

IOAN HOSU

THE EMPIRE OF COMMUNICATION: BODY, IMAGE AND RELATION

Ioan Hosu

Babes-Bolyai University, Communication and Public Relation Department, Cluj-Napoca, Romania.

Email: ioan.hosu@polito.ubbcluj.ro

Review of Aurel Codoban, *Imperiul comunicării: corp, imagine și relaționare* (The Empire of Communication: Body, Image and Relation), (Cluj-Napoca: Idea Design &Print, 2011).

Key Words: communication, image, corporality, seduction, persuasion, the culture of communication, Aurel Codoban

The connection among body, image, relation, persuasion, manipulation and seduction, the relationship between culture and civilization and their link with mass communication technologies are some of the themes that Professor Codoban has masterly analyzed, problematized and communicated for more than 20 years.¹ His preoccupation with these problematic fields of interest began long before they started to dominate public debates, doing pioneering work in the hermeneutics of love, of the body and corporality and of communication in these areas. The book entitled *The Empire of Communication: Body, Image and Relation* is the result of a multi-disciplinary approach, of semiotic, hermeneutical and philosophical analyses that together anticipate and launch a set of debatable issues with implications for vast domains, emphasizing some of the topics of interest of recent public communicators.

In his works, both in this recent book and in his previous one², Aurel Codoban offers new arguments and perspectives, skillfully avoiding value judgments that are so easy to formulate when talking about image (self, body), about seduction and manipulation or the image of the world in which and with which we live. What is interesting is the pragmatism of his observations and analyses, most of them generated by the dynamism with which he changes theoretical perspectives and points of view that make his approach viable.

The major hypotheses that the author identifies refer to the problem of social relations, to the way in which these will be configured, without naming or insisting on the new dilemmas or reconstructions of the social and the cultural, of the rules and values that govern the postmodern globalized world, recently called transmodern³. The ability to explain diverse communicational practices and realities is generated by a skillful type of handling of the ingredients necessary for any consistent and durable approach. Durability comes from the capacity to sense, predict and announce major changes in the field of social communication, mass communication and the relation culture – civilization⁴.

The Empire of Communication: Body, Image and Relation follows a series of texts that reflect the interest in the systematic and careful analysis of the relations that manifest in the world of communication (with sacred and profane dimensions) in contemporary society. The main themes of the book are grouped in a three-dimensional structure (3D): *silence – communication* (the spoken or written word or the images that substitute it); *soul – body*; *relationships and interpersonal connections*. The three components are gathered together in the relation culture – civilization which is permanently adjusted and modified by the evolutions of communication and technology.

Even if the body was excluded from the platonic Christian discursive sphere, being regarded as a foreign element in the public space, with the secularization of the western world, the body has reoccupied the central

place in the practices, discourses and economy of our quotidian life: “The body seems to be the great winner of our world history [...] Everywhere it seems to be a cult of the body which does not require great effort, as the discipline of work or performance sport would, but it is rather a combination of sport and yoga meant to offer only pleasure and relaxation”⁵. The relation body – soul is problematic and the author specifies the set of techniques and practices that contribute to the welfare of the body to the detriment of the soul. Twentieth-century thinking induces new forms of body cultivation (bodybuilding, body care, medical intervention – transplant, plastic surgery etc.). Art, medicine, robotics, genetics and their entire institutional frame generate images and media representations that “serve the body and not the soul”.

The “asymmetrical relation soul – body” has a historical existence: the Judeo – Christian concepts mark the beginning of a long period in which the body barely had a place in the public space. The aestheticization of quotidian life is assumed both at an individual and at an institutional level because of media which constructs a virtual reality that “proposes an illusion instead of reality, an illusion as reality”⁶. We witness the unprecedented development of a propaganda apparatus, an entire industry which strongly sustains the body and it situates the elements of the spiritual in remote places. Everyday language and corporal interpersonal relations give the body a privileged position in society due to the key significations and roles played in relationship management. The approach followed by the author includes some fundamental themes that make the subject of various studies in the field of socio-human sciences (see gestural symbolism, the conscious and the unconscious) but also some less known themes that will probably make the subject of consistent research in the future (the relation image – sound – smell, connections between semiotics and communication) – all integrated in recent sociological, psychological or anthropological studies. The emphasis laid on corporal communication has numerous psycho-social-communicational implications that require correct interpersonal relation management, which is strictly linked to the pragmatic dimension of communication.

