Babeş-Bolyai University

Faculty of Letters

SUMMARY

OF PHD THESIS

POSTMODERN MYTHOLOGIES

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Chapter 4 – The Myth as a Cultural Construct

Chapter 5 – The Virtual Space – Another Type of Labyrinth of the conemporary Imaginary

SUMMARY

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Postmodern Mythologies is more than an ambitious exercise to highlight the main metamorphoses of the myth in postmodern society; it is also a project that aims at demonstrating the way in which the myth functions as a cultural construct. The thesis is focused on mythologies of counterculture and those of consumer society. Our methodology consists of deconstruction, comparative analysis, fragmentariness, while the aim of this demarche is concentrated not only on pointing out the phenomenon of mythic desacralization in postmodernism, but also registering the specificity of the main myth of the consumer society.

The thesis includes five chapters. The first chapter – *Reception of the Myth* – rebuilds diachronically the manner in which the myth has been viewed, pointing out Eliade's hermeneutical aspects that we consider compatible with the premodern and modern mythical imaginary. While Eliade's perspective on the myth is an exemplary storytelling or "true history"[1], a *naratio* with a function of universal pattern, that cannot be timely regarding the mythopoetics of postmodern text. That is true given the fact that postmodern *diegesis* is nothing else than a game of mythic electrons of meaning that are powdered through the great adventure of *semiosis*. In Roland Barthes' terms, the myth is a "second order semiological system" in its relationship with language; it is a "metalanguage" or a "true and unreal story at the same time that transforms history in nature".

The second chapter - *Mythical Desacralization in Postmodernism* – presents the definition of basic concepts (postmodernism, postmodernity and mythical desacralization), as well as the circumscription of the mythical imaginary of counterculture of the '60s, analyzing the new mythic morphologies of the *New Age* generation. At the same time, the chapter offers the

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[1] Mircea Eliade: *Miturile lumii moderne. Mituri, vise şi mistere.* Editura Univers Enciclopedic, Bucuresti, 1998, p.17

interpretation of some of Ioan Petru Culianu's creations in mythical key. On the other hand, we suggest that Culianu's work marks the transition from Eliade's logocentrism to the pluri-discursivity of the worlds of postmodern text, anticipating the cybertopias of the virtual medium.

The world *desacralization* supposes the shredding of the centre, which is divided in a-centred particles so that the decay of the sacred reaches the fall into profane: "Actually, there is no World, but only some fragments of a shredded universe, an amorphous mass made of an infinite number of places more or less neutral, where the man moves, herded by the obligations of an integrated existence in an industrial society".[2] Desacralization supposes the "exhaustion" of *mythos* of its religious valency, losing its sacred character, while that decay of the myth attracts the remythologization, a process that finds its explanation in its very mental-ideological configuration of the man.

Escaping the contingent is viewed as being reached through the *art of transformation*, as Culianu would say, respectively through the magic of the text as a form of manifestation of a type of sacredness of postmodern spirituality. Tracing a line between *homo symbolicus* and *homo religiosus* and revealing the membership of the symbol more as a cultural category than a structural one, Culianu draws attention to the complexity of the problem of symbols. On the other hand, he points out the idea that they represent the result of a mental combination, regarding myths, religions and even the notion of reality as a huge mind-game. Thus, religion understood as a cognitive phenomenon of a rhizomic substance in postmodern terms is generated by games of mind through a similar mechanism to those of computer programs. Mythologies of counterculture, as New Age movement bring in the foreground new mythical morphologies as an effect of the tendency to escape the world through extra-corporeal experiences, shamanic trances induced by the consumption of hallucinogens, faith in extramundane or forms of extraterrestrial life. Therefore, travelling in time, the illusion of existence as a spectral projection in the sense of Baudrillard's theory of simulacra, as well as decorporealization represent literary themes that mirror the "overcoming the contemporary relativism through the spiritual transgression"[3]. The obsession of escaping time and space is circumscribed by an area of magical writing in which the magical papyrus, the emerald stone or the magical painting are as many possible portals if not towards a world beyond, then towards another dimension. Decorporealization supposes an

