The post-modern paradigm – a framework of today’s media impact in cultural space

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Abstract

This paper analyses the present usage of new media and of the virtual spaces in the contemporary day to day life. Our analyses underline how the post-modern theorists considered the main concepts as explanatory in describing the changes in the social life, in the cultural space, in the human-machine relationship. The concept of “virtual” represents one of the main concepts used in post-modern paradigm due to its specific features. We try to demonstrate that post-modern paradigm is explaining the framework of today media impact in cultural, social and human space, we present the main debates and points of view of the contemporary theorists that described in their work the features of post-modern life, the main concepts and effects on our day to day life (Lyotard, Derrida, Habermas, Foucault, Baudrillard).

Keywords: Post-modernism, Virtuality, new media.

1. Introduction

Virtuality is one of the fundamental concepts carried in the post-modern paradigm due to the features it implies and to its forms of manifestation. The virtual space, the communication and media technologies are marking points that can be found in the contemporary debates regarding the specific of society and culture (Morales, 2009). Also, the central elements that shape the post-modern paradigm are the effects or cultural forms of the new media, of the virtual space and of the communication through media technology.

According to Ihab Hassan (1985) the term postmodernism was first used in 1930 by Federico de Onis with the purpose of highlighting a minor reaction to modernism. The popularity of the term manifested itself in New York during the 1960s among young artists, writers and critics who were part of a movement rejecting the institutionalized culture of museums and academies. Beginning with the 1970s the postmodernism became a large concept used in both the United States and Europe, generating debates and theories in the writings of Lyotard, Derrida, Habermas, Foucault, and Baudrillard etc. Among its central features one can numbers (Featherstone, 1988, 203-205; Bauman, 1988, 225-226): the decrease of the borders between art and every day life; the collapse of the hierarchic distinction between high culture and mass culture; an undefined style that favors the eclecticism and the mélange of colors; parody, irony, games and the celebration of surface, superficial culture; the decline of originality and artistic genius and the assertion of the repeating principle in art; deconstruction, the lack of

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systematizing and the proclamation of inter-textuality, of the hypertext (Lyotard 1979, Turkle, 1994, 2005); the pluralism of cultures and of knowledge (Bauman, 1988). In the mean time Kellner (1998, 83) considers that the post-modern paradigm implies the implosion of borders, the trans-topic thinking, the radical differences and the hermeneutic attack on realism and fundamentalism. The changes brought by the post-modern paradigm must be seen in relation to the new developments of the society (such as the impact of computerized technologies and of the global restructuring of capitalism). In the same line of ideas, postmodernism is a characteristic of the contemporary society, tending towards globalization that presents changes of the cultural sphere, the forming of new types of audiences and of publics. In this new type of society there is an emergence of the symbolic space, generated by the multiplication of the communication and information means, by the diversifying of the audiences and of the public. Also, there are declassifications, deconstructions of monopolies and there are cultural enclaves that are becoming legitimate at different intra and inter social levels.

2. Stakes of Postmodernism

One of the fundamental works treating postmodernism is that of Jean-François Lyotard, La condition postmodern, published in 1979, translated into English in 1984, together with the essay An answer to the Question What is Postmodernism? These works became key texts of the spreading of postmodernism in the English speaking world. Through this piece of writing, postmodernism becomes identified with the critic of fundamental knowledge, with the idea that philosophy might restore the universal valid human knowledge in relation to anti-fundamentalism. Lyotard states that one cannot discus about an all comprising idea of reason, but about several (1993, 5). For Lyotard, meta-narrative modernity gives way to a multitude of local narrations, small ones, partial in expressing each its own difference. From the first pages of the book, it is clearly shown that the post-modern period corresponds to the global mutation in the status of knowledge, mutation that takes place due to the development of informational and communication sciences (1993, 12-14).

Following the logic of the philosophic post-modern heritage, the idea of deconstruction can be found in different forms in the work of Foucault (for instance in the analysis of the concept of power), but also in the work of Derrida. The derridian deconstructive concept has its origin in the cybernetic theory of Norbert Wiener, and its meaning refers to an endless informational flux and to an undetermined process (Lafontaine, 2007, 38). These vintage is recognized also by Katherine Hayles (1999) when stating that the deconstruction is the child of the informational era when one endeavors to underline the radical extraterritoriality of writing and its non-subjective nature (1999, 43). Derrida claims that there is no general absolute origin of sense for as long as the presence is never present and subjectivism cannot be but an illusion built and deconstructed through writing (Derrida, 2001). The analysis undertaken by C. Lafontaine (2007) on the historical influence of the cybernetic theory, founded by N. Wiener during the Macy Conferences completes the perspective of the theoretic frame of postmodernism.

