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SCIENCES**

MEDIA CULTURE: RHETORICAL PERSPECTIVES

- PhD THESIS SUMMARY -

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Key words: media culture; rhetorical criticism; communication sciences; qualitative methods; media literacy; culture jamming; memes

Introduction

This scientific study has had as a general objective to promote the methods of rhetorical criticism in the field of qualitative research in communication sciences, in general, and in media studies, in special, as well as to stimulate media literacy in Romania. Media messages, products of media culture, which are omnipresent in contemporary societies, constitute forms of indoctrination, as well as symbolic resources for the emancipation of the users.

I have chosen as a topic for my doctoral thesis „Media culture: rhetorical perspectives”, because this has in view significant aspects regarding national and international research in the field of communication sciences: the investigation of the media culture artifacts and the methods of rhetorical criticism.

Rhetoric is the first theory of communication and constitutes, thus, the conceptual, epistemological basis of communication sciences. Rhetorical criticism contributes to new ways of understanding rhetoric in field of communication sciences. The qualitative methods in communication sciences, as those of the rhetorical criticism, operate with distinct epistemological principles from the quantitative procedures.

The nature of media messages is inherently rhetorical, and consequently the scarcity of their employment in Romania is quite surprising. The media messages are complex cultural artifacts, ideologically saturated, with explicit or implicit persuasive purposes, controlled by specific formulas, codes and conventions, with meanings which can be analyzed, explained and evaluated critically, actively and cunningly using the methods of rhetorical criticism.

The critical deciphering of media messages (media literacy), involves various abilities, which can be developed by using the tools instrumentelor puse la dispoziție de methods rhetorical criticism.

Context

In Romania, both rhetorical criticism and media literacy are hardly used at all. Media culture is approached, usually in the form of translations and, much less, as original studies. Thus, the relevant resources, available in Romanian language, are extremely deficient. In the field of media studies, the use of rhetorical criticism methods is, practically, absent. I have to mention, though, as an exception, the work of Maria Cvasnîi Cătănescu, *Retorica publicistică*:

de la paratext la text,¹ a book which approaches rhetorically the media messages, but, from a predominantly linguistic perspective and which does not use the concept of rhetorical criticism.

This paper contains a series of originality elements. Firstly, it is one of the very few works (in any case, it is the first doctoral thesis from Romania), which presents the methods of rhetorical criticism. Secondly, it is the first doctoral thesis which promotes the principles of media literacy, as conceptual tools for the critical consumption of media messages. Thirdly, another original element is the application of the methods of rhetorical criticism on media culture artifacts, in order to develop the conceptual and procedural instruments of media literacy. Fourthly, the Omega strategies of persuasion are discussed, corresponding to a new conceptual model, based on resistance. Fifthly, the concept of meme is discussed for the first time concerning the artifacts of media culture. Sixthly, this paper is the first to discuss culture jamming related to the artifacts of media culture.

I must make several terminology explanations and clarifications. I prefer to use the concept of rhetorical criticism and not rhetorical critique, because it would wrongly suggest a similarity with other endeavours, as literary critique. Neither the concept of rhetorical analysis can adequately express the whole task, because analysis constitutes only one section of the critical activity, besides interpretation and evaluation. Media refer to totality of the platforms which deliver messages, industrially produced, targeting anonymous, heterogeneous and scattered publics, aiming at acquiring profit. When I talk about a single type of channel, I use the term medium. Also, I use the concept of media culture to talk about the totality of artifacts produced by media organizations, regardless of how heterogeneous these might be.

In the composition of the corpus, I had several obstacles. From the very beginning, I intended to select only Romanian media artifacts, which are studied sporadically or never. I managed to select eight distinctive artifacts as the topic or involved rhetorical processes are concerned. A further complication was caused by the character of the methods of rhetorical criticism, more exactly the fact that the research question is formulated after the analysis of the artifact, in divergence with other methods of research. The risk was to not produce research which emphasizes the explanatory force of the methods of rhetorical criticism. Another complication, but a deliberate one, was represented by the fact that I have chosen relatively difficult media artifacts, even if, initially, they did not seem.

¹ Maria Cvasnii Cătănescu, *Retorica publicistică. De la paratext la text*, București, Editura Universității din București, 2006.

Structure of the paper

The thesis comprises four chapters, the first two of which deal with the theoretical dimensions, the third approach the methodology of research, and the fourth one consisting in applying rhetorical criticism on media artifacts.

The first chapter approaches the media culture. The ubiquity and accessibility of media culture, as well as the apparent transparency of this, activates the most diverse and not always beneficial consequences, on the users of media messages. Media culture constitutes a consequence and, at the same time, a factor of postmodernism and globalization.

Media culture involves processes of domination and resistance, zone of intersection of symbolic contest, of ideological conflicts which try to become hegemonic. Media culture comprises texts, images, sounds, organized in the form of media spectacles, which imbues with the daily life and dominates the leisure time, shapes the political opinions and attitudes, social behaviors and offers elements based on which individuals build their identities. Media cultura is an industrially organized, profit oriented techno-culture, which combines culture and technology in new configurations.

Most general theories of media culture are dogmatic and opaque to important aspects of it. This is why, the most adequate approaches of investigating media culture and of elaborating relevant theories consist in performing specific explorations on particular artifacts, within dynamic and turbulent circumstances of the contemporary societies.

There are several traditions of the study of media culture. Frankfurt School has initiated the critical studies on mass communication in the 30's of the 20th century. These researches have promoted the concept of cultural industries, in order to emphasize the process of industrialization of mass culture, and the commercial aspects that underlie this system. The exponents of the Frankfurt School have been the first to systematically analyze and criticize mass culture and communication within the critical social theory and, mostly, they have been the first to underscore the importance of cultural industries in the reproduction of contemporary societies, in which mass culture and communication constitute agents of socialization and mediators of reality (political, economic, social and cultural). There are, nevertheless, some severe limitations of the critical theory, that have to be corrected (excessive pessimism, dogmatism, elitism). British cultural studies place the culture within a theory of social production and reproduction, showing the ways in which the cultural forms serve either the consolidation of social domination, or the activation of resistance and opposition to this. The originality of British cultural studies consists in attesting the importance of media culture and

in highlighting the way in which this is involved in processes of domination resistance. Both the Frankfurt School and cultural studies have contributed to the critical analysis of media culture, each research direction compensating the limitations of the other.² Another exponent of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, Jürgen Habermas, proposes the concept of public space, inspired by Enlightenment, a discursive sphere intermediating between civil society and the political power. The criticism performed by Habermas is, however, excessively severe. The model of the public space that he has elaborated constitutes an idealized version. In the democratic contemporary societies, the public space is inconceivable in the absence of mass-media, in the sense that mass communication mediums have become the main instances of production of the public space.