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[2] Mircea Eliade: *Nostalgia originilor.* Trad. De Cezar Baltag. Edit.Humanitas, Bucureşti, 1994, p. 121

[3] Paul Cernat*: Mistagogii epistemologice*. În *România culturală.Bucureştiul cultural*, Nr. 100 / 12 octombrie 2010

experience of shamanic type through which the soul leaves the physical body and it blends with the great universal energies. As we ascertained, such a postmodern shaman may be considered the pseudo-anthropologist Carlos Castaneda. *The Teachings of Don Juan* is the text that imposes the pleasant feeling of slipping into other realities; it also uncovers the secret of shamanic trances induced by hallucinogens consumption, fictionalizing thus the credible.

As a form of expression of some collective suppression, the myths may be considered social constructs that reflect forms of religiosity of the collective subconsciousness. Concerning postmodernity, parodic religious forms of counterculture, *psi* phenomena or espionage mythology prove to be social constructs that find their roots in the new technological conquests and virtual world, as well as new forms of substituting the old behaviours of relating to sacredness. Readjustments/de(re)constructions of myths in the contemporary world reflect the relation between that *Weltanschauung* circumscribed by works of Marx, Nietzsche, Freud or Frazer, which reflected ancient traditional mythology and new cultural identity, with its new mythologies – the heroic bestiary, the great dream of the united Europe, the power of new sciences or of the new man-machine, mythology of posthumanity.

The postmodern religiosity may be understood as an expression of some forms of eclectic, syncretic, dogmatically unsustainable Neopaganism that is largely indebted to social contamination by technical means. The scientific momentum of these turboaccelerating cyberindustrial times (Deleuze and Guattari) has determined the construction of new mythologies. It is the case of some spiritual movements as *Google Church, Discordianism, Last Thursdayism, Maradonian Church, Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster* or religious directions that established false epistome, which are based on the faith in UFO, such is the case of *raelian church, theory of the hologram universe* etc. The mythologies of sacro-therapies reflect the manner in which the ample scientific revolution of the last decades has shaped our way of relating to life, reality or religiosity due to new experiments and findings so that the man of our century developed a major dependence toward the alerted rhythm of science, handling expectations to magical machines. These machines/devices are seen as a chance of healing or even touches of immortality: new medical equipment that tracks affections with the help of bioresonance, irisology, and corporeal purification through bioenergetic techniques of reiki massage. Biotechnologies fuel the fascination for biological death annulment or man's temptation to pervade beyond the incomprehensible, thus resurrecting the myth of universal

panacea, while the postmodern feminine representations offer the image of the new Eve, attracted by finding the beauty elixir.

The proclaimed globalization of postmodernity settles a mythology of a global body near a global village by annulling frontiers between cultures. Banks of organs, implants with genetic embryos, prostheses or silicones of all types represent fragments of a transhuman/posthuman hybridization specific for postmodern anatomy. In Hesperus, the mythology of brain hologram functions as an illusion of past of a defragmented/dismembered humanity on which other illusive projections are placed, projections of a utopic cybernetic future. *Hesperus* is a novel of winners and weak heroes, of mutants and clones, replacements of nations' titans of older days. That permanent problem of taking possession of territories brings into discussion not only morphologies of a controlled world, but also warps of a perfect, invincible and petulant civilization, given the cynicism of that perfection.

Basically, we may identify in postmodernity two alternatives of relating to the sacred phenomenon. On one hand, we may talk about disenchantment of the world, a proclaimed phenomenon (Max Weber, Durkeim, Wittgenstein) in the name of secularization and on the other hand, we may identify the denying attitude according to which we don't discuss about a comeback to sacred/religiosity; we rather talk about extirpating/annulling sacredness due to fundamentalism (Marcel Gauchet's thesis). In other words, in nowadays society we may meditate on events that converge unto disenchantment and annulment of religiosity, as well as what Jean-Pierre Sironneau remarked as the survival of the symbolic language and its preeminence toward the conceptual constructions, a permutation of sacred/religious experience in other cultural contexts. As a result, the religious phenomenon from nowadays society is related to the specificity of the social constructs.

