories which highlight the impact of the image on human consciousness and their role in creating new dimensions of reality or reality levels, the article foregrounds the ontological status of the spectacle and explores it from the standpoint of fictional or possible worlds theories (a model applied by Brian McHale in his study of postmodernist fiction). In this sense, the emphasis is placed on the mechanisms and structural components of the spectacle, with a view to pointing out the ways in which the communist regime attempted to get total control over the individual.

Today, more than twenty years after its fall, it may be said that many of us still feel that they are ‘haunted’ by the spectres of communism (to allude to Adrian Cioroianu’s This Ceausescu who Is Haunting the Romanians) or are still living under its ‘grotesquely elongated shadows’ (to use a metaphoric expression of the famous postmodernist writer, John Fowles). The devastating effects of the communist regime at the level of human consciousness as well as on the Romanian society at large are far more profound and far more lasting than one can have ever imagined (perhaps, it suffice to mention the irrecoverable loss of an entire cultural and political elite killed in the communist prisons). Both the research on this topic and the endeavour to study it from a different perspective have been motivated (as already mentioned in the introduction) by the desire to cast light on the suffering of the Romanians who lived in a totalitarian society. To understand the past is absolutely necessary in defining one’s identity and means in the end to express one’s solidarity with or a sense of belonging to that community. At the same time to recall it to the younger generations seems the right thing to do for those who were young or lucky enough to live to tell their story.
References

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