An original interpretation of post-modernism is realized by Foucault starting from the analysis of the sameness and being different in Cuvintele și lucrurile (1966/2006). In this sense the taxonomy commented by Foucault (2006, 39) starting from a text by Borges (taxonomy which is the basis for the entire archaeology of the discourse and the language of Cuvintele și lucrurile) regarding a certain Chinese encyclopedia on the classification of animals reflecting the joining and the sameness with the post-modern perspective. Also, the entire vision of Foucault on the sameness (on a closure that is opening) and that cannot exist under the form of another, in continuous movement and negotiation of the sense, is easily placed as a way of interpreting the virtual space. One can practically state that especially in this space a human being does not die due to his or her attachment to an object, a thing or a representation. Through the permanent renewal, reshaping the human of Foucault is being perpetually recreated. In this context, the anti-humanism promoted by Foucault has a political dimension apart from the epistemic one.

In the space of communication one may notice the hegemony of the figurative element in contrast with the discourse, a splinter that derives from Lyotards work. In post-modernism one may notice a favor for images, for the visual instead of words, the preference for the dimension of the spectator instead for the distance. This idea is largely debated in another work of reference: Scott Lash Discourse or Figure? Postmodernism as a Regime of Signification (1988). Lash (323) draws the attention on the resemblance between the fake representation of Baudrillard and the figurative/discursive distinction of Lyotard. Proclaiming a society of images, Baudrillard is in the post-modern paradigm. The present society is characterized by the hegemony of images, of the visual compared to the verbal and the narrative. Lyotards distinction is founded on the Freudian psychoanalytic theory. The discourse represents the secondary process by which the alter ego operates according to the principle of reality. The figurate is by contrast the primary process of in unconscious that operates according to the principle of pleasure. Thus, speech,
the words belong to the secondary process and manifest themselves according to the principle of reality, whereas the image (as a perceptive memory) is the result of the primary process through which the desire is fulfilled. This discussion characterizes the opposition speech/image: in contrast to words, images signify the iconic element, through the resemblance with the referent which is modified by using the speech.

In the production of cultural post-modern goods, the intellectuals enjoy a different status. Lyotard, but especially Zygmunt Bauman (1988) considers that the role of intellectuality has been modified due to broadening and the plurality of cultural goods market, their authority on the educational project being diminished. From law givers, privileged with the possession of universal knowledge, they have come to hold a role of cultural go betweens (Featherstone, 1988, 213; Kellner, 1998, 74), of enablers for others in a universe of multiplied and diverse worlds, of games and of languages. This idea will extend to other domains of the social life, especially in the contemporary pedagogy that puts an accent on the modification of the role for the educator from central actor of the educational process to that of partner, tutor and mentor for the student. Due to mass culture and consumerism it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain authority and a distinctive role in high culture. In this contexts, Bauman proposes a sociology of post modernity (1988, 235) that should have as a study object the pluralism of post-modern society that should posses the ability for hermeneutics and interpretation in order to be analyzed and described together with the new changes of the social environment. Never the less, Bauman’s sociology of post modernity does not tackle the problem of new technologies, of ways in which techno culture changes the nature of the public sphere. Also, it does not explore the way in which multimedia produces new forms of text and in which it displaces the centralism of word and discourse. Thus, although characteristic to postmodernism, Bauman does not analyze the central role of the media and of the new technologies in building the contemporary society (Kellner, 1998, 82).

3. Conclusions

One of the important assertions to be taken into account in an analysis of postmodernism is that this one does not represent the explanatory key to the contemporary universe. Thus, there is no Unitarian postmodernist theory, but more likely a set of perspectives, of post-modern theories that sometimes coexist with each other, including the modern perspective. This fact is determined by the existence of a large community of post-modern theoreticians which for most of the time contradict one another. Thus, one may notice the significant differences between thinkers and theoreticians such as Baudrillard, Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, and Bauman. Even more, the writings of Foucault, Lyotard and Baudrillard evolve through various stages, with some changes in the point of view taken. Our main research findings underline that new media and the new technologies of information and communication are one of the central factors of changing in the social and cultural life. We are witnessing the alteration of human roles due to the multiplying spaces or to deconstructing structures (in derridian sense). There is also taken place a global mutation in the knowledge statute which becomes fragmentized and diverse. The individual as human being has encountered new forms of socialization in spite of the general cry for its lost and its loneliness. He is capable now to discover new competences in order to achieve his needs, to use its creative nature to fulfill his work or to achieve his private goals. In conclusion postmodernism- just as modernism- is a contested field, but, never the less it represents a complex adventure (Kellner, 1998, 79).

References

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