The public opinion regards the cognition, representation, affects and volitions and it appears as an assemblage of opinions explicitly expressed, in relation with a problem or as a grouping of the responses given to the poll questions. Mass-media influences the processes of formation and modification of public opinion. The most important theoretical elaborations which have proposed explanations regarding the impact of mass-media over public opinion are: magic bullet theory, two-step flow model, agenda setting, spiral of silence model and cultivation theory.

The postmodernist theories have also approached the media culture. One of the most remarkable postmodern discourses belongs to Jean Baudrillard, who claims that media has a crucial role in distorting and blurring the distinction between image and reality. Baudrillard thinks that we live in a world of simulacra, of objects having the primary function of utility have vanished and that have transformed into a system of social positioning, in signs integrated within a code by which the consumer society reproduces itself and which dictates the rhythm of human existence. In this society, media culture would be an artificial and fictional system of simulacra and of spectacles. The concept of spectacle society has been developed by the French theorist Guy Debord, in order to describe the consumption of staged images, products and events regis-tered in contemporary world. Media spectacles are manifestations of the mass culture, which incorporate social values, life styles, dramatizations of societal conflicts and models of conflict resolution and include events, in politics, sports, etc., in sensationalist forms. The Debordian concept of spectacle corresponds to the term „pseudo-event”, created by the

² Douglas Kellner, *Cultura media*, traducere de Teodora Ghiviriză și Liliana Scărlătescu, Iași, Editura Institutul European, 2001, p. 55.

american historian Daniel Boorstin, who argues that reality was replaced by a sintetical discursive universe, capable to reproduce itself.

Marshall McLuhan theorizes media as a determining factor of cultures and societies. Mediums of communication, by their very nature, determine a certain structure of information and of knowledge and, thus, influence decisively the world vision of the individuals, their perception and reason, as well as the organization of society. McLuhan claims that, by moving from Gutenberg galaxy to Marconi galaxy (age of electronic mediums of communication), becomes apparent a retribalization of mankind, a global village, in which milions of individuals connect to the media. Thus, electronic communaion technologies generate media culture.

Media culture constitutes a huge laboratory of memes (a storage of repetitive symbolic structures which guide the perception, evaluation and interpretation of objects, phenomenons and persons). Memes designate discrete cultural units (ideas, texts or practices), conveyed from a person to another,³ through copying and imitation, that reach a high level of popularity. Memes are the fundamental cultural units, which are the basis of the evaluative and interpretative frameworks of the individuals. The memetic mechanisms filter the reality and, thus, act as ideological devices. Memes are colectively constructed public discourses, in various ways, representing diverse orientations and perspectives.

The rhetorical aim of media messages is influence, which can be positive, fair, honest (information, persuasion) or negative, pathological, perverse (disinformation, manipulation, propaganda and intoxication).

Persuasion is a form of social influence, extremely difficult to define. The study of persuasion has been the main objective of two disciplinary fields: an ancient one (rhetoric) and a modern one (psychosociology).

The persuasive appeals from the traditional rhetoric– *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* – constitute the general strategies of the discourse. The credibility of the agent (*ethos*) has a central role in persuasive processes. The *pathos* involves the appeal to the emotions and will of the audience members. The *logos* is logical, rational element of the persuasive messages.

Psychosociology has studied persuasion in detail and empirically validated the main principles of rhetoric. One of the most influent psychosociological theories of persuasion is the elaboration likelihood model (ELM), which is perfectly compatible with rhetorical paradigm. ELM proposes a dual process, which studies the ways in which the target processes the persuasive messages. The theoretical extremes of a continuum of processing are the central

³ Julian McDougall, *Media studies: the basics*, New York, Routledge, 2012, p. 182.

route and peripheral route of elaboration of persuasive messages. Even if, in fact, the individuals process the messages simultaneously, on both routes, one of them is usually dominant.

More recent researches⁴ propose a different vision about persuasion through focus on the resistance to persuasion (Omega strategies). These strategies have been much less studied and they are fundamentally different. As the Alfa strategies have the aim of intensifying the persuasive character of messages, the Omega strategies deal with neutralizing, restructuring and circumventing the resistance to persuasion. Alfa strategies emphasize the attractiveness of an alternative, as long as Omega strategies reduce or suppress the resistance for that alternative.

Resistance to persuasion appears under three stances: reactance (resistance to influence), scepticismul (resistance to the message) and inertia (resistance to change). These are not separate entities, but manifestations of the same phenomenon.

Disinformation refers to the totality of false, incomplete or erroneous information, which are pointed to a target who can be an individual, a group or a nation,⁵ and which are supplied or confirmed by the news aimed deliberately, to destabilize opponents, news placed in mass-media by the agents covered as journalists.

One of the main ways to conceive disinformation is media framing. Media makes the reality available to the public through framing. Media framings condense and simplify the natural and social events and phenomena through processes of filtering and emphasizing the information, shaping reality by accentuating some aspects and minimalizing or eliminating other. Through these procedures, media frames structure the experience and influence the perception of the public regarding events, phenomena and persons presented in the news. The framing influences both the selecting the events that are covered by the news, and their processing.

