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CODOBAN AND THE LOGIC OF APPEARANCE: BETWEEN SACRED ONTOPHANY AND TECHNOLOGICAL NATURALIZATION

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Abstract: The problem of how communication constructs reality gives Aurel Codoban's thought a pivotal position between the phenomenology of sacred ontophany and the contemporary technological regime of the image. Thematic readings of his work have illuminated each of these domains; this article asks whether a common mechanism links them. Through a close, immanent reading of his principal writings (1998-2023), it reconstructs what it calls a "logic of appearance": a form of presence through concealment, in which something becomes present through a mediation that hides its own genesis. In *Sacru și ontofanie*, the sacred operates as the category of a consciousness defined by the intellection of signs, and the Absolute appears in the profane while being hidden by it. In the regime of technological images, cultural coding is transferred into the machine, so that the image appears as a "message without code." The article argues that the two regimes share this form of mediated presence while differing in referent, mediator, direction of concealment, recipient and ontological consequence; Codoban himself describes their relation partly as an inversion. The resonance is therefore presented as an interpretive reconstruction rather than as a system formulated by Codoban. Followed to its consequences for the subject, the reconstruction distinguishes the seducer, the addressee, the semiotic agent and the existential interpreter, and shows that these positions form not an irreconcilable aporia but a productive tension between modes of subjectivity: reality-constructing communication addresses the subject beneath critical consciousness, while meaning remains tied to an interpreter who understands across a lived life.

Keywords: *Aurel Codoban; Logic of Appearance; Presence through Concealment; Sacred Ontophany; Technological Naturalization; Modes of Subjectivity*.

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1. Introduction

Aurel Codoban's research trajectory bridges a phenomenological-existential exploration of the sacred with a semiotic critique of contemporary media and communication. His work spans from *Sacru și ontofanie* (Codoban 1998), through analyses of manipulation, seduction, and the image (Codoban 2003; 2006; 2011a; 2011b), to reflections on post-truth and artificial intelligence (Codoban and Cordoş 2021; Codoban 2020). In the latter, he contrasts the human being, who "knows existing in time," with an artificial intelligence that "exists already knowing" (Codoban 2020, 180). Between these poles runs a sustained inquiry into how signs establish what counts as real and the limits of that establishment. This article proposes that Codoban's analysis of the sacred is more than a thematic antecedent to his media theory: it provides a model of signification that can be traced, in modified form, in his account of the technological image.

Scholarship on Codoban has developed along three main lines. Reviews of individual books have reconstructed his scheme of three thematizations of philosophy—being, knowledge, and communication (Bumbaş 2006)—and have interpreted it as a device running throughout the corpus. Bobb (2012) treats the analogue/digital pair as the operator through which *Imperiul comunicării* reorganizes body, image, and communication; he notes that the movement from being to sign is already visible in *Sacru și ontofanie* and observes that technologically encode images present meaning as given rather than constructed. Afloroaei (2008) traces the ontology of the significant surface from Codoban's structuralist work of the 1980s to *Semn și interpretare*, argues that it does not reduce ontology to semiology, and suggests that Codoban's books on love and on the sacred intersect more than has been recognized—a cross-reading he leaves for another occasion. Sandu Frunză's studies come closest to the present inquiry. He links the ontology of the significant surface, the dialectic of the sacred and the profane, and seduction, drawing on *Sacru și ontofanie* as well as on Codoban's 2003 lecture (Frunză 2011); more recently, he has examined the camouflage of the sacred in contemporary political communication (Frunză 2025b) and the irreducibility of lived experience in the face of artificial intelligence (Frunză 2025a). In these studies, however, the connection between the sacred and the sign mainly serves a theory of weak transcendence and postmodern religiosity, rather than being examined as a formal mechanism with its own internal distinctions. The present article builds on these contributions. It takes up Afloroaei's open

suggestion and the material Frunză assembles, and asks a narrower question: whether a specific mechanism of presence through concealment can be reconstructed across the two domains, how far the analogy holds, and what tension it produces between modes of subjectivity.

Codoban's semiotics of manifestation is particularly noteworthy because it encompasses two seemingly opposing modes of reality construction. On one end, the sacred "grounds a World" (*fondează o Lume*) through ontophanic manifestation (Codoban 1998, 72); on the other, communication constructs virtual realities (Codoban 2011c, 29) and, in the post-truth era, truths that endure because they possess "the meaning of reality" (Codoban and Cordoş 2021, 171). Codoban links these modes through the concept of an "ontology of the significant surface," which he introduces in *Sacru și ontofanie*: if we live in a world of significations "without consistency, without origin and without depth," the sacred is "precisely the point of unreality that gives consistency to Reality" (Codoban 1998, 74; cf. Frunză 2011, 183). This article explores the role of this semiotics of manifestations in Codoban's account of reality construction, along with the tension between modes of the subjectivity that it reveals.

The argument unfolds in five steps. First, it examines the sacred as a category of the intellection of signs in *Sacru și ontofanie* (1998). Next, it reconstructs the naturalization of the sign and the image in Codoban's analyses of seduction and visual technology (2006-2011). The third step compares the two regimes, identifying what remains invariant and what differs, and presents the resulting concept of "presence through concealment," as the authors' reconstruction rather than as a system formulated by Codoban. The fourth step builds on this comparison to explore the construction of reality and the subject, distinguishing the positions of subjectivity involved. Finally, the article situates this reading in relation to Eliade, Barthes, and Baudrillard, demonstrating how Codoban modifies, rather than simply opposes, their accounts of manifestation, representation, and simulation.

