

## ON THE "RITUALIZATION OF OPTIMISM " THROUGH "SHORT REASONING" . THE TALK-SHOWS AND METATELEVISION

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The present essay attempts to introduce in the field of objects of cognitive sciences several controversial issues - theoretical and ideological - regarding the "TV gambling games", the talk-shows and of course, the publicity-like opinion polls. I will claim that individuals are not only actors in this phenomenon, but that they also become part of a (naive) audience, by being involved into a continuum of interpretative networks. In the beginning I will refer to a generic version of this cognitive mechanism and afterwards I will touch upon some of the reasons which cause a bizarre poverty of the research methods of these social phenomena.

How are the actors-spectators persuaded that they are placed in the "media proximity" of the location of the collective decision? The answer of the cognitive<sup>1</sup> sciences claims that the accreditation of these connections is created by the circulation of some "decisional abbreviations". These abbreviations are some sort of basic and synthetic decision operators which appear in the shape of statements summarizing an information-selection criterion warning that a collective decision-making is to follow (in which the 'abbreviations' are argumenting statements) whose success or failure is connected with the capacity to convince the other of its justice value. This is the model of limited rationality - the citizens accepting to become interested by a public debate if and only if: the time is limited and the cognitive effort minimal. The individual decides in sequences and stops at the first solution which crosses a the minimum level of satisfaction. This is what makes the decision-making procedure rational and not the decision as such. (H.A. Simon<sup>2</sup>).

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<sup>1</sup> For the beginning I will start from the model offered by D. Sperber and D. Wilson in "*La Pertinence. Communication et cognition*", Minuit, Paris, 1989. I have exposed a more detailed presentation of the possibilities of using the cognitive sciences model in sociology in the chapter "Distance cognitive mobilization" in "*Construcția simbolică a câmpului electoral*", Institutul european, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> H. A. Simon, *Models of bounded Rationality*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1983  
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The published opinion polls and the talk-shows are the perfect means for the activation or re-activation of such 'over-crowded reasoning' or 'semi-statement knowledge' (Sperber) necessary to build a public controversy. The actors' behaviour is rational in relation with the abbreviation (there is for example an implicit consensus of the public opinion to consider that the price index is a valid inflation abbreviation) and irrational towards the real situation since the individual possesses a 'total un-knowing' (the government could have artificially achieved a good result by making efforts to prioritize the limiting of the products' price increase - from which the price index is calculated).

A more suggesting understanding of this phenomenon is given by D. Sperber with the help of the following example referring to the mechanism of guaranteeing the paradoxical beliefs by tradition and/or the appeal to tacit collective beliefs. This refers to those situations in which no solution is sought since 'it is commonly assumed' that there is one!

Given a p statement, if it is part of the encyclopaedic knowledge it is necessarily confronted with other statements. But it can also appear in a different manner, i.e. as part of the statement: "p is true". It is plausible to have an 'understanding' of the latter. Without knowing p. For instance I know that  $\langle\langle e=mc^2 \rangle\rangle$  is true. But ' $e=mc^2$ ' is known only by the physicist. And ' $e=mc^2$ ' is part of my scientific encyclopaedia, but only as part of  $\langle\langle e=mc^2 \rangle\rangle$  is true, and only between inverted commas. Memorizing such statements would be similar with their placing into a 'black box' from where they come out only in critical situations. We can say in this case that they activate the symbolic memory. For instance I do not possess the complete information, neither do I have the certainty that I have the necessary competence to make valid judgements about 'the national situation' so that I would vote in the direction x or y. What I know though (in the event of my being familiar with the statistical forms) is that 'somewhere, someone' represents 'the social rationality' (' $\langle\langle e=mc^2 \rangle\rangle$  is true') through research of all kinds ('administrative research', opinion polls, 'political debates'). Such a demon which activates the symbolic memory is the 'plausible'. It seems to be a conservative demon since its name suggests that it prefers redundant information rather than new one. But no, it gets bored! It needs 'spot-lights' (talk-shows revealing certain issues, scandals concerning the manipulation of opinion-polls results, omission of the miscalculation rate etc.) which strengthen its belief that somewhere there is a 'innocent truth' to which the actor-spectator can get access provided that he watches the revealing 'public debates' (political analysts' discourses, talk-shows hosts' efforts, editorials etc).

I present now two comments which show that cognitive models are also compatible with other types of research programs regarding the representations operations through cognitive approaches.

The first refers to the accomplishment of the representation as cognitive operation of 'appropriation' of particular cases. Such a procedure implies that body resemblance, civil state qualities and personal biographies are taken as reference. Michel Foucault, presenting an epistemic history created in a fact a history of resemblances, i.e. of taking something as the reference for a comparison.

The second is the one suggested by A. Desrosieres and L. Thevenot<sup>3</sup>'s studies which show that the differences used for classifying people do not depend solely on the 'social roles' but also on the relevant 'information formats' for the accomplishment of the classification. These are reflected especially when the aim of the research imply a greater care for the recognition of the various modes identification rather than a formal maintenance of the formal illusion with respect to the existence of a corpus of 'same type' equivalence classes. From here the two French sociologists claim that one can derive various persuasive games concerning the public opinion in the same way by publishing opinion polls one is faced with a mobile increase of the 'average' over a series of individual cases.

#### **A) Bingo television**

Why is the time cheap on Sundays? Because not all people can 'succeed'. Why is it that half of Romanian citizens waste their weekend by running after teletickets and watching the whole day bingo-TV?

One answer of a misleading simplicity: because people want to get rich and do not know how to do it. So they waste their time in unproductive activities which would not be so catastrophic (because the amount of money is limited - we refer now to the 'small player' and the 'Sunday player', and not to the addicted one) if this would not develop a 'take all and give nothing' mentality (in fact people who blame the game are afraid - as it appears from the 'subtle' questions in the opinion polls - of the 'small but sure income' mentality). However, everything would trigger a wrangling idleness and a macro system oriented towards a redistribution of wealth without creating a new one.