In current mass culture, each participant in communicational exchanges in the public space is a theoretician or a practitioner of topics on the problem of communication, the body and their relations.

Since each individual demonstrates, by means of his body, that he is the master of these times, the body no longer needs costumes or masks. It is known that these had an important place in folk customs, rituals and ceremonies, by symbolizing the angelic and the demonic, beauty and ugliness etc. Today, there is no need for such representations of good and evil because the world is no longer perceived as bipolar; good and evil no longer fight but rather co-exist in the logic of cooperation. For today’s individuals, it is the body itself which communicates good and evil in

everyday situations; the body is the mask or the medium-image through which the individuals communicate their adherence to right and wrong, beauty and ugliness, peace and war etc.

Positivist approaches have favored socio-psychological studies detrimental to philosophical-religious perspectives on the same theme, managing to impose a set of concepts and explications with regard to communicational behavior at individual and societal levels. These explications are dominant in the social space⁷ and the interest moves from soul to body, from paradigms that valued the spiritual to approaches for which the body is the single value. Today's debates are on the evolution of the body and less on people's spiritual evolution. If the purpose of philosophical and religious discourses is the meaning of life, the communicational discourse of corporality is imagological and oriented towards immediate everyday social relations⁸.

In *The Empire of Communication: Body, Image and Relation*, Professor Codoban formulates a set of questions and challenges generated by the tough confrontations of philosophy in postmodernity. The philosopher deals with a fatal 'pre-opinion maker', able to destroy his position and legitimacy in the public space. His competitor is the communicator: the specialist in public relations, the advertiser, the journalist, the image counselor etc. This is the etiquette of those who establish image as a new religion; the communicator is not a knowledge producer but rather an actor that interprets historical tradition in a postmodern register; he is the interface of technological research and production and the industries of communication that all serve the needs of image construction.

The technologies of communication and the new consumer practices represent the *new social institutes* that set up the system of evaluation and the modality through which one relates himself to content or image. Images sell well and are the object of easy consumption because they can be assimilated without having to know the rules or the norms of writing and reading; the main task of this new institution (communication technology, the internet, telecommunication etc.) is to create and maintain social networks, to make people relate to one another because "the spirit is the network"⁹.

Today's consumer practices are access, use, purchasing/buying, consumer frequency, and the criteria of choice are part of some rituals that celebrate the body, just like the formula *eternal youth and life without death*, a well-known statement of the popular imaginary. Consumer behavior seeks to obtain bodily welfare because if the body feels well, man feels well, in obvious opposition to those old practices that valued the asceticism of the body for the well-being of the human. These are the extreme paths that Aurel Codoban explores in his work, defining some of the major mutations of contemporary cultural spaces. The series of changes that result from communicational practices gradually transform

interpersonal communication into forms of public communication (see social networks and computer mediated communication)¹⁰.

The book of Professor Aurel Codoban makes any reader admit that the myths imposed by religious traditions or customs no longer influence the life of individuals. Social experience is the one that guides and provides trust, necessary in the process of choice making. Science and scientific theories no longer appear as necessary. Life experiences inspired by the myths of communication or by images tend to substitute the old myths and legends. Western technology and economy are the sponsors and pillars of the trend of the Image by means of the major mutations in the communicational field (virtual reality or hyperreality¹¹, digitalization, globalization, interactivity, cyberculture etc.) that result in ubiquity, speed and equality of access everywhere and for all, equality in spending time and not only "equality before time and death". These goals are as old as the world, and media communication offers our senses the illusion of omnipresence and omniscience, by the open access to other places, people, events, objects etc. *The immediate need to have it all* (to be and to know) is one of the reactions of the excessive and indiscriminating consumption of images and of substitutes of information. This is a type of inflation of communicational practices and behaviors that contributed to the aestheticization of everyday life by means of the production of images that invade both the public and the private space making the distinction 'personal – public' impossible.