2. Method

This article employs a qualitative model of immanent discourse critique: it reconstructs the claims of a body of texts and evaluates them using the premises, distinctions, and vocabulary that the text themselves provide, rather than applying an external framework (Titscher et al. 2000). The goal is interpretive transparency, not empirical validation. The analysis considers both coherence and tension, examining points where the corpus appears to

pull in different directions and assessing whether these constitute contradictions. Close reading is understood as sustained attention to wording, argument structure, and context (Brummett 2010). For this reason, all passages quoted directly from Codoban were checked against the original editions, with the exception of two most recent books (2023a; 2025), which are cited through Frunză (see below); translations from Romanian are the authors' own unless otherwise indicated.

The corpus was selected based on three criteria. First, it includes texts in which Codoban explicitly addresses at least one of four focal concepts: sign, manifestation, reality, and subject. Second, priority was given to texts that formulate a mechanism rather than merely provide a diagnosis. Third, each node had to be represented both by its earliest formulation and by at least one later restatement or application, allowing continuity and change to be traced across the trajectory. Based on these criteria, the texts are grouped into four conceptual nodes: the ontophany node (Codoban 1998); the node of naturalization and seduction (Codoban 2006; 2009; 2011a; 2003; 2013a; 2011b); the node of reality construction and post-truth (Codoban 2011c; 2011b; 2013b; Codoban and Cordoş 2021); and the node of the existential interpreter (Codoban 1998; 2020; 2023b). Codoban's most recent essays, *Sentimentul straniu al vieții* (2023a) and *Comunicarea în epoca reproducerii ei artificiale* (2025), extend the last two nodes toward a philosophy of the singularity of life and communication with artificial intelligence. These essays are cited through passages quoted by Frunză (Frunză 2025b; 2025a) and serve as corroborating evidence for later restatements, rather than as anchor passages. Furthermore, secondary literature on Codoban is used to situate this article's contribution, not as a substitute for his own texts.

The analysis proceeds in four steps. First, for each node, anchor passages are identified in which Codoban defines or applies one of the focal concepts; each passage is read in its immediate context, including whether Codoban speaks in his own voice or reports the position of another author. Second, the focal concepts are traced across the nodes in chronological order, noting shifts in vocabulary and earlier formulations of later ideas. Third, a structural resonance between the sacred and the image is inferred only when three conditions are met in both domains: something becomes present only through mediation; the mediation, or the genesis of what appears, is concealed within the appearance; and this concealment affects what counts as real for the recipient. Lexical recurrence—such as the use of *aparență* in both domains—is treated as supporting but not sufficient evidence. Fourth, the reconstruction is tested against three types of counterevidence that could weaken it: passages in which Codoban

describes the relationship between the sacred and the image as opposition or inversion rather than as a shared form; passages that limit the constructive power of signs; and passages showing that the positions of the subject lie on different levels and therefore do not conflict. When such passages are found, the claim is narrowed accordingly rather than dismissed. In the sections that follow, the ontophany node is examined first and the node of naturalization and seduction second; the third section compares the two; the nodes of reality construction and of the existential interpreter are examined together in the fourth; and the final section situates the results in relation to Eliade, Barthes, and Baudrillard.

3. The Sacred and the Sign: Codoban's Semiotic Foundations

The connection between the sacred and the sign in Aurel Codoban's thought has been closely intertwined since his foundational work, *Sacru și ontofanie* (1998). In this work, the sacred is not understood as a purely metaphysical substance existing outside of consciousness; rather, it is posited as a transcendental category operating at the level of sign interpretation. This approach addresses the inaccessibility of the signified and legitimizes the reading of hierophany through the framework of structural linguistics. For Codoban (1998), the world in which the sacred emerges is, first and foremost, the world of signs (*o lume de semne*):

> If for the transconscious, for that part of the human being which is oriented toward being, the sacred is a value, for consciousness, for the part oriented toward the world, it is a category. The world in relation to which the sacred appears as a category is a world of signs (*o lume de semne*). Or, better said, the sacred is a category of consciousness essentially defined by the intellection of signs (*intelecția semnelor*). It is the category that makes religious experience (*experienţa religioasă*) possible as a signifying experience (*experienţă semnificantă*) (Codoban 1998, 63).

Through this formulation, the sacred functions as the condition of possibility for a religious experience to be meaningfully understood. Codoban himself sets this category beside Kant's. In a schema of parallelism, he aligns the Kantian terms of experience—the thing in itself, experience as the place where objects are constituted, and "the subject with its transcendental categories"—with those of religious experience: the Absolute, religious experience as the place where hierophanies and kraptophanies are constituted, and "the religious human being, with the transcendental category of the sacred at the center of his existence"

(Codoban 1998, 28). He immediately adds that "the differences are even more important than the similarities" (Codoban 1998, 28): religious experience belongs to an existential rather than a cognitive plane, its transcendental conditions acquire a historical dimension, and the sacred is not only a category of consciousness but also a value and a formation of the unconscious (Codoban 1998, 29). The sacred therefore has "another kind of transcendentality than the Kantian categories: that of phenomenological intentionality" (Codoban 1998, 64). The parallel with Kant marks a shift rather than a transfer: the sacred is not a category of the understanding that organizes sensory data into objects, but a category operating at the level of the intellection of signs (*intelecția semnelor*).