Media framing refers to the defining of problems (evaluation of the actions of a causal agent in terms of costs and benefits); diagnosing causes (identification of the forces which create the problem); formulating unor moral judgments (evaluation of cause and effects); and suggesting solutins (presentation or promotion of remedies and anticipation of their

⁴ Eric S. Knowles; Jay A. Linn, *Approach-avoidance model of persuasion: Alpha and Omega strategies for change*, in Knowles, Eric S.; Jay A. Linn (eds.), *Resistance and persuasion*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, London, 2004, pp. 117-148. Also, Eric S. Knowles; Dan D. Riner, *Omega approaches to persuasion: overcoming resistance*, in Anthony R. Pratkanis (ed.), *The science of social influence: advances and future progress*, Taylor and Frances, New York, 2007, pp. 83-114.

⁵ Garth S. Jowett; Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda and persuasion*, 5th ed., London, SAGE, 2012, p. 24.

effects).⁶ Media framing operates with various rhetorical strategies and de tactics, from lexical selections, to metaphors, metonymies or synecdoches and descriptive, narrative, expositive or argumentative structures.

Intoxication consists in an assemblage of deceitful schemes aiming to influence the targets by introducing in their informational routines, via mass-media, data that are interfering with their decision-making processes. The targets of intoxication are decision-making elites: governments, general staffs, information services. The delimitation between intoxication and disinformation is difficult and blurry. The main difference between these actions consists in the fact that the former focuses on a small group of management persons, possibly one leader, whereas disinformation concentrates on public opinion.

Manipulation is a concept equally frequently and wrongly used, and as well ambiguous,⁷ being often confused with propaganda, persuasion, etc. Manipulation is the action of determining a social actor (person, group, community) to think and act in a way that is compatible with the interests of the initiator, and not with his/her own interest, using persuasion techniques which intentionally distort the truth, deceiving with fraudulent arguments and tapping into non-rational levels.⁸

Propaganda constitutes the deliberate and systematic effort to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviors in order to achieve a response care furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.⁹ There have been identified three types of propaganda:¹⁰ white, grey and black.

Media messages can, then, persuade honestly or can use pathological devices: disinformation, fake news, manipulation, intoxication or propaganda. There are two different, but not incompatible, modes to use the resources of media culture: media literacy and culture jamming.

Media literacy represents the abilities to actively select, interpret and interrogate the media messages. In today media landscape, the distinction between news and propaganda, on the one hand, and between news and fiction, on the other hand, becomes more and more difficult. Media literacy consists in applying of critical thinking abilities in the inquisitive

⁶ Robert M. Entman, „Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm”, *Journal of Communication*, 43, 1993, p. 52.

⁷ Septimiu Chelcea, *Opinia publică. Strategii de persuasiune și manipulare*, București, Editura Economică, 2006 p. 225.

⁸ Ștefan Vlăduțescu, *Comunicare jurnalistică negativă*, București, Editura Academiei Române, 2006, pp. 285-286.

⁹ Garth S. Jowett; Victoria O'Donnell, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 17-23.

process on the artifacts of media culture. Access, analysis, interpretation, evaluation and creation of media artifacts are the main intellectual operations of media literacy. Although there is no consensus regarding definitions or the actual content of media literacy, the various approaches can be summarized in the form of five fundamental principles.

Culture jamming constitutes a rhetorical practice, a resistance anticonsumerist strategy and a critical approach through which media messages are modified in a subversive manner, in order to challenge and to counteract the hegemonic discourses. Culture jamming uses allusion, irony and parody, in order to question critically the consumerist and corporatist perspectives and to propose alternative ways of interpreting media messages. Culture jamming constitutes the interpretation of the original message through direct intervention, employing two rhetorical strategies: perspective by incongruity and polemical intertextuality. The Canadian author Kalle Lasn thinks that culture jamming is engaged in meme warfare. The fundamental mechanism of domination in media is constituted by the dynamic relationship between the danger and safety memes (in news and advertisements). In the first stage, through the news, the world is represented as dangerous, hostile and unpredictable, determining, in the public, fear and insecurity, which will be soothed, in the second stage, through advertisements, which offer media audiences the euphoric, but false, sensation of assurance.

The second chapter presents the rhetorical criticism. Human sciences as a whole are marked by the rhetoric condition, which impregnates the totality of social relations. The aims of rhetoric are strategic, making possible, through its extremely elaborate tools, the symbolic processes which lead to the effective construction of meaning and discursive communities, and also to the initiation of action. Rhetoric is omnipresent in contemporary society, in all fields of communication: private, public, political, media, commercial, etc.

Rhetorical criticism is a qualitative research method in communication sciences, devised in order to systematically investigate and explain the symbolic acts and artifacts, for the purpose of understanding rhetorical processes.¹¹ The final result of rhetorical criticism constitutes a contribution to the development of the communication abilities. The rhetorical critic suggests, implicitly, how symbols can be used in more effective ways in the vast field of communication. By suggesting some theoretical principles about how rhetoric operates, we offer a guide for those who want to become better communicators, both in creating effective, subtle and sophisticated messages, and in their discerning and critical reception. Understanding various options available to rhetors in constructing messages, and deciphering how these

¹¹ Sonja K. Foss, *Rhetorical criticism: exploration and practice*, 5th ed., Long Grove, Waveland Press, 2018, p. 6.

options work in producing persuasive effects, rhetorical critics become able to question the decisions of rhetors in the process of communication, more exigent in accepting rhetorical practices and more sceptical to the messages.

Rhetorical critics analyze, interpret and evaluate the symbolic artifacts, in order to understand how these work and to make explicit and intelligible those rhetorical elements that go unnoticed by the common users. Rhetorical criticism is not a positivist scientific effort, but it involves the personality, intuition and imagination of the critic. However, a certain level of objectivity is necessary. The objectivity of the rhetorical critic is situated between ideological partisanship and scientific neutrality.

I have presented eight perspectives of rhetorical criticism: the neo-aristotelian method, the cluster perspective, the fantasy-theme method, the generic criticism, the ideological perspective, the metaphoric criticism, the narrative perspective and the pentadic method. These are the most employed methods of rhetorical criticism and the most likely to generate the understanding of the rhetorical processes involved in artifacts.

The methods have constituted a central engagement of rhetorical critics since the beginning of the discipline. The researchers examine either the way in which the theory provides methods which are employed in rhetorical criticism (theory serves criticism), or the way in which criticism contributes to theorization through its heuristic capacity, through exhibiting and testing hypotheses and through the reflexive employment of methods derived from theory (criticism serves theory). I think that both perspectives take place successively and help each other: theory must create the ground for criticism, and criticism must test the problematic assumptions of theory.