Such a negative and cynical attitude can be encountered in the economic field as well. The American moralizing language - how would the Romanian equivalent sound like? - uses rhetorical questions of the type 'What, you are a little bastard but you are not rich yet?' when referring to the stock exchange speculations.

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<sup>3</sup> A. Desrosieres, "Classer et mesurer. Les deux faces de l'argument statistique", *Réseaux*, 69/1995.

I have made the association between the incrimination of gambling and of the financial speculation for thus we can build a common ground for the comments provided by historians, sociologists and economists: the correlation of the status quo modification is indisputable (usually: the increase of social mobility) and the blame of the idea of 'game'. Hence the derived hypothesis that the 'game' rather than a 'disease of moral weakness' is a syndrome of the 'heavenly expectation': when people feel outrun by others they put their hopes into random projects. Thus they 'take up' petty 'gambling' games (Telebingo) and they adventure into quick business areas like the case of FNI (lately, as some sociologists consider they invest their hopes into IDD – long-distance education...) The opposite case is the one when the 'outrun' the others: they look for stability and risk-taking avoiding, they blame the 'new games'. I think that several examples taken from R. and G. Brenner<sup>4</sup> and a speculation that I will make starting from a hypothesis formulated by Max Weber will better suggest why at the question from the beginning an easy answer is misleading.

In 1388 Richard II imposed the adopting of a law that obliged the people to buy the necessary equipment for the 'fighting art' therefore not allowing them to spend their money for 'tennis football, dice or bowling'. In 1477 Edward IV worried by the numberless scandals between the 'job-less' soldiers after the end of the expeditions in France tries to forbid the 'gambling houses'. The fact that behind these stories there lay a military lobbying animated only too little by moral-patriotic feelings comes out of the 'discourse analysis' of 1541 Henry VIII's decree: the justification that the new games occupy the free time necessary for the ability of weapons-handling formation and disturb the public order accompanied by a request from the arches and arrows manufacturers who were overtly against the 'superficial games'. The birth of a new game industry generated a competing category of public actors capable to use a clever system of rumours for the 'public visibility' of this request.

A second example will bring more light over the fact that if during times of instability people start gambling and 'speculative economy' this correlation is not a cause-effect connection. Instability, laziness or superficiality are not caused by games and speculation. On the contrary the last two have a stability-bringing role for they reduce the uncertainty which already exists, calms down the spirits and maintains the hope during troubled times (the two authors ask themselves rhetorically if in the absence of the possibility of believing that one might get richer through gambling of risky economic business the only chance left is the one

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<sup>4</sup> R. & G. Brenner, *Gambling and Speculation*, Cambridge, 1990.

of the revolutionary or ideological institution). The example I will give comes from a study of some American sociologists on a topic entitled: *The amazing popular deceivings*<sup>5</sup>.

This hypothesis started from the observation that in the Netherlands the tulip-mania recruited its most faithful fans from among the middle class ambitious and with an ascending social mobility members. For them tulips had become a social symbol similar with the today's objects bearing Picasso's signature. The fluctuations of their price can be explained by the changes in the individuals' fear of not being recognized as members of this 'class' if they do not possess tulip bulbs! More clearly, tulip-mania appeared out of two socio-economic and esthetical beliefs: a) that the tulips will remain forever a social symbol, b) that the idea of a 'striking house interior' 'analytically' supposes the image of the tulip (while others prefer certain dogs or the 'academic comfort' – leather covered books etc.). Finally the situation has changed and many tulip investors failed. Is it to blame the idea that people had in some way or another that the tulips had ceased to be 'flowers' and became social symbols? The authors of the study showed that a correct analysis could be made only if two questions are posed! To the question "Is it an error to believe that tulips will remain forever a symbol of prosperity?" a retrospective answer is "yes". But to the question "Was this belief destabilizing?" the answer is "no" – because the middle class would have searched for a new symbol of prosperity so that if tulips would not have been good for business the Dutch would have found something else: maybe the portrait-painters or the astrologists of the XVIIth century. But in this case it was not the price of the tulips which would have fluctuated but the prices of the astrologists and painters because they would have fallen the moment their services wouldn't have been needed any more to express a certain wealth.

While playing I will allow myself to refer to the same game as the American researchers but to change its pieces and the efficiency of its rules. To keep as Wittgenstein would say 'the constitutive rule' (when to move the bishop and how the castling can be made) and to create an 'effect of ambiance' by a certain use of the 'regulating rule' (for instance to try to checkmate with the knight and bishop and give up the castle). The economic efficiency is smaller (I waste more time), but the show is greater. Let us ask, for example, the above mentioned questions with regard to astrology. Is it a mistake to believe in astrology? The answer is 'yes'. Is it destabilizing this belief? Not necessarily, because who knows with what other madness, indulgence or divination method it would be replaced!

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. R.&G. Brenner, *ibid.*

Is it indeed a mistake to believe in binge television? The answer is...

Leaving aside the rules of this explanatory game: personally I am sure that our present day television channels are guilty of rendering uniform and superficial the Sunday leisure time. But even if nothing can be done then shouldn't the solution perhaps be looked for by taking as departing point the question: "What do rich people do for the poor ones?". Who are in this case 'the rich'? The target would be too insignificant if we chased the TV staff as this is only one too fat rabbit. The true 'destabilizing racketeer' is the 'state manager': broke and lacking decision-making imagination it indulges in this game for it needs 'hazardous taxes' (just like the cop who pecks cheese pieces at the market). Unfortunately for those who agree with my ideas previously discussed personally I have but one extravagant suggestion: the state should be obliged to use this money only for fitting out parks, buying TV sets and games for children in less favored schools, sponsorship for publishing houses, films or shows etc. If people not knowing what else to try in order to 'get rich' spend their money on amusements and superficial 'game structures' then isn't it natural that a part of the profit should be redistributed to them so that they could aspire in a 'wise' way?