Both the sacred text and the advertisement are some hypostases of human communication, representative of two very different cultural moments. Aurel Codoban focuses on the evolution of communication from a perspective that is different from the one of Marshall McLuhan. He introduces in his analyses the explanations, interpretations and nuances that are the prerogatives of the hermeneutist and the specialist in the philosophy of the sacred and of love, discretely relating to both the sacred and the profane¹². The material is easily communicated by image; we as body are immortalized by photo or video cameras in an instant of time; yet, discovering the spiritual dimension or the soul needs time, patience and a special type of communicational relations. What is evident is that the up-to-present technological development can barely sustain the communication of spirit or of love.

The ethical and bioethical aspects activated by corporal communication and corporality represent a challenge addressed to diverse domains like moral philosophy, law, cybernetics, medicine, communication sciences etc. Sandu Frunză draws attention to the controversies caused by the insufficient configuration of the frames of expertise and counseling in ethical problems in the public space¹³, insisting on the need to clarify the roles and the ethical codes of public communication given the fact that in the new media and social networks

each participant in the process of communication is both a producer and a consumer of content and images¹⁴.

Each perspective mentioned by Professor Codoban contours a presentation of the evolution of human values caused by scientific and technological developments that have had numerous consequences on interpersonal relations and generated various mutations of ideological and cultural debates. The idea of a cyber-tech man is very appealing to a mass of individuals who want no pain and eternal beauty; they want to be as good-looking as the actors of cosmetic advertisements, to remain forever young and they see in technology their salvation and, consequently, a new religion. The introduction of the concept of human dignity¹⁵ along with the one of ethics is the basis of future debates in the field of corporality and medical¹⁶ technology that both converge in the body of the man of the future, a hybrid: biological and technical mass. Aurel Codoban and other authors directly and indirectly refer to the new ideological movements and trends inspired by technological perfection (transhumanism, cyborgization¹⁷, postgendrism). Although exotic, these themes and preoccupations will make the subject of future debates on interpersonal relations and on cultural issues in the broader sense.

The work of philosopher Codoban identifies “the concrete forms by means of which culture moves into civilization and civilization takes the role of culture”¹⁸, presenting the modalities in which the relations among social actors are constructed and regulated, with dense references to the dynamics of social representations and images and consistent analyses of the proper dynamics of communication and of its influences generated by diverse transformations at individual and group level.

Notes:

¹ **Acknowledgment:** This paper is a result of the project “Transnational Network for Integrated Management of Postdoctoral Research in Communicating Sciences. Institutional building (postdoctoral school) and fellowships program (CommScie)” - POSDRU/89/1.5/S/63663, financed under the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013

² The reference is to Aurel Codoban, *Amurgul Iubirii. De la iubirea pasiune la comunicarea corporală* (ediția III-a), (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Idea Design &Print, 2010).

³ Daniela Cojocaru, Antonio Sandu, “(Bio)Ethical and Social Reconstructions in Transmodernity”. *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 10, issue 30, (Winter 2011): 258-276.

⁴ Aurel Codoban, “Manipulation, Seduction and Ostensive Ideology (Advertisement)”, *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 2, issue 4, (Spring 2003): 123: “I believe that at present, the thematization of philosophy is communication, that philosophy looks in the mirror of communication when it defines itself and that, at the same time, when we debate on what religion is and

on what the diverse philosophical dimensions of the human and of culture are, the key of interpretation is this: communication”.