Postmodernism produces an obvious change: the displacement from the concept of *creation* structured around a centre on the concept of *text* as *writing*, endowed with the power of transcendence. The postmodern conscience is remarkable due to its fragmentary vision of world and a combinatorics of the sign that offers the illusion of leaps from reality into possible/credible realities. That is possible through an assumed game of deconstruction that triggers an assumed labour of spraying the meaning. As we could notice, the past is rebuilt for magic metafictions of counterculture based on a repeated or multiple "encoding" through some artistic means as parody, allusion, pastiche and quote. The postmodern text is thus a world of particles freed of

meaning, a world made of fragments of overlapped worlds so that to create the great illusion of simulacra. It is the text of mythological *trails* which are revealed under the dense fog of writing (Eco). The text is seen as a ramified product of a creative mind, as we may notice in the epistemological prose of I. P. Culianu, J. L. Borges or U. Eco.

The third chapter - *From the Cretan Labyrinth to the Labyrinthian Text* – represents an attempt of literary poetics, absorbing the mythical postmodern imaginary, the architectural pattern of the rhizomic labyrinth. Thereby, we took into account the explanation of the mythical intertextual functionality as a ramified process of the mind game, which supports the idea of a great adventure of the postmodern *semiosis*. From the perspective of mythopoeia of the space, passing from logocentrism to pluricentrism may be marked by a certain type of mythical intertextuality, built in the shape of a *rhizomic labyrinth* – a term that we intended to impose as an architectural metaphor for the postmodern text. The rhizomic mythopoeia of the postmodern text highlights the relativism indebted to several levels of reality. That effect is obtained due to a logic of mythical dismembering-reassembling specific to postmodern artist's vision who becomes not only a collector, but also a conceiver of myths or a mythical parodist.

Mythical intertextuality is the essence of a process of producing the postmodern text, a process through which the *open work* becomes an accelerator of mythical particles. Once the accelerator starts to work, new theories of the text propel towards a fluid mechanics of acquiring meanings based on a game of significances. Myths function as rhizomic particles, some electrodes freed of meaning that are agglomerated on a plateau, in Deleuze's words. Postmodern relativism proposed a semiotic game in which premodern forms of myths (or their rewritings) are interconnected in a net that annuls the logocentric and linear, even binary principles of a literary work. In such a variable demystifying society, where the tendency of annulment of competition between religion and science is visible, the myth has a crucial role in producing the meaning, as it is responsible for the meaning filling of the work, for feeding the production of significance. Thus, from postmodernist perspective, it is not only the process of becoming or the repeatability of the myth that is important, but also the complexity of relations that are settled between these myths that allow short circuits of myths from various cultures. From that perspective, *demythologization* means the annulment of historicism. Identity is not shaped on the basis of an ordered procedure anymore. Sacredness is not manifested in a logic of premodern ritualistic

order, but it is manifested by/through chaos, which gives birth to agglomerations of meaning, displaced mythical particles that are reassembled, generating levels of reality.

From the perspective of virtual culture, the *hypertext* would represent not only a virtual materialization of bodies of texts, but also an emanation of language and our mythical representations as mind programs. The active involvement of the reader in hypertext, as well as assuming the role of the constructor supposed an update of the exterior world of the digital space that takes the shape of the human psyche; the hypertext reshapes our cognitive processes[4]. The *storyspace* as an artificial area is a form of utopia of the world in the variant of a virtual text through which the reader defines himself/herself. The hypertext may be interpreted as an alternative to pervade the authorial collective subconsciousness; we mention significant examples S. Jackson's project *Skin* or hypertexts *Patchwork Girl* (1995), *My Body* (1997) and *The Doll Games*. Writers of hypertext fructified the great dream of poststructuralists and deconstructionists so that Derrida's dialectics represents the basis of their creation, alongside concepts like *author's death, the Great Text, rhizomic text* (Deleuze and Guattari), *multilineality*. The compatibility between postmodern poetics regarding writing and nature of hypertext is largely due to the development of new technologies. They allow the achievement of ramified forms of the text, seen as a network of texts that build the adventure of a virtual semiosis, a rhizomic labyrinth desirable for structuralists as well.