As it is inevitable that there are rich and poor, there are also some 'theories of the justification' which to the question labeled reformist "What do rich people do for the poor ones?" add another conservative one: "What do poor people do for the rich ones?". I will try to sketch out a solution to this problem starting with the way in which Max Weber has described 'the rational nucleus' of the balance between the two major institutions which transform human hope into ritual: religion and the game of chance. "The lucky one is rarely satisfied only with his success. He needs besides that to know that he has the right to this success. He wants to be sure that he deserves it more than anyone else. He wants to have the right to think that the less lucky ones have only what they deserve. Moreover, the success has to be legitimate". In other words, the institutions which rebuild our anxiety aligning us in a context of faith enter the competition with those who offer us the games of chance because both of them transform the 'individual hopes' into ritual, giving us the opportunity to leave the present social status by means of a symbolic 'game': the former by the direct social interactions intended by the games, the latter by the interactions mediated by several systems of beliefs. Some sociologists (H. Schöeck, G. Geertz) say this 'more directly': the hope and the happiness given to those who rich or poor believe in taking chances are maybe nothing else than a way of freeing the individual of his desire and the envied person of the remorse and fear of the envious.

Therefore 'which is the moral' of the arguments above? I think that some of those who blame the 'active search of risk' (cf. N. Perpelea, "De la ruleta rusească la proba ordalică", in

Dilema, 328/1998), the game and the stock exchange speculation within a short period of time consider that we cannot hope to accomplish something in our life before we cease staring at someone else. I count on the idea that they are right but this only within the framework of the rules of a world game where 'the culture of shame' (Nietzsche) is not just a "phony ritual" (E. Goffman). Within this framework of meanings I prefer the 'sociology' that can assume the following normative principle: we should tolerate those speculations of the risk which, through the myth of the quasi-mystical or magic 'short way' towards success maintain within the public imaginary the aura of the moral reprobation aiming at the facility, refusal or effort of the 'long way'.

How would you look on the TV taking the 'bing-notes' with the obligation to become an actor in a video in which you advise other people to continue to believe in their chance? Personally I would parody a famous distinction made by U.Eco with regard to the TV reality-shows and soap-operas and I would make a declaration similar to those of the neo-incas sociologists who, after 'sophisticated analyses' have reached the conclusion that the paleo-incas had hidden their treasures under the tele-tickets tables one can see nowadays in the city streets.

### **B) The Reflexive Competence of the TV political debates meta-spectator**

Keen of soap operas and passionate talk-shows, the incas do not read 'sociology books' in which the new 'televisual genders' like reality-shows ("Surprises-surprises", "Forgive Me!", "Life Beats the Movie") and talk-shows ("At Tuca", "At Adrian Paunescu", "At Calinescu", "At C.T.Popescu" ) are bantered. That is why the critical theories ("The Frankfurt School") cannot be applied. We must prefer a sociology of the critics against the televisual communication phenomenon. This type of sociology is no doubt of feminine gender: it does not want to be loved as much as it aspires to be pluralist-preferred. In other words, the theoretical key interest of the analyses about the 'televisual communication' which will captivate the new sociologists will not be the one to observe how various agents of the public space (the administration, parties, civil society networks, pressure groups, communities etc.) force the public and programs' producers to offer certain definitions about what 'the truth of the messages' really means. We would rather examine the instruments which the theoreticians, analysts and various categories of receivers use in order to make judgments about the way in which this technological power convinces the social space actors to maintain their communication.

Accordingly we should apply a *nominalistic definition of power* as M. Foucault suggests: "[...] this is not so much an institution, a structure, nor a certain power that some people possess: it is the name which is lent to a complex strategic situation in a given society"<sup>6</sup> Therefore we are not interested in making a content analysis of the virtually manipulative messages (a whole army of analysts waste today their time with this kind of 'monitoring'), but rather by the opinion figures which the mediatic discourse offers the amateurs of judgments regarding the fulfillment of its stabilizing and maintaining an effective or virtual communication among and with all partners of a supposedly inevitable quasi-contract of communication. More simply put, for 'the television' (the quotation marks signify obviously the fact that I personify an 'author' which is in reality invisible) it suffices that it is watched. But as a viewer I still do not have – at least for some of the things I can see there – any code for interpretation. What would then stop me to waste my time by watching another channel? It is enough though for me to consider that my communication partner has a communicational intention. I do not know which that is, what 'contents' it hints at but it is enough for me to think that there is a pertinent intention, that one or the other 'know what they know', but even it is enough to think that 'they do not know what they are doing'.

The specialists in communication epistemology would have observed by now that I applied here the 'theory of communicational pertinence'<sup>7</sup>

This cognitivist theory claims that a representation of a certain thing has chances to be transmitted (the inter-individual communication mechanisms are thus explained) and received as long as they offer an interpretation of the raw facts (let us take the example of 'unhappiness') according to the following model: 1) when the non-respect of a social practice precedes 'unhappiness' this non-attitude seems to be its cause; 2) the explanation of 'unhappiness' by someone's action or non-action allows: a) the identification of the responsible agents, b) at least a social answer to a situation in which the individual or the group is helpless; 3) the agreement with a practice protects even against a social risk : not to be accused of being the cause of unhappiness. We may infer from here that for 'fitting' to the natural model of human mind functioning based on the 'fight' between *an active factor* and a conservative one.

<sup>6</sup>Michel Foucault, *Le volonté de savoir*, Paris, Gallimard, 1976, p.123.

<sup>7</sup>Dan Sperber, Deirdre Wilson, *La pertinence. Communication et cognition*, Paris, Minuit, 1989.