This shift in the operational domain of the transcendental structure—from the epistemology of sensory objects to religious semiotics—assigns a distinct function to the category of the sign, differentiating referents that transcend the world (the sacred) from those within it (the profane). This differential mechanism establishes the fundamental semiotic demarcation between the two.

> For example, in the West, in religious experience of the Christian type, the sacred is the transcendental category which, operating at the level of the intellection of signs, distinguishes between signs whose referent transcends this world and signs whose referent belongs to this world, as between what is sacred and what is profane (Codoban 1998, 63).

Codoban presents this distinction as an example drawn from Western, Christian-type religious experience; its general point, however, is that the sacred is identified at the level of signs. This semiotic interpretation immediately encounters a difficulty concerning the accessibility of the Absolute. Because the Absolute is "situated outside any possible experience" and, among its negative connotations, is "in-cognoscible" (Codoban 1998, 72), it cannot appear in its purity, and the sacred can never manifest itself directly (Codoban 1998, 79). It is from this inaccessibility that the necessity of the sign arises. Following Gilbert Durand, Codoban locates this necessity in the symbol, a non-arbitrary sign whose signified cannot be presented at all: "because the signified is inaccessible, it [the symbol] is, as a sign, an epiphany, that is, the appearance through and in the signifier of the unsayable" (Codoban 1998, 81).

In this context, epiphany or hierophany is not a direct manifestation of the divine essence but its mediation in and through signs: structurally, the sacred can be present only as a sign-event. Codoban explicitly grants a

structural-linguistic framework interpretive authority here: “The relation between signified and signifier in the constitution of the linguistic sign can cast a sufficiently strong interpretive light on hierophany viewed from the perspective of the religious symbol” (Codoban 1998, 79). He does not, however, simply apply the Saussurean model. Whereas the linguistic sign is defined by the arbitrariness of its relation to the signified (*signifié*), the religious symbol belongs to the class of non-arbitrary signs, and its specificity lies in the inadequacy between a maximally concrete signifier and an impalpable, invisible signified: “in this inadequacy we must seek the secret of the symbolic form of hierophany” (Codoban 1998, 80–81). The sacred is thus not merely reflected by the sign but made present through a semiotic process in which the inaccessible signified can be indicated only through the mediated presence of the signifier. This foundation later becomes the axis for understanding seduction, simulation, and the transformation of the subject in Codoban’s media analysis.

From these passages, the present article reconstructs a movement that Codoban does not formulate as a single thesis: the function that Kant assigned to the transcendental categories in the constitution of objects of experience (Kant 1998) is relocated, in a phenomenologically modified form, to the domain of the intellection of signs. In this reconstruction, the inaccessible signified can be instructively distinguished from the Kantian thing in itself, with which Codoban’s own schema aligns the Absolute (Codoban 1998, 28). Whereas the thing in itself marks a limit of knowledge, the inaccessible signified of the symbol does not halt signification but sets it in motion, since it can be indicated only through the presence of a signifier. The comparison with Saussure’s dyadic schema (de Saussure 1959) and with Peirce’s account of the index, in which a sign refers to its object through a real relation rather than through resemblance or convention (Peirce 1960), is likewise the authors’ interpretive frame: neither Saussure nor Peirce is named in *Sacru și ontofanie,* and Peirce’s typology enters Codoban’s analyses explicitly only in his later writings on seduction and the image (Codoban 2003, 135; 2006, 155). Within these limits, the reconstruction shows how appearance acquires ontological weight in Codoban’s account. Describing ontophany, he states that the Absolute and its manifestations are, with respect to the religious reality of the World, what “essence and appearance” (*esența și aparența*) are “for the Hegelian concept of reality” (Codoban 1998, 114). Appearance (*aparenţă*) is here not a veil in front of reality but a constitutive moment of it. This does not mean that the sacred is wholly constituted by signification: Codoban gives the sacred an ontic anchoring in the creatural self-consciousness and self-

transcendence of the human being (Codoban 1998, 65), and treats it also as value and as a formation of the unconscious (Codoban 1998, 29).

This foundation also allows a more precise placement of the present reading in relation to earlier ones. Frunză (2011) has shown that the ontology of the significant surface, the symbolic inadequacy between signifier and signified and the passage from ontophany to communication are already present in *Sacru și ontofanie,* and has used them to explain the postmodern condition of religion. The present article reads the same passages for their mechanism rather than for their diagnosis of religiosity. One passage is decisive in this respect. Codoban writes that religious experience "finds its expression in ontophany, but is communicated as ontology," and that "only now do the Absolute and the World receive the consistency of reality: when religious experience change its subject from 'I' to 'we'" (Codoban 1998, 153). The thesis that communication confers consistency on reality—later stated in terms of a culture of communication (Codoban 2013b, 168)—thus has a formal antecedent at the most fundamental level of Codoban's theory of the sacred. The following sections trace how the form of presence identified here reappears, in modified form, in the realm of the image.