Starting with the '50s-'60s, the concerns for myth and mythology bring into the European stage new names as Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, Michel Maffesoli, Philippe Walter, Joël Thomas, Pierre Brunel, Paul Carmignani, and Claude-Gilbert Dubois. The Center of Imaginary Research of Grenoble established by Gilbert Durand explores a more and more mythocritical attitude; we mention here Georges Dumezil, Gaston Bachelard, Charles Maurron, Campbell, and Mircea Eliade.

In a century of speed where the scientific development hallmarked everything, we notice a rethinking of myth valences and an attempt to implement widely a hermeneutics of cultural imaginary. The continuous mythical regeneration is due to the fact that the myth represents an inexhaustible matrix of combinations and symbolic representations that confer the person a possibility of the most ingenious combinations. The contemporary art is remarkable, given the

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[4] David Jay Bolter: *Writing Space: Computers, Hypertext, and the Remediation of Print*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000

syncretism influenced by forms of parodying traditional mythology, through which an escape from contingent into possible worlds/realities is undertaken. The only difference from previous eras is that not the deities' world has descended on earth, but the world becomes a relative concept dominated by old powerless deities, depleted of sacredness. The fourth chapter – *The Myth as a Cultural Construct* – aims at defining new mythical morphologies from the vision of consumer society. Thereby, superheroes, cyborg creatures or hypermythologized ones replace the gallery of civilizing heroes, articulating phantasms of a postmodern imaginary anchored in the virtuality of an absent society, as Jean-Luc Nancy would say. But the distance of the postmodern man from the traditional mythology isn't defined in terms of *white mythology* (Derrida); it doesn't annul the geographic space of mythologies, but it is indebted to desacralization and de-territorialization as specific attitudes of contemporary worlds.

Mythical consumerist morphologies reflect a capitalist type of thinking specific to postmodern period so that frequently what is sold better is the publicity, the "hero", the "star", the label. The civilizing heroes of older times have been replaced with stars, VIP, while the discourses on postmodern myths are centered on concepts as desacralization, mythical re-combinations, mythical parody, political myths or virtual mythical morphologies. *Consumer society* transforms the social person into a consumer of simulacra, of superficial representations of the real world. Mythologies of consumer society are emergent forms of the culture of image, of "signs of abundance". The place of civilizing heroes has been taken by various more or less robotic figures, cybernetic creatures designed to appease exigencies of citizen's power. The hero of our time is a product of consumer society, a superman of masses destined to new commercial formulas. That superhero is nothing less than a cultural construct, a mark of a virtual yet globalizing culture. Fantasy literature, comics and digital games discounts the "weak discourse" and consecrates various superheroes as Harry Potter or Frodo. It is evident that these are different from the typology of the classic hero, as the hero rewrites the myth of the saving hero, identified in constructs as *Batman, Superman, Spider-Man, X-Man*. Contemporary fairytales leave the impression of *One Thousand and One Nights*, as it rewrites some mythical scenarios from traditional fairytales using forms of intertext, pastiche, parody or fragmentary techniques specific to postmodern imaginary. Such examples of postmodern narrations that reflect urban legends are texts of Angela Carter, Robert Coover, and James Finn Garner.