Rhetorical critics, guided by theory, engage in discovering the meaning in discourse, and the methods articulate this task. Each method has limited interpretive resources, ignoring, by its own conceptual structure, other components of the messages. The methodological fixation produces pointless, tautological and obscure criticism. A possible solution to this problem consists in initiating the criticism starting from the artifact (emic perspective) and not by choosing *a priori* a method. The weakness of this approach consists in the temptation of the critic to become too attached to the artifact, which determines the substitution of criticism with conceptually opaque, confused and deficient prose.

Rhetorical criticism must be guided and not controlled by theory and method. The criticism which is controlled by method or by theory proceeds deductively, by application of the method (theory) to a certain artifact. The criticism controlled by the artifact moves inductively, through the progressive building of the theory. The conceptually oriented criticism

acts through an abductive process, which consists in successively investigating the artifact and the conceptual framework. This critical movement between object and concept results in the evolution and development of understanding the object through the conceptual work.

The authentic criticism does not consist in applying a predetermined formula, but involves the intervention of the rhetorical critics, with their assumed subjectivity, balanced through a coherent and credible argumentation, based on sufficient and solid proofs. The rhetorical artifacts are not neutral, so neither can rhetorical criticism be objective. The final aim of rhetorical criticism is not to establish the truth, but to develop various interpretative perspectives, which emphasize different relevant aspects of the messages.

The third chapter approaches the methodology of the research. In view of applying rhetorical criticism, I employ two research tools in humanities and social sciences: textual analysis and case study. Textual analysis is a transdisciplinary method, used in social, political, language and communication sciences, for examination of the messages from different sources, on different channels. The purposes of textual analysis are the description and interpretation of the features of messages (content, structure, functions). Textual analysis assumes the identification of the most plausible interpretations of the messages and tries to emphasize the way in which individuals make sense of the world. The analytical approach seeks the realization of meaning-making practices in texts.¹² The method of textual analysis focuses on the underlying assumptions of media messages,¹³ using deconstruction as an investigative procedure. The central concern of textual analysis refers to the ways in which media messages (and other types of messages) promote certain versions of reality. Textual analysis does not research the accuracy of the representations of reality, but the ways in which these representations create meaning,¹⁴ the perspectives from which these are realized. This does not mean that all perspectives are equally plausible or acceptable, but only that there are different perspectives of sense-making. In rhetorical criticism, textual analysis manifests in case studies. Rhetorical critics isolate a certain phenomenon, describe its relevant aspects, classify the textual characteristics, interpret the discursive model and evaluate the artifact.¹⁵

¹² Alan McKee, *Textual analysis: a beginner's guide*, London, SAGE, 2005, p. 4.

¹³ Elfriede Fürsich, „In defense of textual analysis. Restoring a challenged method for journalism and media studies”, in *Journalism Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2009, p. 240.

¹⁴ Alan McKee, op. cit., p. 17.

¹⁵ Roderick P. Hart Suzanne Daughton; Rebecca LaVally, *Modern rhetorical criticism*, New York, Routledge, 2018, p. 27.

The case study constitutes the method which uses explanatory research questions, refers to phenomena over which researchers do not have control and focus on contemporary rather than historical phenomena.¹⁶ Even if the case study is blamed for providing an insufficient base for generalization, this objection can be counteracted, either by mentioning similar difficulties in the case of other methods, or by strategic selection of the cases, data gathering techniques and analysis and interpretation strategies. Moreover, rhetorical situations are not unique, they can be grouped in genres or categories, which activate similar rhetorical reactions. This method includes both studies focusing on a single case, and multiple cases. The case study can explain, describe, illustrate, explore or it can realize metaevaluations.¹⁷

The research design constitutes the procedure by which data to be collected and conclusions to be drawn are linked by the initial questions of the study.¹⁸ Every empirical investigation has a research design, explicit or implicit. For the case studies, there are five essential components of the research design: research question(s); hypotheses, if there are any; unit(s) of analysis; logic through which data is linked with hypotheses; and the criteria of interpretation of the research findings. Rhetorical criticism individualizes itself methodologically through a series of specific notes. In the case of rhetorical criticism, the research question focuses, usually, on the message and it presents the particularity of being asked after the analysis. Each method of rhetorical criticism has its own procedures and units of analysis. The units of analysis are exploration tools that allow the selection of certain types of data about the artifact, directing and limiting in particular modes, revealing certain aspects and reducing or omitting others. The presentation of the research findings must offer concrete evidence and data, from the artifact. The final step refers to the contribution to the rhetorical theory, which constitutes the response to the research question, transcending the specific case and generalizing on the basis of the identified rhetorical processes.

The rhetorical criticism perspectives belong to the field of qualitative research in communication sciences, and they have specific methodological standards. Rhetorical criticism has an epideictic character, coming from the evaluative aim of its functioning.

The standards of rhetorical criticism are distinct from those of the quantitative methods— validity and replicability. The standards of rhetorical criticism are based on two fundamental assumptions,¹⁹ specific to the qualitative methods of research of communication.

¹⁶ Robert K. Yin, *Studiul de caz: designul, analiza și colectarea datelor*, cucânt înainte de Donald T. Campbell, traducere de Valentin Alupoae, Iași, Polirom, 2005, p. 17.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 32.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 37.

¹⁹ Sonja K. Foss, *op. cit.*, p.24.

The first assumption asserts that the objective reality does not exist, but it is a symbolic creation, produced by employing rhetoric. The second assumption, closely connected to the first, argues that a rhetorical critic can know the selected artifact only through a personal, subjective interpretation, and not through an impartial, objective study, because the critic includes in research his/her own values, interests and experiences, which are reflected in the ways in which he/she understands and writes. The assumed subjectivity of the critic is not, however, neither irrational, nor arbitrary.