4. From Iconic Analogy to Apparent Index: The Naturalization of the Sign

The question of how iconic images gain their acceptability leads Codoban's analysis to a mechanism of signification that, while operating in a realm distinct from the sacred, exhibits a similar mode of functioning. His media analysis stems from an epistemic shift: from a textual regime based on unmotivated signs to an image-based regime grounded in motivated, analogical signs.

> …a displacement from text to image and, in general, from the digital, unmotivated sign to the analogical, motivated sign […]. […] this new episteme is based more on analogy than on unmotivated, differential or digital signs […] (Codoban 2006, 157; see also 2013a; 2011a).

Codoban employs Saussure's distinction between motivated and unmotivated signs (de Saussure 1959) to define the nature of the image: "For Saussure, the image, i.e. a drawn or painted portrait, is a motivated sign by means of resemblance […]. As long as it is the representation of something, the image signifies something and refers to something, i.e. it is a sign, and as a sign, it is an analogical sign" (Codoban 2011a, 8). This analogical status, however, does not remain a static representation. In

recorded images, as opposed to fabricated ones, resemblance gives way to indexicality: "they are traces, indices, before being iconic: resemblance yields to indexicality. The image loses its representative character; it becomes the signal of a situation or even receives the force of the thing itself" (Codoban 2011a, 10).

It is this shift toward indexicality that produces what Codoban calls the "apparent indexical sign" (Codoban 2011a, 4): a state in which a human-made sign is perceived as if it were merely a natural phenomenon. This effect operates symmetrically in production and in reception. Codoban had described a related effect earlier, in his analyses of seduction, as a "re-naturalization of the sign" that turns a sign back against the ordinary movement of signification (Codoban 2003, 135) and as the "naturalization of the sign" that inverts the semiotic genesis (Codoban 2006, 155)

> The apparent lack of code in the denotative message naturalizes the message and creates the illusion that we can find cultural signs in nature. But the meaning only belongs to culture […] (Codoban 2011a, 12).
>
> […] the image itself has won and not the text, but the image is produced by digitalized text: now we have more text behind an image than we could have ever imagined. […]. […] The apparent lack of coding in production symmetrically brings forward an apparent lack of coding in receiving. Apparently, the spectator of such an image does not have to know or respect reading rules, […] (Codoban 2011a, 14).

This is where the mechanism of naturalization becomes visible. The image creates the illusion of being a "message without code" and this illusion facilitates the naturalization of the sign. The apparent lack of code, however, only an appearance: the technical and cultural coding that precedes the image does not disappear but is transferred into the operations of the machine that produces it. What seems most natural on the surface is, in fact, densely encoded. Codoban identifies two source of this appearance: it is a consequence of "the denotative character of the analogy as a message, especially of the indexical one," but also of "transferring the coding implied by production […] within operations using technology that belongs to machines" (Codoban 2011a, 14). The Romanian version of the same analysis calls the result an *aparență*—an appearance in the sense of a semblance—and speaks of an "apparent lack of coding" (*aparenta lipsă de codificare*) on both the productive and the receptive side (Codoban 2011b, 39). How this concealment—cultural meaning presented

as nature—relates to the concealment identified in the realm of the sacred is examined below.

Codoban's analysis of the naturalization of images is in critical dialogue with the visual semiotics of Roland Barthes and Peirce's typology of signs. From Barthes he takes the analysis of the photographic image as a "*message sans code"* (message without a code) and the distinction between the denotative and the connotative message (Barthes 1977); his formulation that "the apparent lack of code in the denotative message naturalizes the message" is in effect a gloss on Barthes (Codoban 2011a, 12). What Codoban adds is a change in the location of the effect. For Barthes, the naturalizing force of denotation serves connotation, that is, the rhetoric of the image; for Codoban, the codelessness of technological images is also a consequence of the transfer of coding into machine operations (Codoban 2011a, 14). He thus modifies Barthes's account by shifting part of the naturalization from rhetoric to the technical genesis of the image, while retaining the claim that meaning "only belongs to culture" (Codoban 2011a, 12). With Peirce's triadic scheme of icon, index, and symbol (Peirce 1960), Codoban uses the typology not for static classification but to trace a movement. In 2003 and 2006, the upward movement from indices through icons to arbitrary symbols is described as the movement of culture and civilization, which seduction reverses (Codoban 2003, 135; 2006, 155); in 2011, the technological image is shown to move from iconic resemblance toward apparent indexicality (Codoban 2011a, 10–14). Naturalization operates not because the image is free of code, but because its technical and cultural coding is concealed behind a surface that presents itself as natural.

An analysis of this mechanism also clarifies the contribution of existing interpretations. Bobb (2012) has already observed that, with new technologies, images pass from cultural to technical encoding, so that meaning is "no longer built, but given," and Frunză (2011) has connected seduction to the promise of a paradisiacal condition. These readings capture Codoban's diagnosis of the age and the anthropological stakes of the analogical turn. The present reading focuses on the step-by-step operation of the mechanism—how analogy gives way to index, and index to an apparent index—and on its earlier formulation in the analyses of seduction, where Codoban states that the movement from indices to arbitrary signs is the one with which "religion, culture, civilization, and human liberty" began, and that seduction inverts it (Codoban 2006, 155). This point is crucial for what follows: Codoban himself relates the naturalization of the sign to the genesis of religion, but as its reversal.