As soon as it succeeds to establish itself as a self-reflexive structure (to this also helps the reflexivity illusion created by 'small theories' to be found in magazines such as "Telemania", as well as genres which simulate the control of the 'audience', like the case of the ProTv show : "ProTv listens to you!") a television channel triggers the premise of the existence of a 'text' having pertinent intentions (in the sense of Sperber or Wilson). I can, for instance, say to myself: "there is something here connected to the effort's being worthwhile..."

Baudrillard used the metaphor of the swollen mirror to refer to this persuasive technique. In our case the reflection is the illusion that we are part of a communication contract. We can detect the same suppositions as in the conversationalist Leviathan: there is a certain competence of the 'public eye' to appreciate the pertinence presumption of the communicational intentions which circulate within the public or private discussions network (gossips, chattering, articles from various magazines and newspapers containing the TV program)<sup>8</sup>. Televisual communication is achieved through an interface created by a pact or a contract Through which the parts admit they are in a communicational situation and that they do that for they have co-shared reasons. Thus a communitary event<sup>9</sup> is produced which, at the level of its programming, is organized in sub-divisions of shows of well-defined genres and easily identifiable which allow the transmitter to maintain near the public a predictable system of undeceived expectancies (see further on the concept of 'discursive regime'). Hence the system of genres can be understood by the viewers as a reservoir of codes between the transmitter and the receiver. But there arises the problem of the way in which such a 'manifestation of pretensions' can manifest itself (as a mere remark of some "exigencies", for of course it would be too much to talk about the "perfection presumption" – see Gadamer's hermeneutics).

Generally the researchers who do not use the contractualist model only for its 'descriptive easiness' do not forget to stress a defining more subtle question of this contract: its 'formatting' as a stake contract. How could we better understand this as long as thus we suppose an equivalence between a promise and its guarantee?

<sup>8</sup>This problem has also been analyzed by anthropologists: "Discussions about the TV represent themselves a social force. They are the main means of transmitting the significance of television, a means where they come together with other meanings in a new form to create an important interface with the world of action and belief. "(B. Hodge, D. Tripp, *Children and television*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1986, p. 143. *Cit.* de R. Silverstone, *Televiziunea in viata cotidiana*, Polirom, p. 91).

<sup>9</sup>A. Negri, P. Signorelli, R. De Berti, *Scènes de la vie quotidienne, Réseaux*, CNET, Paris, 44-45/1990.

For the beginning we can explain this paradox by observing one of the mechanisms which – according to the explanation offered by J. Elster – regulates the connection between *interests*, *social norms* and *emotions*.

We have here the three main motivations of human action. The ‘normative action’ is not just an *optimizing mechanism* ( e.g. an ex-post rationalization – to create communicational or cultural appearances! – of interests), for oftentimes the involved social norms do not imply strategic stakes. AS opposed to the *conventional equilibriums* (not to cross the street when the traffic light is red) and the social codes (on Friday with your lover, on Saturday with your family) social norms do not have the exigence of ‘specialized sanctioners’ for they are made up of individuals through an individual propensity. Even because it is independent of its effects, the *normative action* has positive consequences for the agent<sup>10</sup>. Shorter: this equilibrium (promise – guarantee) can be formulated according to the model of the Anonymous Association of those who quit smoking (AASQ): “I will punish you if you do not punish me ...for I did not punish you”. In other words, the contracted genders make up the ‘texts’ (and explain them) in such a manner so that they will make operational (in the analysis algorithm of the reflexive viewer) an *expectance system*. These are connected by all sorts of feed-backs, phone-calls (“ProTv listens to what you see”), audience control index, media reaction (“Telemania”) which induce a certain ‘reflexive competence’: the belief that the communicational act functions according to the anticipated dissuasion rule.

Following the market model – so like a sort of *communicative goods* – these ‘criticizing rituals’ can be individually experienced by ‘knowing’ or ‘seeing’. There is an exchange of information and perceptions in a *quasi-individual* way in four forms of space-time contracted by four pacts: the *hospitality* pact, the *commerce* pact, the *learning* pact and the *show* pact. If during the *paleo-television* era (U.Eco) the viewer thought he ‘knew’ and ‘see’ well through the ritualization of the Great Society Inquisitor, now (*neotelevision*) this ‘wisdom effect’ (or self-perception of the *personal sophistication*) arises from the tactile relationship with images, actions or private lives. The fact that the individual relationships (of proximity) between persons are the most easily noticed makes the ‘encounter’ with the TV programs be similar with the most friendly simple encounters completely ritualized by

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<sup>10</sup> Elster’s preferred example is the *revenge act*. The costs of this punishment are not to be neglected, but within the chain of these calculations arises the *normative belief* that on a long term to win all or nothing is favorable to small constant gains (i.e. to be guided by the rational choice theory). For instance the one who does not let any chance to swear back – when swore at -- go acquires a reputation which allows him further on to threaten which otherwise would not be believed. Cf. J. Elster, *The Cement of Society*, Cambridge U. P., 1989. J. Elster, “Rationality, Emotions and Social Norms”, *Syntheses*, 98/1994.

Goffman's rule, but which are not connected by fixed ceremonies typical to the festive event (of *society* type). The exception of these events is now similar to the 'salt and pepper' and is called : *media events*: sensational fights during the TV debates, championships final, VIP's marriages, catastrophies, extraordinary rescues, rock concerts, amazing job-quitting ... The daily life rhythm thus becomes a 'crucial' good which continuously maintains (and not only sporadically) the audience in a state of mutual friendliness capable to exorcize the potential 'betrayals' by *zapping* (the use of the remote control generates the narcissist illusion of a certain hiper-reflexivity).