Consequently, the aim of the rhetorical critic is to offer a certain perspective on the artifact, to propose a possible way of seeing. There is no single correct or true interpretation, because the rhetorical artifacts are complex, multidimensional objects, engendering various interpretations and evaluations. Thus, two rhetorical critics can analyze the same artifact, can ask the same research question, can employ the same method and can reach different conclusions or results,²⁰ both valuable and, ideally, both compatible. Thus, rhetorical criticism produces cumulative knowledge, rather than substitutive explanations.

In rhetorical criticism there are three standards of evaluation of essays:²¹

a) Justification, the primary standard, consists in argumentation of the rhetorical critic. Each claim must be supported with sufficient arguments, data and proofs, quotes and descriptions from the artifact;

b) Reasonable inference – rhetorical critics must display as clearly as possible how they reached from the data of the artifact to the claims based on the argumentative grounds. These critics must explain how their claims or conclusions are supported. Although personal, the argumentation must be rigorous, based on clear and relevant standards;

c) Coherence, the third criterion, involves the ordering and presentation of the results so that they form a unified whole, created through clear and logical connections among ideas. This criterion requires analyzing and grouping arguments and claims, in order to illuminate for the audience the relevant aspects of the artifacts. The claims from the essay must possess internal coherence (not contradicting each other). Also, coherence refers to the necessity that all the major dimensions of the artifact to be included in a clearly structured interpretative frame.

²⁰ Karyn Rybacki; Donald Rybacki, *Communication criticism: approaches and genres*, Belmont, Wadsworth, 1991, p. 12.

²¹ Sonja K. Foss, *op. cit.*, pp. 24-26.

These three criteria emphasize the creative dimension and the persuasive force of the rhetorical criticism.²² The criticism must be imaginative in assumptions and conclusive in argumentation, which means entirely rhetorical.

The rhetoric theory has appeared, historically, as a consequence of examining the discourses with established persuasive force. In today rhetorical criticism, the accent is placed on theory and not on rigid methods or procustean formulas. The rhetorical critic must know the theory closely and assimilate the methods of rhetorical criticism until they become an organic part of the way in which he/she perceives discursive acts and artifacts. Thus, through the cultivation of his/her sensitivity by rhetorical theory, the critic becomes able to get access to the subtle mechanisms of the discourses. Criticism represents the application of the skilled intuition of the critic.

The methods are modalities to discover symbolic actions explained by theory. The restrictive imposition of the methodologic framework in the study of rhetorical artifacts only confirms in a servile manner the celebrated theoretical assumptions. The etic perspective, which consists in the application of a predetermined method, leads the critic to the discovery of exactly those elements which he/she expected to find and blocks the identification of new elements. A possible remedy of this hindrance consists in starting from the artifact (emic perspective). The problem with this approach consists in the temptation of the critic to get too closed to the artifact. Consequently, the rhetorical critic must resist the excessive devotion to the both perspectives and to justify the method through the specifics of the artifact, and not the artifact through the characteristics of the method. The methodological flexibility allows the elucidation of the ways in which messages work and the avoidance of predetermined procedures, which produce empty homages, instead of critical analysis. In this sense, the rhetorical critic must know the limitations of the method and discover ways to surpass these restrictions, and improve the method through the amplification of its conceptual perspectives. Moreover, some methods can be combined, which compensates, in part, their limitations.

Rhetorical criticism is an art.²³ Choosing a critical perspective, as well as selection of an artifact, belongs to the decision of the rhetorical critic. The rhetorical critic makes visible what, for the profane public, could be seen, but went unnoticed, makes explicit what was implicit in the discourse, makes intelligible what was obscure. The critic not only studies

²² Mark R., Stoner; Sally J. Perkins, *Making sense of messages: a critical apprenticeship in rhetorical criticism*, New York, Routledge, 2005, p. 26.

²³ Jim A. Kuypers, *Rhetorical criticism as art*, in Jim A. Kuypers, *Rhetorical criticism: perspectives in action*, New York, Lexington Books, 2009, p. 14.

rhetoric, but he/she applies it: he/she is a rhetor, with all the etical, estetical, persuasive and epistemic implications of this quality.

The rhetorical critics are not identical.²⁴ Some of them are more competent than the others. Even when they examine sophisticated and suggestive artifacts, some rhetorical critics prove themselves unable to appreciate their subtleties. The gifted rhetorical critic, by contrast, builds a provocative analysis even of the most modest messages. The authentic rhetorical critic is both receptive and imaginative, adopting a sharp attitude and addressing the suitable questions.

The alert rhetorical critic is sceptical: he/she interprets messages in his/her own terms, not in the rhetor terms. The sceptical critic identifies the motives of the rhetor in discourse, carefully analyzing the messages, mostly those that disguise the rhetoric. However, scepticism is not the same as cynicism.

In order to prove his/her competence, the rhetorical critic must be discerning, acting as a detective. The observant critic has the capacity to recognize what and how he/she must examine and has clear criteria to sort the collected information. He/she must concentrate on cues from the discourse, especially on those which the rhetor tries to dissimulate, giving attention to the details which the majority of audience members ignore. Details that seem irrelevant can prove extremely important. The rhetorical critic is looking for concealed cues in the most unpredictable places. However, perspicuity must not be confused with excentricity or with interpretative delirium.

The talented rhetorical critic is imaginative. Practically, anybody can collect data about an artifact, but the able critic knows how to use the information in order to emphasize the persuasive strategies.

The competent rhetorical critic is not easily intimidated. Rhetoric is a territory of ideological conflict, in which different visions and perspectives confront. The rhetorical critic takes part in these battles, not only as a simple observer, but also, frequently, as a warrior.

There are four traps that the rhetorical critics must avoid:²⁵ rhetorical criticism is not a simple discussion of the rhetor's ideas (the rhetorical critic must not study only the result of *inventio*, but also the imaginative process); rhetorical criticism is not a simple description of the circumstances in which the discourse has been produced (rhetorical situation must be

²⁴ Roderick P. Hart Suzanne Daughton; Rebecca LaVally, *Modern rhetorical criticism*, New York, Routledge, 2018, p. 31.