5. From Ontophanic Revelation to Iconic Naturalization: The Structural Resonance of Presence through Concealment

Read side by side, Codoban's analyses of the sacred and the image display a recurring pattern, which this article names—in its own terms—presence through concealment: something attains presence only through a mediation that conceals its source or genesis behind what appears. In the sacred, the pattern is explicit. Ontophany presents a reality, the World, "where the Absolute appears slightly occulted by its manifestations, where the sacred is revealed in the profane, but also hidden by it" (*revelat în profan, dar şi ascuns de el*) (Codoban 1998, 114). The inaccessibility of the Absolute compels every manifestation to be mediated, and the sacred appears as sign-events (epiphany) for a consciousness defined by the intellection of signs (*intelecţia semnelor*) (Codoban 1998, 63).

Codoban also gives this concealment a direction. He notes that modern theories of the relation between the sacred and the profane fall into two alternatives: either the sacred is generated by the profane, so that "the profane hides in the sacred," or the profane is the product of the sacred, so that "the sacred is the one that camouflages itself in the profane"; in both cases, the second term is "the ciphered expression of the first" (Codoban 1998, 169). The first alternative is that of the "masters of suspicion"—Marx, Nietzsche and Freud—whose negative hermeneutics seek truth beyond the symbol; the second is that of the positive hermeneutics of Cassirer, Jung, Bachelard, and Eliade (Codoban 1998, 169). For Eliade, the dialectic of the sacred and the profane means "the camouflaging, the hiding, the encrypting of the sacred in the profane" (*camuflarea, ascunderea, încifrarea sacrului în profan*), which is "the reverse" of the position of Marx and Freud, for whom the profane is hidden in the sacred (Codoban 1998, 170). Concealment is therefore an operation with a vector: something is encoded in something else that disguises it, and the vector can run in either direction.

It is this vector that allows Codoban's analysis of the sacred to be compared with his analysis of the image. The comparison is sometimes supported by vocabulary, since Codoban uses *aparenţă* and its cognates in both domains. The lexical recurrence, however, cannot carry the argument by itself, because the word changes meaning. In *Sacru și ontofanie*, "essence and appearance" is a Hegelian pair in which appearance is a constitutive moment of reality (Codoban 1998, 114), although in the same book, in his account of archaic Asian ontologies, a World lowered to "mere appearance" marks a diminished reality (Codoban 1998, 120). In the

analysis of the image, by contrast, "apparent" designates a semblance that conceals its genesis—an "apparent indexical sign" (Codoban 2011a, 4), an "apparent lack of coding" (*aparenta lipsă de codificare*) (Codoban 2011b, 39). This resonance between the two domains must therefore be established at the level of the mechanism rather than of the word, and it is presented here as the authors' interpretive reconstruction, not as a system that Codoban formulates explicitly.

On this basis, the two domains can be compared along the dimensions summarized in Table 1. What remains invariant is a form of presence: in both, something becomes present only through a mediation that conceals its own source or genesis, and this concealment affects what counts as real for a recipient. What differs is almost everything else—the referent, the mediator, the mode and direction of concealment, the level at which the recipient is addressed and the ontological consequence. In ontophany, a higher reality is encrypted in the profane; in the naturalization of the image, a cultural construction presents itself as nature. Codoban's own framing confirms that the vectors are opposed. In 2006, he describes the naturalization of the sign as an "inversion of the semiotic genesis," the reversal of the upward movement through which religion and culture began (Codoban 2006, 155); in 2003 he presents philosophy and the religions of the book as an effort "to tear man away from the magic of the image" (Codoban 2003, 137).

Table 1. Presence through concealment in two regimes

Dimension	**Sacred Ontophany**	**Technological Naturalization of the Image**
What becomes present	The Absolute, situated outside any possible experience yet manifested in religious experience (Codoban 1998, 72)	Cultural meaning, which "only belongs to culture" (Codoban 2011a, 12)
What is concealed	The source: the sacred is "revealed in the profane, but also hidden by it" (Codoban 1998, 114)	The genesis: the coding of production, transferred into machine operations (Codoban 2011a, 14)
Mediator	A profane object functioning as symbol; inadequacy between signifier and signified (Codoban 1998, 79–81)	The technical apparatus; the recorded image as trace or index (Codoban 2011a, 10, 14)
Direction of concealment	A higher reality encrypted in the profane (Codoban 1998, 170)	A construction presented as nature; an "inversion of the semiotic genesis" (Codoban 2006, 155)

Dimension	Sacred Ontophany	Technological Naturalization of the Image
Recipient and level addressed	Religious consciousness defined by the intellection of signs; the sacred is also a value and a formation of the unconscious (Codoban 1998, 29, 63)	A spectator who apparently need not know reading rules (Codoban 2011a, 14); in seduction, the unconscious against consciousness (Codoban 2003, 136)
Ontological consequence	Grounds a World; gives consistency to Reality (Codoban 1998, 72, 74)	Signs taken as reality: "the sign is reality" (Codoban 2011b, 53)

Source: Authors' reconstruction

The comparison is therefore one of resonance, not of identity: the form of mediated presence recurs, while its direction is reversed. In terms of Codoban's typology of hermeneutics, hierophany corresponds to the vector of positive hermeneutics—a higher reality encrypted in the profane—whereas the naturalized image corresponds structurally to the vector uncovered by the masters of suspicion, a construction hidden behind what appears to be given (Codoban 1998, 169–70). There is, moreover, at least one passage in which Codoban himself brings the two together through the image of the screen: if we live, "according to an ontology of the significant surface," in a world of significations without consistency, origin or depth, the sacred is "like a point, like a hole in the screen of our dream, on the same level as the screen" (Codoban 1998, 74). The passage is conditional, but it shows that the language of surface and screen belongs to Codoban's theory of the sacred before it enters his analysis of media. What this revealing-and-concealing structure does to reality, and to the subject confronting it, is the question of the next section.