The analysts who talk about a 'reflexive television' seem to do it in connection with this *neo-television*. Some use the term *metatelevision* to refer to the *endogenous criticism* against the televisual practices. Although only count Münchhausen managed to get himself out of the mud by seizing his head, the prefix 'meta' seems to suggest that out of these discussions could result a sort of moral exigence which offers the possibility of an analysis of the televisual derision even within the catodical spatio-temporality. Thus we suppose that the stake of the contract can be *controlled* by the viewer vigilance (and codified by the 'expert-systems' instruments of the televisual programs analyst and by the 'audiences') by observing the homogeneity between: 1) the *four pacts* (which incarnate in 'television models' : of news, services and commerce, leisure, relationship, science, etc.) and 2) *the genres, shows, speakers, rituals and decorations* established as being pertinent incarnations (effective accomplishments).

In my opinion, with the ones who adopt this 'metatelevisual' conception we cannot have a technically honest discussion of an epistemological nature for they are either the prisoners of the ideologies and interests of a professional groups which supposes that the television disposes of specific instruments of analysis<sup>11</sup> or they have a theoretically naïve mentality concerning the nature of 'truth' (as it will come out of the imaginary analysis maintained by the public in so far as the *talk-show* is concerned). Taking this into account the only thing left is to move the discussion in the academic field and see whether what I will call the *reflexive error problem* can be found in the mere way in which the 'epistemologists' of televisual communication mobilize the general conceptual intruments of sociology, psychology and anthropology.

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<sup>11</sup>For instance in France the dispute Bourdieu - Schneidermann (the author of the famous metareflexive show "*Arrêt sur l'image*") is famous regarding the possibility of a certain "self-medication" (Bourdieu) within the field: producers, animators, television critics etc. Cf. Ph. Le Guern, Ph. Teillet, "*La querelle <<Bourdieu-Schneidermann>>: analyse comparée de deux métadiscours télévisuels*", in *Champs Visuels*, 8/1998.

One of the passions which arises our interest necessary for the reading of a text about 'television' is a sort of 'epistemic emotion', that of a search for a tacite theoretical orientation. We can even ask ourselves: "Which could be the hidden goal of the author?"

I believe that a 'psycho-sociological' analysis, as opposed to the one in nature sciences can contain personal proofs as well. I have to confess in this respect that I am oftentimes amuse to watch certain such stupid 'media researches' that I attract negative remarks from my family. Can this waste of time be explained only by my specialist research in 'communication sciences'? Is not the case that I act more as a 'naïve theoretician' whose 'intelligibility algorithms' are triggered exactly by this stupid discourse generating the 'factual content'? This is how I reached an almost cynical approach of the problem connected to the existence of a *conceptual-receptive continuum* between the 'mere...viewer' and the specialist in 'television'.

This concept points at the way in which a social theory is capable to live. According to A. Giddens the implicit social theories generate a continuum of the 'knowledge agents' in the communication practices. In other words the 'media society' involves the individuals in situations (given the frequency and the multiplicity of the forms of existence of this topic: "what I think that the others think...") in which the *social communication recursive ness* has produced a certain ability to live inside the space generated by the social theory of communication. But this would imply to consider social theories as social inventions which intervene, transform and create realities. Social theories thus differ from other theories ('nature' sciences) especially due to the fact that *understanding* is their constitutive part: the individuals manifest a certain reflexive understanding arising from the recursiveness between their own understanding and the understanding of others, the latter being 'crystallized' in its turn in the own understanding and the understanding of others.

As I have already mentioned in detail, the *communication recursive theory* is a theory about the understanding of other people's theories about human communication and offers individual supplies to those who live within their space of construction – hence respecting and encouraging their *cognitive authority* (they can for instance understand coordination in communication's own terms). A supposition of this *continuum* is that a communication theory needs to speak about itself, i.e. not only about *mutual knowledge*. (A knows B, B knows A), and *common knowledge* (A knows X, B knows X), but also about *our own constructions* of the objects of knowledge and own understanding. From an epistemological point of view we must take this into account for sociologists are tempted to elaborate theories about a unique social universe and aim at some theoretical constructions to

control the *variations* between what the theoretician understood and what 'everybody understood'.

Bearing this conceptualization in mind let us come back to several meanings of the televisual communication. According to some authors<sup>12</sup> this type of reflexivity can even become the naïve-subconscient source of the passion which makes the receiver invest time of personal audience with regard to the talk-show : I do not know what and how is the truth, but I can 'feel' how it is constructed by its words. I will start further on to elaborate on this idea.

A characteristic of the contemporary Western imaginary (meaning 'mental game') is that of catching us all in the big whirl of doubt: there is somewhere an innocent truth which preexists its 'concrete' manifestations. It is necessary that it is discovered: i.e. there must be defeated (by a 'power to express the truth') the forms which impurify it and also there must always be doubted the instruments ('revelatory speech') through which it is discovered. So, our Western mentality (of course, this is not the only one we possess!) implicitly supposes that this speech is to some extent the truth itself and it can have an 'obvious value' – with the condition that it is a speech 'itself', i.e. noone's. We notice that the key term is this 'noone's'; How is its "*Neuter*" (J. Habermas) ensured? We suppose here two opacities: 1) the one coming from an intentional act (voluntary as well as involuntary), 2) the one linked to the perspective of the regard of an individual or a group's – similar to the 'blind spot' of the ocular psycho-physiology.

I will insert within the presentation of this imaginary a problem of an epistemological nature. Thus, Niklas Luhmann used the systems theory to define communication without using its character of being a language (*Sprachlichkeit*)<sup>13</sup>. He claims that as soon as the evolution will have involved us into communication systems we cannot come back to the paradox of simple souls and that we acquire a new type of 'difference conscience' for we become observers of the contingency of the connection between information and communication behavior (*Mitteilung*: to make known). We live in an era when the 'cultural semantics' transformed the 'in-sincerety of sincerety' into a necessary 'theme' if, of course, we are cautious enough to observe that society 'is kept together' not by a natural order, but by communication. Moreover, we can communicate something about ourselves – about our state, humours, spirits and intentions only if we can *present ourselves* as information context that could just as well be different.

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<sup>12</sup> P. Charaudeau, R. Ghiglione, *La parole confisquée. Un genre télévisuel: le talk show*, Paris, Dunod, 1997.

