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Revolutions are some kind of bed-time stories; big-time happenings and spectacular public redemptions are just tales meant for public use, the “panem et circenses” of modern times. Legends from the depths of history, myths and beliefs from an-historical times, that provides the ethnological meanings and senses of our present existence. Religiously preserved in their originality, and yet so elaborated and actual. Influenced by and influential over the teller. The teller, which in modern history is the measure of all things, the eternal eye in the sky: the media.

This time, the teller is the subject of a story, shared by Mihai Coman, a Romanian anthropologist and the main founder of the journalistic educational system in his country. The immediate post-communist period was, for Romania’s cultural and social medium, a time of rebirth and renewal. From the manifestations of a closed culture, kept that way by some old and patriarchal models of guidance and constriction, the pass to a completely free and democratic atmosphere was quickly and enthusiastically made. Within the limits of “the change flow”, new disciplines appeared on the cultural stage, so necessary and naturally assimilated, that soon became an integrated part of the national mentality. Among the “newcomers” were the sciences of communication and the cultural anthropology itself. In the communist period, the cultural anthropology didn’t had the support of an institutional recognition, like folkloristic, ethnography or rural sociology did, therefore being studied only by enthusiastic people, as an exotic and somehow spare-time occupation. After the crucial moment of 1989, improvements could be seen, but not too many or too spectacular. In fact, the studies kept their consecrated themes – folklore, ethnography, etc. –, only “borrowing” some sets of research methods from the anthropological domain. This way, the idea of applying classical anthropological concepts on contemporary life and society began to take form.

This book stands for an example of applied anthropology on one of the most common and spectacular areas of contemporary existence: mass-media. The book is structured on two main chapters that explain and justify each-other.

The first part concerns the theoretical frame of the work, necessary for the comprehension of the later-to-come chapters. There are a few interesting theories in this chapter, starting with the dilemma of modernity as an anthropological terrain. The anthropology of modern societies, the domain’s new age, is born out of the classical anthropology, which basically concerns primitive, wild, and archaic communities, totally

different from what we live nowadays. Nevertheless, this new branch has totally opposite interests and objects of study, its attention being focused on modern life specificities and life-styles, for which it has to get close to its subject, to mingle even. Only that by doing this, it breaks the principle of its legitimacy as a science: “the study from a distance”, as described by a large number of authors (G. Althabe, M. Selim, F. Affergan, M. Auge, J. Clifford, etc.).

Further away, the author proposes an ethnographic perspective over the phenomenon of mass-media, doubled by a mythological and ritual analysis of the media spectacle. The myth is placed at the base of every written line, and is used as a universal translator and mean of interpretation. The whole media space is embedded with heavy symbolical load that puts it in an original light, even though its color is a bit exaggerated here and there. The mechanics of the analyzing process are rather simple, but spectacularly fructuous. Basically, every journalistic process and procedure is first mystified, and then demystified by the eye of the author, who, after studying the results, but most important, the process itself thoroughly, jumps to conclusions and makes written observations. In the end, the events appear as what they were (subjectively speaking, of course), what they should/could be, and what the media made them to be. It is a discussion of causality, one of approach, applied to a certain press subject. At this point, the press events can be the targets of two kinds of media approaches: the scientific, purely argumentative one, afferent to the notion of “logos”, and the other, which has a discourse centered on the narrative order of events, capable of a symbolic reconstruction of the happenings, afferent to “mythos”. This path leads in the end to a very short anthropological analysis of ways of thinking related to this subject, inspired by the question of Lévi-Strauss’ inspiration: “Does the modern human being think savagely?”

The second part of the book refers to certain media events that took place mainly in the first years after the revolution of 1989, and reflects the realities of that time. The choice of the studied period is not random, because it refers to a period of great social changes and turmoil, and it also coincides with the beginnings of the Romanian’s free press system. These case studies offer examples of ritualistic and mythological interpretations that go beyond the concrete forms of manifestation – the media texts and stories -, searching the “profound cultural codes” which generate and offer a meaning for the media discourses of the time.