6. The Construction of Reality and the Modes of the Subject: Between Post-Truth Communication and Existential Interpretation

The most far-reaching implication of the comparison concerns reality itself. Codoban repeatedly describes reality not as a datum that precedes consciousness but as something established through signification and communication. This thesis must, however, be differentiated according to the kind of reality at stake. In the religious order, the sacred acts as the anchor grounding a World (*Lume*), and this foundation has, for Codoban, an ontic anchoring in the creatural self-consciousness of the human being; the content of the sacred is that of a "guarantee of the real" (Codoban 1998, 65, 71). In the social order, communication constructs an intersubjective reality—already in *Sacru și ontofanie*, the consistency of reality arises when religious experience is communicated and its subject becomes "we"

(Codoban 1998, 153). In the order of mediated perception, technological images produce an effect of the real in which their coding is concealed (Codoban 2011a, 14). The argument that follows concerns the continuity of a form across these orders, not their identity. Its starting point is the function of the sacred in *Sacru și ontofanie*: without it, Codoban writes, the human experience of existence would collapse into evanescence.

> The sacred, the central category of this experience, grounds a World by preventing reality from becoming evanescent and incomprehensible […]. On the plane of religious experience, the sacred points to the real, but a real that obliges us to step out of our contingencies and particularism toward the exemplary (Codoban 1998, 72).

To "ground a World" (*fondează o lume*) means, in this context, to establish a stable order of meaning. The formula is Codoban's restatement of Eliade, whom he quotes at length on the same theme: every religion "is an ontology" that "founds a World which is no longer evanescent and incomprehensible" (Codoban 1998, 114, quoting Eliade).

When Codoban turns to the shift from a textual to an image-based regime, this world-forming function is transferred to communication in an explicitly anti-Kantian formula: "if, for modernity, as Kant states, knowledge constructs reality, for our postmodern world it is rather communication that builds reality" (Codoban 2013b, 168). The formula is not new in 2013. The 2003 lecture already describes communication as the construction of plural worlds of signification (Codoban 2003, 133), and earlier formulations in Codoban's introductions to philosophy and to semiotics are documented by Frunză (2011, 182) and Afloroaei (2008, 114). In *Imperiul comunicării*, the thematization of communication makes the world "be understood as constituted of relations rather than of entities, of relations which themselves institute the entities" (Codoban 2011b, 48), and since "signification precedes designation," Codoban can write that "communication is reality, and this reality is, in fact, a process, the process of signification" (Codoban 2011b, 53). This reversal marks the decline of the Kantian knowing subject and the emergence of the communicating subject (Codoban 2009, 444). In this new order, the shift from text to image gives rise to what Codoban calls ostensive ideology—a mode of communication that no longer argues through words but shows through images (Codoban 2003, 137–38; 2006, 157; 2009, 443–48). Its most complete model is virtual reality, which Codoban calls "the best model of communication as a signifying process," adding that its defining ontological

aspect is interaction rather than simulation or illusion, "because it presents a deliberately and explicitly constructed reality" (Codoban 2011c). Virtuality, however, is not for him primarily a technological novelty: it is introduced by the linguistic sign itself (Codoban 2011c).

The culmination of this theme is found in Codoban's analysis of post-truth reality. In this era, the world is no longer revealed through the disclosure of essential truth but is instead presented through a network of signification and public communication. In his most recent book, Codoban describes post-truth as "the truth-meaning, the valuable or significant truth for each individual" (Codoban 2025, quoted in Frunză 2025a, 5). The ground for this formulation is laid in his earlier analysis of post-truth with Cordoş:

> [...] Knowledge becomes the construction of the world as a reality, and signs (words) are more appropriate or less appropriate names for things. [...] The world is given to man through communication, through signification [...]. That which has the meaning of reality becomes true (Codoban and Cordoş 2021, 171).

Truth, in this context, is no longer verified by correspondence with external objects but is produced as an objectifying effect of communicative intersubjectivity (Codoban and Cordoş 2021). Whatever succeeds in projecting meaning-reality through the power of signification is accepted as truth. The resonant structure described in the previous section—presence operating through concealment—can thus be read as one of the mechanism through which what human beings call "reality" is constructed. Yet when this mechanism is traced to the subject, the picture is more differentiated than a single opposition between a dissolved and a necessary subject. Codoban's texts involve at least four positions that must be kept apart: the seducer, the addressee, the semiotic agent that produces or operates signs, and the existential interpreter for whom meaning is understood. Whether these positions contradict one another or belong to different levels of analysis is the question the following paragraphs test.