<sup>13</sup> N. Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme. Grundriss einer allgemeinen Theorie*, cap.4: "Kommunikation und Handlung", Frankfurt-am-main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1984.

Luhmann states that communication itself produces a doubt of in-sincerity and that the adapting to evolution stimulates a special event – *to know when to keep silent*. This prediction seems extremely plausible if we observed the things around us. What worries more though is that from the supposition of presenting to him/herself in the abovementioned way a strange phenomenon of *keeping silent to him/herself* arises.

To conclude, the *individual speeches* are suspect by definition under the naïve theoretical reflection as well as in the epistemological discourse. The question which analytically arises is whether their public confrontation – ensured by a ‘discursive mechanics’ (the specific protocols of various radio-televized dialogue shows) – can constitute a sort of *neuter witness*. The implicit supposition of these discourses is that the ‘truth’ is simultaneous with the effect generated by the free-speech interactions (‘discursive interaction’) of the persons present in these shows. In all these cases there will be a *show*. Let us consider here only two types.

The *reality-show* offers the viewer the possibility to see how the actors of previous actions ‘really lie’: the heroes of “Surprises, surprises”, “Forgive Me!” of “Life beats the Movie” just act the role of a past harm (accident, natural catastrophe, social disorder, aggression, moral abandoning, un-understood attempt to help someone), and now they expose themselves to the appreciation regarding their competence to be ‘authentic’. In other words, the TV watcher has to involve a moral-esthetical competence – inherited from life and refined by participation at an ‘official culture’ (readings, soap operas, movies, theatre) – to catch a potential ‘double game’ right during the ‘originary moment’. Implicitly a TV watcher could say to himself: if we have here a reacting (a serious TV producer does not hide this!) it is impossible that there won’t be left any ‘traces’ of the real presence of the one who was indeed there. Thus, the ‘object’ of our moral TV watcher judgement which has moral breaks ‘in private’ is the ‘trace’ and the ‘competence of the originary witness’ to offer it to the TV animator for the public.

In the *talk-show* case the viewers’ judgements apply not only to a reconstruction but also to the competence of the present public to reconstruct the public opinion ‘on the spot’. Implicitly the viewer supposes that in society there are several technical ‘options’ with respect to a certain problem, and the actors of the televised dialogue ‘exhibit’ one or the other’s tendency to be consensual, radical, moderated, self-contradictory etc. Here – as opposed to the TV genre called ‘*debate*’ – the viewers’ target is so much the ‘content’ (the presentation in an organized setting of a political, juridical, scientific, religious topic to be rationally solved or at least ‘understood’), but rather the participants’ endowment (similar to the contract between a client and his lawyer) to prolong in the public space the contact with the basic

phenomenon. Differently put, I 'watch' "Tuca-show", "The Daily Problem" or "Sensational with Diaconescu" not so much to see how things will be effectively solved, but to see how a one lawyer or another will behave in court. Of course, this interpretation is only one characteristic of the 'reflexive tele-viewers', others naively expect things to be 'solved' right there. This latter attitude emerges from a quick 'empiric generalization'. The fact that sometimes this really happens ("Come on, shake hands!", "Do you promise here in front of us –population – that from tomorrow you will supply hot water?") does not mean that the 'essence' of this type of 'mediatized conversation' supposes the finding of technical solutions on the spot, but it supposes that 'sometimes-somewhere' is plausible that we can play efficiently ("for you see, dear spectators, we understand each other here!").

### C) Oddities in the spectacle of the poll industry critique

The present essay does not claim to offer a 'precise theory' of the different sorts of discourses about the ritualic scandal caused by the opinion poll discourse concerning political communication. I think we should avoid a 'frontal' epistemology: the scientific object as object of a conscience, the illusion of an immediate object. In other words, when making a sociological analysis we should not avoid suspecting any claim regarding the innocence of such an object of scientific research ('political discourse through opinion polls', 'political communication') at least for the fact that being dragged through the net of (scientific) social disciplines it would not even remain the same.

But how can you get yourself out of a game which seems to characterize this political communication show through the metaphor of mutual throwing with stones? I refer to what R. Girard calls the *victimization mechanism* ('the scape-goat'), at the same time the final stage of social 'decomposition' and starting point of the 're-composition'. Exaggerating a little, of course, we could also talk about this 'cultural zero' with respect to 'political culture'. Here as well there is an imagining of an institutional lapidation (but who should throw the first stone: the sociologist, the political analyst, the journalist, the politician?) from a distant time so a first (or final) lapidation which would spontaneously unleash and reconcile the (political) community.

One solution would be that of 'models'. Here are presented two of them which are very rarely used in the media expositions of the poll phenomenon. The first one because it is subversive, the second because it is techno-esoteric. I will try to offer an explicative link between the two models starting from a guess that the accusation of 'subversion' and 'techno-

esoterism' can be exaggerated due to some interests connected with the new professional fields such as the *abetting groups of high officials and of the political personnel*, as well as the field which we could term, in a weberian language '*the status-quo of the interpretive elites*'.

Obviously in the first model the reader would recognize P. Bourdieu<sup>14</sup> and P. Champagne<sup>15</sup>'s theses. Although I do not agree with all the French sociologists' arguments – see N. Perpelea &, *Structura simbolică a câmpului electoral*, Ed. Institutul European, 1998. I will use some of them to suggest why a more profound criticism of the symbolic position of polls is simply excommunicated from the majority of the mass communication publications which deal with a more 'political' topic. Their arguments consist, to a large extent, in demonstrating non-conventionally (i.e. not in the political analyst language) that the thing which gives value to the answers in an 'opinion-poll' and determines the choice of the 'questioned' sample is not a *technical principle* (to select groups or individuals who effectively have an opinion), but a political principle according to which hidden beliefs, convictions or political stakes gain their scientific appearance.