⁵ Aurel Codoban, *Imperiul comunicării: corp, imagine și relaționare*, (Cluj-Napoca: Idea Design &Print, 2011), 7.

⁶ Aurel Codoban, *Imperiul comunicării: corp, imagine și relaționare*, 76-77.

⁷ Aurel Codoban, *Imperiul comunicării: corp, imagine și relaționare*, 10 and the following pages.

⁸ David Le Breton, *Antropologia corpului și modernitatea* (trad.din lb. fr.: Liliana Rusu) (București: Cartier, 2009), 2: the body is “not an axiomatic fundament but it is rather the effect of a social and cultural construction”; page 31: “the contemporary body, the one that results from the recoil of popular traditions and from the appearance of western individualism, marks the limit between two individuals and the closing of the subject itself”.

⁹ Aurel Codoban, *Imperiul comunicării: corp, imagine și relaționare*, 61: “If in traditional societies the connection between the members of a community was religion, today it is communication understood as relationship. However, it is a relation based on self-disclosure not in front of God but in front of a community of communication, just like in the first Christian churches where the confession of sins was made public.”

¹⁰ Aurel Codoban, *Imperiul comunicării: corp, imagine și relaționare*, 60.

¹¹ The inflation of images and signs characteristic to our times leads to what Baudrillard calls “hyperreality”.

¹² Aurel Codoban, *Amurgul Iubirii. De la iubirea pasiune la comunicarea corporală* (ediția III-a) (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Idea Design &Print, 2010), 12, footnote 7: “The sacred text tells us to love the other not more and not less than we love ourselves; but what do we do if we do not love ourselves?”; page 12: Love concentrates the destiny of communication in the community, the destiny of a type of communication that is not a simple message with information. The same happens with the Being: we cannot identify with it or with the void. That is why love is, in the context of human existence, the reverse of the destinal figure of death, i.e. a positive form of what is negatively death: a transcendence of the “here and now” reality of life through a game that still remains a part of our life, of our world.”

¹³ Sandu Frunză, “The relational individual in a communication built society. Towards a new philosophy of communication”, *Transylvanian Review*, vol. XX, No. 3, (Autumn 2011): 140-152: “Effective ethical communication must be a permanent goal of the current world. The context of the manifestation of such transcendence is important because it can foster a minimal ethics, beyond any absolutism or relativism. Only against such a background of minimal ethics can we expect a reconstruction of communication ethics. The need for a professional ethics is increasingly felt by communication practitioners.”

¹⁴ Sandu Frunză, “Does communication construct reality? A New Perspective on the Crisis of Religion and the Dialectic of the Sacred”, *Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială*, vol. 35 (2011): 180-193: “theorists see communication as a phenomenon of encounter, of dialogue, civic participation, but also of manipulation, or in a broader sense, of influence over almost all the aspects of social life.”

¹⁵ The operationalization of the concept of human dignity: Stefan Tobler, “The Five Dimensions of Human Dignity and their Operationalisation. The Theoretical

Basis of the DOSAR Project in Comparison to the Amartya Sen's Approach", *Revista Ecumenica Sibiu*, no.2/2009.

¹⁶ Jean Martin, "Human dignity: several interpretations with different consequences", *Revista Română de Bioetică*, Vol. 9, Nr. 1, (January – March 2011): 63-64.

¹⁷ David Le Breton, *Antropologia corpului și modernitatea*, 416 and the following pages

¹⁸ Aurel Codoban, *Imperiul comunicării: corp, imagine și relaționare*, 102: "Along with mass communication media, culture moves into/becomes civilization. Digitalization, as a technological infrastructure, paradoxically contributes to the spread of an analogical content which needs less knowledge acquisition but which nevertheless has some greater emotional charge, thus addressing not only the specialists, the elites, but also more people and it is more easily broadcast. It is one of the concrete forms by means of which culture moves into civilization and civilization takes the role of culture."