²⁵ Loren D. Reid, *apud* Vasile Florescu, *Retorica și neoretorica. Geneză, evoluție, perspective*, București, Editura Academiei, 1973, p. 203.

integrated in the critical process); rhetorical criticism is not a simple classification or tabulation of rhetorical procedures (these must be interpreted during analysis, not only identified); and rhetorical criticism is not, in the first place, an excursion in other areas of study (accent must be placed on rhetorical analysis and not political, military, social, historical, etc.).

The rhetorical critic has a superior freedom compared to the researcher who uses quantitative methods, but this entails an equivalent responsibility. The role of the rhetorical critic is not only to examine various artifacts, but also to reexamine them, in order to verify the validity and accuracy of the previous analyses and to develop the rhetorical theory. The rhetorical critic watches artifacts in an insistent and methodical manner, in order to discover rhetorical processes and persuasive strategies. Rhetorical criticism must be a surprise, through new units of analysis and through compelling research questions. The role of the rhetorical critic is to elaborate his/her own analytical, interpretative and evaluative tools. The method of rhetorical criticism is the critic himself/herself.²⁶

The fourth chapter consists in the application of the eight methods of rhetorical criticism (neo-aristotelian, cluster, fantasy-theme, generic, ideological, metaphorical, narrative and pentadic) on media culture artifacts (a television talk-show, a radio feature, a video advertisement, a print editorial, a music video, a rap song, a short film and an online news).

I have intended to analyze only vernacular rhetorical artifacts, as diverse as possible, in order to emphasize the relevance of the methods of rhetorical criticism. All the selected artifacts include subtle rhetorical processes, interesting or surprising and they are pertinent, from different perspectives: they are culturally representative, have received distinctions or have had a great success with the public, have generated ample or unusual effects, have used peculiar rhetorical techniques, etc. Also, since I think that the methods of rhetorical criticism constitute effective modalities to extend media literacy, in the end I performed the analysis of an online news, using all the eight mentioned methods, after using the principles of media literacy.

So, we can conclude that the methods of rhetorical criticism contribute to extending the principles of media literacy. Concretely, the neo-aristotelian method and generic criticism contribute to the development of the second principle; cluster perspective to the nuancing of the first principle, the fantasy-theme method and the ideological perspective, to the amplification of the fifth principle, the metaphoric criticism and the narrative perspective to

²⁶ Edwin Black, *On objectivity and politics in criticism*, in Jim A. Kuypers, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

amelioration of the fourth principle, and the pentadic method to the consolidation of the third and fifth principles.

The fact that I choose these eight methods of rhetorical criticism represent a personal option, motivated by their relevant and diverse character. There are, however, many other approaches, as well as different versions of the presented methods.

Conclusions

Media cultura, omnipresent in today world, constitutes the symbolic environment in which societies and individuals manage their identities, project their anxieties and objectives and create the common discursive space. Becoming the dominant culture in contemporary societies, media culture displaces the forms of high culture as the center of cultural attention and of social impact.

In the field of media culture research can be emphasized certain theoretical paradigms which have offered decisive contributions in view of elucidation of this multidimensional phenomenon.

Cultural studies combine social theory, cultural, historical, philosophical analysis, etc., thus overcoming the classical academic barriers, through transcending the fragmentation that divides the fields of study regarding media, culture and communication. British cultural studies place culture within a theory of social production and reproduction, specifying the ways in which the cultural forms serve either the consolidation of social domination, or stimulation of the resistance and opposition. The focus of critical cultural studies is represented by the fight against domination, against subordination. Cultural studies place, thus, the culture within a socio-historical context, in this promotes either domination, or resistance, and criticize the forms culturã that support an attitude of subordination.

The critical theorists of the Frankfurt School have promoted the concept of cultural industries, in order to highlight the process of industrialization of mass culture, and also commercial imperatives which direct this system and have analyzed media culture artifacts, proving that these have comon characteristics with other industrial products: comercialism, standardization and massification. As a difference, however, with other industrial products, cultural industries artifacts have as specific functions the promotion of ideological legitimacy of contemporary capitalist societies and the integration of the individuals in the framework of mass culture and society. The exponents of Frankfurt School have been the first to analyze and criticize systematically mass culture and communication within the frame of critical social

theory and, especially, have been the first to stress the importance of cultural industries regarding reproduction of contemporary societies, in which the mass culture and communication are in the center leisure activities, and of are the agents of socialization and mediators of political reality.

Both Frankfurt School and cultural studies have contributed to critical analysis of media culture, each research perspective making up for the hindrances of the other. The accent placed by the Frankfurt School on manipulation draw attention on the seductive force of the artifacts produced by cultural industries and on the way in which these messages integrate individuals in a predetermined order. Although Frankfurt School precisely identified the mode of exercising domination by media culture, but did not manage to find strategies of resistance, underscored by the British cultural studies. In reality, the audience is neither that vulnerable, as exponents of the Frankfurt School believed, or that active, as suggested the representatives of cultural studies.

The German sociologist Jürgen Habermas, exponent of Frankfurt School, from the second generation, advanced the concept of public space, as mediating discursive sphere between civil society and political power. The public space, according to Habermas, would have been diverted through media domination and advertising manipulation of individuals. The observations of Habermas, regarding a hypothetical instrumentalization of mass communication, ignore the fact that mass-media contributed fundamentally to the producing and extending of public space, through the valorisation of public opinion and through the imposition of decisional transparency to the political power. The public opinion is the result of the openly expressed assemblage of representations, cognitions, volitions and affects of the individuals. In fact, mass-media constitutes both an instrument of social control, and a vector of emancipation and opposition. In today societies, the public space is inconceivable in the absence of mass-media.

The postmodern theories produce different visions about media culture, in contradiction with modern paradigms. One of the most influential postmodern discourses is that of Jean Baudrillard, who, under the influence by the works of Guy Debord, claims that media has a crucial role in distorting and blurring the difference between image and reality. The expansion of media information suppresses the meaning and reference through neutralisation and dissolution of content. Baudrillard thinks that we live in a world of simulacra, of objects of which the primary utility function disappeared and which have transformed into a social positioning system, in signs integrated into a code through which consumer society is reproducing itself and which dictates the rhythm of human existence. Baudrillard nullifies

the critique of postmodern media culture practices, because, for him, this endeavor should be based on real, the meaning of which has been absorbed and destroyed by simulations and simulacra produced by media. Media messages are devoided of content through substitution of the references with hyperreality of the images, representations and spectacles.