At the level of the *reflexive dimension of the political imaginary* we are faced with the problem of the interface between the 'surveillance of the public opinion circulation' and the 'circulation of surveillance'. The semiotic democracy chokes by wanting too much from the bottom-up, it only being able to resist the horizontal surveillance, that is why the *communication society* will make that the "telegraph would replace the cathedral's bell-tower". I took this metaphor from P. Flichy<sup>16</sup> who alludes to the fact that the wires of the first telegraphs were hung on the tops of churches and cathedrals. Gradually they became, inside the political communication imaginary a sort of secularized 'high place'. Nowadays a dominant position within the field of the agents who ensure 'live' this interface is that occupied by what we call *intelligentsia*. Its role is to be a 'network of networks' – *meta-network* which indicating the virtual position-taking of the profane agents that a meaning already exists. I do not have a special analysis to argue in favor of this hypothesis, but I count on the observation that in the oral language (or en vogue books) of this type of intellectual-analysts who oftentimes visit TV stations there is used with great pleasure a range of topics connected to the founding mythology.

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<sup>14</sup>P. Bourdieu, "L'opinion publique n'existe pas", in *Les Temps modernes*, 318/1972; reprinted in *Questions de sociologie*, Minuit, Paris, 1980, p. 222-235.

<sup>15</sup>P. Champagne, *Faire l'opinion. Le nouveau jeu politique*, Minuit, Paris, 1990.

<sup>16</sup>P. Flichy, *Une histoire de la communication moderne. Espace public et vie privée*, Paris, Ed. La Découverte, 1991, p. 22.

Thus they represent themselves to the public imaginary as a sort of 'chrystalized passage', i.e. a receptacle of the virtual schemes which link the chaos with the rational.

The usage of a pseudo-sophisticated language corresponds to the expectations and competence of a public already used with a certain 'dictionary-like' thinking (U. Eco) circulating in talk-shows, funny political cross-words and zodiacs.

We should not see in the symbolic construction of these networks only some political kitsch. They have an important cathartic function and they are often the only source of decent material existence for the intellectuals. Some sociologists do not hesitate though and notice that the invasion of books written by the so-called 'anti-media politico-media intellectuals' (J.M. Ferry) feeds the social imaginary with a vision *from above* about the public political problems, i.e. how they appear in the 'administrative' sociology studies and the studies of the political-media elites. Their narrative strategy has the shape of some 'political histories' – a sort of saga which gives value to their 'entrepreneurial and meditative' capacity to formulate the rules of the political game. And this is what makes sociologists consider that the *bottom* (sociological) vision is *subversive* for it catches the self-desfaturation in the roles, i.e. often something else than the self image that 'high officials' ascribe themselves. That is why the 'strictly sociological' approaches (see Bourdieu's case) have difficulties in integrating the basic political dimension of the public actions for it seems to ridicule by the theoretical deconstruction that '*it is natural that this should be political*' (e.g. that 'it is interesting in itself to make an opinion poll) through which certain actors of the political field self-mystify themselves in an essentialist manner.

A 'strictly sociological' approach is *non-conventional* from the point of view of today's market of the ideas of the type 'intelligentsia' which ensure the political community a conceptual equilibrium. *Intelligentsia's* 'interest of professional network' is to spread in the political imaginary the idea and belief that their guarding the 'procedural rules' is part of the *contract between the political personnel and civil society*. A more profound criticism of the opinion polls does not correspond to their representing as *duty information* (within the frame of public communication), like a sort of success of the temporary *opening* project of the administrative apparatus. Such a 'strictly sociological' criticism of the opinion polls is in connection with some discussions among the 'professional category' of *politologists*. Thus P. Birnbaum<sup>17</sup> showed in an analysis of the evolution of the contemporary political theories how the global process of professionalizing the political occurs by the

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<sup>17</sup>P. Birnbaum, *La fin du politique*, Paris, Seuil, 1975.

refusal of granting an essential place to power and conflictual relations between social groups. Therefore more profound aspirations of the 'naïve theories' centered around the idea of a 'scientific and non-partisan administration of the political life' gain more value.

Thus the opinion polls (and the care for catching the 'manipulators') participate in the maintaining the belief that the setting the objectives and the rules of the political game is not the result of some arbitrary or ideological preferences: they must appear as determined by and through the strict care of the citizen and as a sort of retour from the daily information and conforming with the specific coherence of the 'civil society'.

If we adhere to such a criticism of the opinion polls, besides the risk of being perceived as having a subversive vision we can also be termed as boring. The reader of 'political analyses' is used rather with the *internal criticism* of the opinion-poll industry (which delight the freshmen students in sociology and political sciences: how can we better 'manipulate' through the formulation of the questions, a sort of 'sociological right-price')<sup>18</sup> He is in search of an interpretive suspense for he is familiar only with a 'Sunday political commentary' especially created to maintain the performance cult according to the sports model. In order to maintain the viewers' attention it is not the predictive value of the opinion polls which is insisted upon, but rather on its aspects which reveal things such as 'the ball is round'. An 'indirect' effect is later manifested at the level of the political passions through the fact that the variance of the audience curve is not connected to the intrinsic value of the competing public action programs but by the candidates' attitude for speculation ('the small sentence' is for the program what the 'stock-exchange' is for the factory).

The second model – the bicephalous network – offers the metaphorical image of a 'reticular democracy' of a 'network society'.<sup>19</sup> The aim of those who use this model is to fight against Bourdieu's theses (but there are also 'Anglo-Saxon adepts': Gingsberg, Converse etc.) who warn us that the opinion polls do not do anything besides provoking the exhibition of some *non-attitudes* (non-opinions) as long as in front of a questionnaire an individual is tempted to behave as 'tested' in his political intelligence and ...it is intelligent to start 'guessing' even if the things you are asked about are not a real problem for you.