The first two positions appear in Codoban's analysis of influence. The formulation most often cited for the annulment of subjectivity is not, strictly speaking, Codoban's own: it belongs to Baudrillard, whom he quotes: "the subject can only desire, the object seduces". The seducer, in this account, can be what he or she is only by being nobody, that is, only if his or her subjectivity is annulled (Codoban 2006, 154–55). What is annulled, then, is the subjectivity of the seducer, who offers himself or herself as an object. Codoban immediately adds that seduction "is closer to

persuasion than to manipulation, because it is a praxis, as it focuses on a subject, even if the seducer becomes an object" (Codoban 2006, 155). The addressee therefore remains a subject; what changes is the level at which he or she is addressed. Manipulation "passes over beyond the field of consciousness of the manipulated" and turns a relation between two subjects into a subject-object relation (Codoban 2006, 154). Seduction, by contrast, while annulling the subject, naturalizes the sign" (Codoban 2006, 155). Read in context, the subject annulled here is the seducer, who "offers himself/herself as an object" (Codoban 2006, 154). In the earlier version of this argument, Codoban specifies that seduction works by addressing the unconscious against a consciousness that can only say no, and that manipulation gains access to a "programming language" located beneath consciousness (Codoban 2003, 132, 136). The mass that emerges in this regime is no longer a community of conscious individuals but a crowd "with rather unconscious reactions" (Codoban 2006, 155). What is bypassed is critical consciousness, not the subject as such.

The third position is that of the semiotic agent. In the regime of technological images, the coding once learned by those who produced images is transferred into "operations using technology that belongs to machines" (Codoban 2011a, 14). In artificial intelligence, Codoban describes an agent that operates "with predefined significances rather than meanings," because it lacks "the personal history of the road to significances" and receives them "readily elaborated by programming" (Codoban 2020, 180). Signs are here produced and processed without anyone who understands them. The fourth position, the existential interpreter, is defined precisely against this agent. To interpret is "to put yourself in the place of someone else, with your life"; hence "the limits of your interpretation are the limits of your life." People can tell stories only because they exist, "that is, not a Being endowed with an essence, but existence that gains its essence over time" (Codoban 2020, 179). This is the sense of the formula "AI exists already knowing, while man knows existing in time," and of the inversion according to which, unlike the human existent, "in AI essence precedes existence" (Codoban 2020, 180–81). Codoban's most recent essays sharpen this contrast: artificial intelligence is "a mechanism based on a calculation, not on an understanding that is born from living experience," and, unlike the organic relations of human being, its relations depend entirely on communication (Codoban 2025, 22; 2023a, 55; both quoted in Frunză 2025b, 134).

These positions do not stand in formal contradiction, because they are located at different levels. The dissolution described in the analyses of

seduction and manipulation concerns the seducer and the critical consciousness of the addressee at the moment of influence; the existential interpreter concerns the conditions under which meaning can be understood at all. Codoban held both levels together long before his writings on artificial intelligence. Already in *Sacru și ontofanie* he distinguishes knowledge, which proceeds through the categories of the understanding, from understanding, which "is existential: to understand something truly, we need the whole span of our life" (Codoban 1998, 29), while locating the sacred not only in consciousness but also in the unconscious (Codoban 1998, 29, 65). The same book describes the moment at which the Absolute and the World acquire "the consistency of reality" as the moment when religious experience, communicated as ontology, "changes its subject from 'I' to 'we'" (Codoban 1998, 153). Communication grounds reality here not by eliminating the subject but by making it intersubjective. The 2023 chapter points in the same direction, although it must be read for what it is: an account of Eero Tarasti's project rather than a formalization of Codoban's own position. The contrast it draws is between the science that "obtains the truth by breaking apart from the presence of the subject" and a semiotics that seeks what "opens only in the presence of the subject"; Tarasti's synthesis is then characterized as "a (structural) semiotics with an existential (hermeneutic) subject" (Codoban 2023b, 124–25). Finally, each of Codoban's analyses of influence ends with a call for critique—of "pure and practical communication" (Codoban 2006, 157), of the image, manipulation, and seduction (Codoban 2003, 138), and of an ostensive ideology that may "charm and enchain our thinking" (Codoban 2013b, 174). Critical consciousness is bypassed by the regime he describes, but it is presupposed by the description itself.

What remains is therefore not an aporia but a tension between modes of subjectivity, which can be stated more precisely. The mechanism of presence through concealment constructs reality by addressing the subject beneath the level of critical consciousness, while meaning remains tied to an interpreter who understands across the span of a life. The two modes are not simply juxtaposed; they are entangled. The coherence of the self over a whole life—the condition that the 2020 text makes the ground of interpretation—appears in the 2003 lecture as a cultural programming inherited from the Christian idea of the person, which obliges individuals to remain consistent with themselves and which manipulation exploits (Codoban 2003, 132; cf. "mechanism of consistency" in Codoban 2006, 153). The continuity that makes the existential interpreter possible is also the point at which the communicative regime takes hold of him or her. The

subject is at once the condition of meaning and the site through which naturalized signs operate. Codoban's latest book states this entanglement in a single formula: "There is no living experience without communication, but there is communication without living experience" (Codoban 2025, 21, quoted in Frunză 2025b, 134). The existential interpreter depends on the communicative order, while that order can operate without him or her. Whether this tension belongs to signification as such or is a historical effect of the civilization of communication—Bobb (2012) reads Codoban as describing the dismissal of the subject by civilization rather than by theory—remains an interpretive question that the corpus does not settle.