The concept of spectacle society was promoted by the French theorist Guy Debord, in order to describe the consumption of the staged images, products and events in today's world. Debord continues the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, but, unlike its exponents, he encourages esthetical terrorism, meaning direct intervention in the process of cultural production. Media spectacles are instances of mass culture, which incorporate social values, lifestyles, dramatizations of societal conflicts and models of conflict resolution and include political, sportive etc events, in sensationalist and tabloidized forms. Being a fusion between information and entertainment, infotainment spectacularizes the news, which become, thus, spectacles of the real. The entertainment has invaded all dimensions of social life.

The Debordian concept of spectacle corresponds to the pseudo-event, a term created by the American historian Daniel Boorstin, who argues that reality was replaced by a synthetic discursive universe, capable of reproducing itself. These skillfully staged events are essentially tautological: the fact that an event is presented as important determines its importance. Thus, media representations tend to value rather the capacity of media to produce representations, whatever the real content.

Marshall McLuhan hypothesizes media as a determinant element of cultures and societies (technological determinism). Media of communication, by their nature, determine a certain structure of information and of knowledge and, thus, influence decisively the worldview of individuals, their perception and thinking, as well as the organization of society. Media effects on individuals and societies, beyond the effective content, short-term, include others, long-term, profound, unnoticeable and, thus, unconscious, regarding the form. The medium of communication influences the receivers in other ways than the content it conveys. Moreover, the ubiquity of media culture from contemporary society makes invisible this very omnipresence.

In the age of fake news, alternative facts and post-truth from today's societies, the knowledge of rhetorical processes and a motives of rhetors, involved in producing the media messages becomes more important than in any other times.

Media culture is a huge laboratory and generator of memes (a stock of symbolic repetitive configurations which direct perception, assessment and interpretation of objects, phenomena and persons). Memes are fundamental cultural units, conveyed from a person to

another, through copying and imitation, which lay at the basis of evaluative and interpretative frameworks of individuals. Memetic mechanisms filter the reality and, thus, work as ideological devices. In this way, media, via news, comments, entertainment and advertising, create the dominant social *doxa*, through different alarming, conspirationist, protectionist or apocalyptic memes. Mediasphere is the main space of proliferation of these ideological codes. Even if some memes prove to be extremely stable, most of them are susceptible to constant mutations, through transfer from person to person or from media to media. Each media type activates primarily some memes and disadvantages others. This aspect is consistent with the theory of Marshall McLuhan, regarding identification of influences of media forms on human culture, perception and knowledge.

The rhetorical aim of media messages is influence, which can be positive, legitimate, honest (information, persuasion) or negative, pathological, perverse (disinformation, manipulation, propaganda and intoxication).

The study of persuasion was the main concern of two disciplinary areas: ancient (rhetoric) and modern (psychosociology).

These concepts (disinformation, manipulation, propaganda and intoxication) are frequently used in confusing or abusive manners, so that their delimitation and clarification is necessary. The difficulty of unequivocal definition of disinformation, manipulation, propaganda and intoxication comes from the common features they possess, from the similarity of the devices and stratagems they use, as well as the fact that can be employed simultaneously, engaging in various relationships, overlapping which further complicates their discernment.

Disinformation refers to all false, incomplete, erroneous information, aimed to targets representing individuals, groups or nations and which are fed or confirmed through news destined, deliberately, to destabilize their adversaries, news placed in mass-media by covert agents working as journalists. One of the most important and current versions of disinformation is fake news, which contaminates the public space and becomes manifest mainly during elections, in order to discredit certain political competitors and to divert attention from the fundamental topics.

One of the principal ways of executing disinformation is media framing. Media framings condense and simplify natural and social events and phenomena through processes of information filtering and ranking, building reality through emphasizing of some aspects and minimizing or excluding others. Thus, media structures experience and influences perception of the public concerning the presented events, phenomena and persons.

Intoxication consists in an assemblage of deceiving procedures intending influencing targets through introducing in their informational system, via mass-media, information which interferes with the decisional process of the receivers. Delimitation between intoxication and disinformation is difficult and ambiguous. The main difference between these actions consists in the fact that the first one targets a small group of managing persons, perhaps a leader, whereas the last aims at the public opinion.

Manipulation is, also, a frequently used and ambiguous concept, often confused with propaganda, persuasion, etc. Manipulation is the action of determining a social actor (person, group, community) to think and to behave in a way which is consonant with the interests of the initiator, and not with the interests of the receiver, using persuasion techniques which distort intentionally the truth, deceiving by using falsified arguments, and also appealing to non-rational levels. For the manipulation to achieve its purpose, the action of influence must be concealed as persuasion and to give the audience the impression that they dispose of freedom of choice and of action.

Propaganda constitutes the intentional and systematic action to shape perceptions, to manipulate cognitions and to guide behaviors in order to achieve a response that promotes the desired intent of the propagandist. Propaganda comprises the totality of means and methods of producing and transmitting of messages which promote doctrines, programmes, ideas, belonging to an organization, with the aim of gaining support and of attracting adherents. There are three kinds of propaganda: white, grey and black. Each type of media is adequate for certain forms of propaganda. The optimal effect is acquired through strategic combination of different types of media and propaganda forms.

The media culture can generate two big types of reactions: educative and subversive. The first approach corresponds to media literacy and it refers to the competencies to analyze and interpret critically the media messages. The second approach (culture jamming) constitutes a strategy of resistance against dominant discourses promoted by media culture and consists in their subversive modification, in order to challenge them. Media literacy operates with a negotiated reading of media messages, whereas culture jamming performs an oppositional reading.

The alert consumers of media messages have acquired adequate strategies and specific competencies to identify fair information and honest persuasion and to evade the attempts of manipulation, disinformation, intoxication or propaganda. Media literacy represents the abilities of actively selecting, interpreting and interrogating media messages.