Postmodern culture produces what we may call the *clash of titans*, a term with an ironic hint that tells of the postmodern preference for dialogism, cohabitation and parody. The era of technologies, gadgets gave rise to virtual culture. The virtual mythologization supposes trust in the virtual world, trust in new mythologies and birth of some new ones, falling into technology as a fan and then as a convinced follower of the new society. The virtual society becomes a competitor for the real one, offering the power to become what he/she is not in real life, simulating thus the mere existence. The virtual world may be understood as a space of socialization and assertion of a mythologized subjectivity. Avatarisation represents a mask, an icon behind which are hidden borrowed, imagined, played identities. That is a *sine qua non* condition to adhere to the society of electric tribe type; that is the form of negotiating the human imperfections or partaking power. Virtual communities build the illusion of existing together, they mythologize an Eden like existence of the brotherly universal state in which we are close when we are in fact separated by huge affective abysses.

The last chapter - *The Virtual Space – Another Type of Labyrinth of the conemporary Imaginary* – is focused on the futuristic techno-mysticism and on posthumanist cybermythologies. Cyberspace becomes a virtual agora[5], where a new type of avataric subjectivity is stated, while the relation between the mass culture and technology of information, exploration of the virtual space, cyberculture in essence determines another issue – relation between human and posthuman. At the same time, *industrialization of the alive*, as Paul Virilio names it unveil frustrations of the *motorized handicapped*, of a frustrated postmodern being who faces the artificial intelligence and biotechnologies of the future considered threats for humanism, as it facilitates the fragmentation and even annulment of identity. Cyborg, avatar, mutant or androgynous may be regarded as various mythical posthumanist morphologies. The rhizomic functioning in the postmodern discourse may be explained due to relativism and simulative nature of this virtual subjectivity, theatricality of existence or the temptation of overcoming limits of biology. The virtual subjectivity of post-existence is represented by a certain type of artificial intelligence that denies the biological or even the technologized body and it marks what Scott Bukatman named "terminal identity" or *the last trail of humanity*, the last and irrevocable transformation. From the posthumanist or even transhumanist perspective we

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[5] 5 Steven G. Jones: *Virtual Culture. Identity and comunication.*în *Cybersociety.* London, Sage Publications, 2002, p.89

mention a strong discourse concerning the impact of digital technologies on the human existence – see Lee Bul, Klaus Obermeier, Stelarc, Eduardo Kac or Orlan. The mysticism of the technologic art is manifested through expressive machined forms of art that present the metamorphosis of the human body into a technologic body, experimenting the artificial intelligence obtained with the help of nanotechnologies of the last generation. Multiple simulated identities prove not only a revolutionary lesson of Darwinist evolutionism, but also represent formulas of de/refragmentation of the biologic body in a virtual anticipation of biomorphism, avatarisation and cybernetic body.

A relevant conclusion of this research may be the fact that nowadays mythologies reflect a clear distance from traditional ones. On one hand, postmodern mythologies rewrite in parodic terms fragments of old mythologies, which are re-encapsulated in new diegetic forms expressing facets and tendencies of nowadays culture dominated by parametres of consumer society. On the other hand, the postmodern technoimaginary reflects the dissolution of subjectivity that is produced through the "vision machine", a perceptive extension of the "body with no organs", a universality of the visual.

Finally, it is necessary to point out the fact that mythology of the technological body immortality may be traced in forms of *cyber-body art* that projects not only the temptation of escaping the contingent, but also the deep accents of a late post-Nietzschean philosophy, which glorifies cyber-technology (as cyber-deity of complete control over the human body) after God's death. Cyborgs, robots, mutants or transgenic entities that populate the story of the cyberpunk genre circumscribe the sphere of cybermythologies and rebuild representations over the machined subconsciousness of the postmodern (posthuman or transhuman) man, constituting a generous discourse on the future imaginary of the inhabitants of the old planet. Mythical morphologies of transhumanist cyberculture are related to a certain type of futuristic technosensitivity and they describe a technoimaginary of the superman produced in the lab. Certainly, they remain chimera of religious cybervisionarism and they involve a traumatized rip of the biologic body.