7. From Inherited Problems to the Tension of Subjectivity: Codoban within the Constellation of the Sacred, the Sign, and Reality

Read in this way, Codoban's trajectory from the phenomenology of the sacred to the critique of media is not merely a change of subject matter. The sacred, the image, and the construction of reality are linked by recurring form of mediated presence, while the direction of that mediation changes between the two regimes. The continuity of form, rather than of content, situates Codoban distinctively in relation to three authors on whom he draws: Eliade, Barthes, and Baudrillard.

Codoban does not simply reverse the functions of his predecessors; he modifies their accounts. From Eliade (1959) he takes the dialectic of the sacred and the profane and the conviction that the sacred is a "guarantee of the real" (Codoban 1998, 71). He reformulates this dialectic in semiotic terms, as the relation between an inaccessible signified and its symbolic signifier, but he does not reduce the sacred to signification: it remains a value, a formation of the unconscious and the correlate of human self-transcendence (Codoban 1998, 29, 65). His modification of Eliade lies in making hierophany legible as a sign-event while preserving Eliade's concern with the real. Codoban's relation to Barthes (1977) is analogous. He keeps Barthes's distinction between denotation and connotation and the thesis that meaning belongs to culture, but locates part of the naturalizing effect in the technical genesis of the image rather than only in its rhetoric (Codoban 2011a, 12–14). In both cases, Codoban extends an earlier account into a domain its author did not address—the semiotic of ontophany in Eliade's case, the technical apparatus in Barthes's—and both extensions lead him to the question of how the subject is positioned once reality is increasingly constructed through the communicative order.

The relation to Baudrillard is closer still, and it should not be described as a simple opposition between continuity and disappearance. Codoban adopts Baudrillard's account of seduction (Codoban 2006, 154–55) and accepts his diagnosis of the hyperreal: "the installation of the hyperreal tells us that for us simulation is more real than the real" (Codoban 2011b, 77). He then adds a qualification of his own: "the simulation of reality is the very process of communication," whose "ever-present effect" (*efectul din totdeauna*) lies in the passage from stimulation to simulation, and electronic technologies "not only contribute to the generalization of communication but also reveal its less visible nature" (Codoban 2011b, 77). Where Baudrillard narrates a precession of simulacra that liquidates the referent (Baudrillard 1994), Codoban reads simulation as the intensification of something that communication has always done. Two further features keep his account distinct from Baudrillard's. He retains a distinction between signification and simulation, which corresponds to the difference between persuasion on the one hand and manipulation or seduction on the other (Codoban 2011b, 77). And he does not treat all reality alike: the World grounded by the sacred, the intersubjective reality of communication and the effect of the real produced by media are distinct orders, linked by a common form of mediated presence rather than dissolved into a single process of simulation.

The tension of the subject in Codoban's corpus is thus not merely a symptom of the post-truth era. Because presence through concealment operates, in different forms, from ontophany to the digital image, the question of the subject accompanies the whole trajectory rather than appearing only at its end. In the most recent essays, the existential interpreter is reformulated through the singularity of life, and the sacred itself is described as having left history, to reappear in a humanism "in which not man is sacralized, but life itself" (Codoban 2023a, 171, quoted in Frunză 2025a, 8; see Frunză 2025b, 130).

8. Conclusion

This article has established three points on textual grounds. First, in *Sacru și ontofanie* the sacred functions as the category of a consciousness defined by the intellection of signs; the Absolute, inaccessible as signified, appears through the symbol, and in ontophany the sacred is "revealed in the profane, but also hidden by it" (Codoban 1998, 63, 81, 114). Second, Codoban's analyses of seduction and of the technological image describe a naturalization of the sign, first as the reversal of the movement from index

to symbol (Codoban 2003; 2006) and then as the transfer of coding into machine operations, which produces the appearance of a message without code (Codoban 2011a). Third, the subject appears in these texts in at least four positions—the seducer, the addressee, the semiotic agent and the existential interpreter—which occupy different levels of analysis; the existential interpreter, often associated with Codoban's writings on artificial intelligence, is already present in *Sacru și ontofanie* (Codoban 1998, 29; 2020).

Two further claims remain interpretive hypotheses. The first is the structural resonance between ontophany and the naturalization of the image. It rests on an invariant form of mediated presence that conceals its genesis, but the two regimes differ in referent, mediator, recipient and ontological consequence, and Codoban himself describes their vectors as inverse. The resonance is therefore the authors' reconstruction, supported by the texts but not formulated by Codoban as a system. The second is the characterization of the subject's situation as a productive tension rather than an aporia: the continuity of the self that grounds interpretation is also what the communicative regime exploits. Whether this tension belongs to signification as such or to a particular civilization of communication is a question the corpus leaves open.

These results matter for two reasons. They show that Codoban's critique of communication rests on resources developed in his philosophy of religion, so that his work cannot be divided into a religious and a media phase without loss. They also offer a way of analyzing the presence of religious forms in contemporary media—a camouflage of the sacred in the profane, but also a naturalization of the constructed—without collapsing religious reality, social reality, and mediated perception into a single order of signs. Codoban's distinctive contribution lies less in resolving the tension of the subject than in making it the starting point of a critique of communication.

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