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<sup>18</sup> With respect to the snobbishness caused by the distinction game concerning the spectacle interaction of the reading of 'opinion poll texts' I think it would be instructive an anecdote 'with G. Gallup'. At a party he was asked by 'a lady' how did it happen that she had never been questioned for an opinion poll. Gallup answered that he had just as many chances of being stricken by lightning. Probably we find ourselves today at a stage in which the snobbishness wears the clothes of parody – forgetting though that it could very easily pass as a real 'consumer' of opinion polls.

<sup>19</sup> A. Gras, *Les macro-systemes techniques*, Paris, PUF, 1997.

The label 'bicephalous' suggests the fact that inside a network (which is not part of a 'network'!) we are all looked upon – if we can accept an 'equivalence convention' – as 'schematic individuals' made up of the same 'psychical predicates': one end is the network itself the other is the schematic-individual. To understand better this component of such a fictional-heuristic model it would be useful to present the favorite metaphor of the artefacts hermeneutics of cognitivists (e.g. D Dennett<sup>20</sup>): a 'psychic predicate' belongs to the 'non-person', it is 'abstract'. These 'features' are devoid of content: unlike the equator and the gravity center they are not part of the 'physical inheritance' of the world. These 'features' are devoid of content: unlike the equator and the gravity center they are not part of the 'physical inheritance' of the world.

Let us examine the application of this model for the analysis of the symbolic function of statistical conventions necessary when creating political connections. The point is that the public imaginary of the global society emerges from the inter-connection of some 'singular public emotions' which are not the ones of a certain 'personality' or of a 'flesh and bones individual' for a 'connection network' cannot comprise but 'traces' of some 'agencies' (a sort of political homunculi whose substance is of a statistical nature) which have a history (to be active for a certain amount of time) in groups of short concatenations (the period in between the opinion polls). An agent fixed in his place according to the classical model of democracy would have an only too powerful rational self and so, an *unbearable desire* inside the network of the aspirations towards originality. Personal pride can be present in the "mass individualistic society" (M. Mafessoli) if it is not rejected by the anti-bodies of the network. The condition is that the emotions, desires, opinions, intentions and singular interests would re-present themselves for the other 'agents' as having a mere intention-desire of passing (through a transistor). I consider relevant for the understanding of the new agent of the reticular democracy Bachelard's metaphor: "it is an image before there was a being; it is a desire before there is an image"<sup>21</sup>.

Let us try to offer a more natural image to what we have said above. In situations of panic everyone considers he is warned by a danger but nobody believes that he knows more than someone else when he feverishly reflects about some internal mental states ('cognitions') which arrive there as from nowhere: should I run or not? – Should I be ashamed of this or should I just feel guilty?

<sup>20</sup> D. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, Little, Brown and Company, 1991.

<sup>21</sup> G. Bachelard, *L'eau et les rêves*, Paris, Le Livre de poche, Paris, 1992, p. 12.

Should I drink X or Y? In such cases one solution is to take as departing point someone else's behaviour. Only I know that my cognitive-emotional states are anxious, but maybe my neighbour knows more. This is how an anxious fascination for someone else's opinion is born. So, in the absence of some powerful beliefs the collective orientation towards an *ensuring hypothesis* is produced. This can be nothing else but the *average opinion*. Now the opinion polls intervene and generate a sort of bastard between worry and arithmetics. Their function is to transform the individuals' 'live panic' into a 'cold panic'. (R. Girard) expressed by a sort of proclamation: here is the media, here is the reason... Newspapers, television and political analysts do nothing else but double this *crucified surveillance of the other among the network of signals conforming the idea that there is an average of normality*.

Another concept used by this model is the one of the *collective quasi-subject*: effect of the emergence of the interconnection of some "schematic individuals" who, by this circularity, can exhibit network mental properties - "collective psychological predicates" - similar to the intentions we attribute to the individual subject.

Let us translate this into natural language. Let us say that the *transistor* is the *opinion poll*. Its starting functioning is a *performative ritual* at the end of which the collectivity finds out - again - what is "profane" and what is "sacred". Bourdieu's criticism (the polls consider that the individual opinions have the same importance) does not have meaning any more for all behaviours are "inputs" whose "value" has a "profane dimension" in relation with the convention that "the sacred tendency" is modelled during "output". Here is the example of the famous question "Do you think that our country is on the right way...". It has been said that this is an example of a "typical Romanian" poll-question which was mistakenly and later taken from the American methodology during the cold war. In fact it has a ritual role in various opinion polls in Western countries and has the function of indicating when "outputting" two tendencies: the profane (for those who only pursue their own interest) - and the sacred ("this country", *Romania*).

There is no doubt that many of the readers of this explanation will burst into laughter. And they are right. But they could through this bizarre type of conceptualization think about a technological metaphor which has as reference the polls function to build up the *profile of an anti-conspiration* (of the "simple citizen" around a "charismatic artefact" placed either on the presidential institution, either on church, army, police, television channel or newspaper) against the *conspiration of the "manipulating" politico-mediatic mechanism* (MPs, news-men, political analysts etc.).

I will agree here with those sociologists<sup>22</sup> who consider that this is an example of irrational and self-realizing behavior which favors exactly the thing it it fears.

Why is it helpful to see the show of ritualizing the opinion polls (and their criticism) in such a manner? It is as if you wanted things to happen in this way precisely so that you had something to criticize, similar to the Sunday political analysts? To all these questions I attempted to answer in Robert Nozick's way: "I think that what I say in this book is correct. This is not my way to back off. On the contrary, I aim at giving you everything: the doubts and worries, uncertainties and opinions, convictions and arguments. In those parts where I feel some tension I try to comment upon that or at least to warn the reader about what makes me feel uncomfortable"<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> J. P. Dupuy, *La Panique*, Éd. Les Empêcheurs de tourner en rond, Paris, 1991.

<sup>23</sup> R. Nozick, *Anarchie, Stat si Utopie*, Humanitas, București, 1997, p. 40.