The first study refers to the University Square and its ritual dimensions. This location is considered to be the “0” kilometer, the very heart of Bucharest, capital of Romania. It was also the scene of the manifestations that led to and followed the revolution. The author makes the delimitation between the space, the time, the actors, the actions and the symbols of the events. From a spatial perspective, the University Square appears as a modern “axis mundi”, containing symbolic marks of religious, cultural and urban community between people and their beliefs. The dynamics of the event takes us to the temporal analysis, best described by repetitive tempos and moves performed by the social actors, who don’t really relate to each-other in the beginning, but after they have assimilated the repetitive tempo of the atmosphere, they act like a congruent and complementary mass, performing their acts of protest, which had a religious and political materialization.

The author continues in the next study to follow the reflection of live-transmitted revolution and the journalistic mythologies of the moment. Here, he presents a very interesting concept regarding the modern sacrifice, exemplifying with the process and execution of the communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu. The conclusion is that in our times, the immolation does not possess the attribute of concrete, physical annihilation any longer, but it is all about a symbolic sacrifice, regarding the processes of moral and social annihilation, shame and humiliation, all of these long-term, lent and widely mediated processes. That is why the judgment day of the communist dictator was a profoundly wrong one, giving birth to press reactions that transformed the Romanian revolution in a stolen one, and the triumph of history in a circumstantial history.

The book continues with the treaty of two major press subjects of the time, two visits, both of remarkable people, special for different reasons. One of them is ex-king's Mihai visit, and the other is of the pop music superstar Michael Jackson. Quite equal as importance, the two events shared different targets of population and popularity. The ex-king's visit was presented in the time's press as a mystical event, sharing both positive and negative connotations, depending on the political orientation of the journalists. While the ex-king's pilgrimage was a sacred and mythical one, the superstar's visit was also mythical, but embedded by human mythology and used for political interests. Michael Jackson's pilgrimage was a laic one, addressed to the people, to the fans. Their interest in the musician was canalized towards the leaders of the political class, in some sort of political liturgy, which preceded the national carnival caused by this great event. The mechanisms of manipulation and the anthropological theories concerning the events are very interesting and very well detailed, making a pleasant and voluptuous reading.

The last study focuses on the image and perception metamorphosis suffered and induced by a certain Romanian personality, a rather controversial poet and politician that by a number of few strategic public apparitions related and commented further by the mass-media, managed to construct himself a solid and somehow loveable image. The means, mechanisms and their social impact are described thoroughly and integrated in the historical and social context of the time. The book concludes with an anthropological analysis regarding the self-perception of the media and its action and intervention structures.

In the end we have a book that produces analyses of contemporaneous society by using means, methods and terms belonging to classical anthropology, and even traditional ethnology – in terms of myth, rituals, magic. A book with a spectacular content, and with a new approach on an already spectacular domain: mass-media. It has some very interesting choice and presentation of concrete cases of study, truly representative for the psychology of the Romanian spirit and the post-revolutionary mentality associated to it. Yet, in some cases, the main theme is fragmented or neglected by methodological and excessively theoretical aspects, which only result in making the reading inadequately dense and its comprehension more laborious. Also, a certain didactic linearity, a thematic monotheism of the book – even though it proves a very good and punctual following of the declared subject - becomes somehow irritating and tiresome from a point on, with consequences on the reader's pleasure and interest. Still, the book is dosed in such a way that the unpleasant moments never last more than a few paragraphs, or a few pages. It has very good substance, and even if sometimes the author gives up on style or form, the text is still a very attractive one; after all, it is a specialty book, not a narrative novel.

It remains in the end an original production, and a book worth reading, especially if one is interested in knowing and understanding the triggers and mechanisms of Romanian media system, and, through it, the Romanian social spirit and way of life.