Although it pretends to present reality, media, in fact, represents it. Representation constitutes the process of meaning creation within a system of available significations and influences the perception on reality, through selection and elaboration. Selection entails several dimensions: detection of events to become objects of media coverage, determination of significant aspects of those events, selection of sources, of angle, of words, etc. Different components of messages are assembled, within a technological process, in which intervene different specialists and workers and in which every element is positioned in view of maximum impact, and the final version does not allow the awareness of operations developed along the way. This final version represents only a representation of reality, from many possible others, but it has a natural appearance, as a result of the editing process of the message.

Format or genre constitutes the main modality, both for public, and for producers, to classify media messages. Genres or formats determine specific expectations of the audience toward media messages (news, comments, advertisements) and suppose the understanding of techniques used and of aimed targets or effects. Media use its own languages, allowing it to convey its messages efficiently. Press, radio, cinema, television, multimedia and online platforms each have their own codes and conventions, techniques and rules of production. All media messages have implicit or explicit persuasive purposes, in the sense that they try to determine the public to do or to believe something. For this aim, media messages use different techniques: credibility devices, emotional and rational appeals.

All media messages are destined for audiences (target publics). The consumption of media messages is a routine, daily behavior of individuals. Media users anticipate a certain advantage following the media consumption, however vaguely expressed would this be. Different consumers of media messages understand them differently. Media messages are omnipresente, but not omnipotent. The members of audience can use three approaches regarding the decoding of media messages: preferred or hegemonic reading (in total agreement with the intentions of author); negotiated reading (in partial agreement and disagreement with the intentions of author); and oppositional reading (in total disagreement with the intentions of author).

The producers of messages decide what elements to include and to position within media messages. In other words, there are no neutral messages: all media messages are impregnated ideologically. Media messages are multilayered, organized on multiple levels of ideas, meanings, opinions and attitudes. Moreover, media messages are, essentially, narrations. Narration allows association of certain disparate elements and their ordering, through a plot, in a coherent structure. Thus, narrations make intelligible a realitate, otherwise chaotic and

ambiguous. Through putting information into a plot, media messages highlight certain elements and diminish or suppress others. Media reduces the events, frequently, to narrative structures, based on simple binary oppositions.

Media messages appear with a purpose or a motive, being influenced by money, ego or ideology. In this case, it is not only the commercial dimension of profit, but also the symbolic, political, etc. Mass-media functions on a double marketplace: it sells audience to the companies which want to advertise and sells interest to the public, in order to determine its loyalty. The main reason of media is to attract audience, creating in it a state of receptivity, inclusively for advertisements.

Culture jamming constitutes a rhetoric practice of anticonsumerist resistance and a critical action through which media messages are subversively altered, to challenge and oppose dominant discourses. Culture jamming appeals to allusion, irony and parody with polemical intention, to critically interrogate the consumerist and corporatist perspectives and to propose alternative ways of interpreting the media messages. Culture jamming mocks, diverts and undermines dominant discourses, through a process of radical mutation of them, using the same tactics through which original message was created. Culture jamming opposes the cultural establishment and hegemonic discursive practices. Culture jamming constitutes the interpretation of original message through direct intervention on it, using two rhetorical strategies: perspective by incongruity and polemical intertextuality. As the dominant discourses recover, reject or coopt the critical messages, cultural activists must invent new tactics, adapt and adjust actions in unpredictable ways. The internet offers new tools and repertoires of culture jamming.

The principles of media literacy are heavily based on semiotic. My intention was to emphasize the importance of rhetoric in this field.

Rhetorical criticism is a qualitative method of research in communication sciences, conceived to investigate and explain systematically the symbolic acts and artifacts, with the purpose of understanding the rhetorical processes. Rhetorical criticism cannot be reduced to theoretical contributions, but also includes and accumulates a body of knowledge which develops human communication in a practical way. The purpose of rhetorical criticism is to describe, analyze, interpret and evaluate symbolic acts or artifacts in order to understand why they succeed or fail. The role of the rhetorical critic is to make explicit or intelligible those rhetorical elements which go unnoticed by common users.

The rhetorical critic must understand the potential and details of each perspective. Methods must not be applied rigidly, in a formulaic manner, but flexible, as a personalized act,

which helps the critic, not to lead criticism. Perspectives are instruments which the rhetorical critics must internalize in order to use them in their own manner.

In this paper, I presented and applied the most relevant methods of rhetorical criticism: neo-aristotelian, cluster, fantasy-theme, generic, ideologic, metaphoric, narrative and pentadic.

I think I have accomplished the objectives of the thesis, consisting in promoting methods of rhetorical criticism in the field of qualitative research in media studies and in promoting media literacy in Romania.

Methods of rhetorical criticism can be used with clear results in analyzing, interpreting and evaluating artifacts of media culture. Media literacy can be developed by using conceptual elements provided by rhetorical criticism. The two disciplinary directions are not only compatible, but also fitting within a more sophisticated critical construction.

The diversity of media culture artifacts which I have investigated confirms the explanatory and interpretative force of the methods of rhetorical criticism. The persuasive strategies (*ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*), key words, fantasy themes, rhetorical visions, organization principles, ideologies, metaphores, narratives and pentades constitute as many access points in the rhetorical investigation of media culture artifacts. Each method directs attention on certain aspects of the artifacts and ignores others.

The media culture can be understood as an instrument of manipulation, disinformation, intoxication and propaganda, but also as a resource for resistance, as spectacle or as perceptual matrix, as simulacrum or as a meme generator. Critical studies and cultural studies, the theories of technological determinism or postmodern paradigms shape this turbulent phenomenon, in continuous transformations and essentially of rhetorical nature.

The critical approaches concerning media culture must maintain inventiveness and pluralism, in order to remain pertinent. New methods of rhetorical criticism will lead to the discovery of some peculiar aspects of the media artifacts, in permanent differentiation.

The future research must determine, also, the relationship between rhetoric and memetic (the science of memes), to establish the stable informational structures of the memes which are disseminated in different types of media, etc. Some methods of rhetorical criticism are clearly compatible with memetic: fantasy-theme and ideological perspectives. Others can establish conceptual relationships later. Memetic, mediology and technological determinism can constitute a distinct set of research on media culture. Their association with rhetorical studies can generate new perspectives on media communication.

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