MEDIA NARRATIVE STRATEGIES AND STEREOTYPIZATION. STORIES OF DELINQUENCY IN THE CASE OF ROMA IMMIGRANTS

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Abstract: The study focuses on presenting one of the most controversial narrative strategy of the today media namely the tendency to attach negative traits on the image built to describe the Roma immigrants. Media representation of the Roma immigrants is sometimes constructed through minimal depreciative traits, promoted and maintained in such a way as to become ethnic stereotypes. The mass-mediated image of Roma immigrants who commit criminal acts abroad varies from portraits constructed through soft irony to disparaged caricatures. Theories on media narratives and stereotype representations are taken into account when dealing with Romanian media coverage, the present research analyzing the TV news stories, in order to argue that the overall image of the immigrant category is negatively reflected each time the journalistic narratives stress upon immigrants’ criminal behavior.

Keywords: media reflection, negative image, stereotype, irony, depreciative structures

Theoretical perspectives on media narratives. The immigrants’ media image as others or criminals. Stereotypes and prejudices

In a world where immigration is still regarded as a potential inflow of criminals, there are not few cases in which media narratives emphasize the idea that receiving countries identify immigration as a worrying issue. Media reflection renders a negative image of immigrants in the form of stereotype traits.

In the past years, the Romanian academic world has been more and more concerned with in-depth searching of media narratives. Starting from the almost ordinary idea that it is impossible to exist in society without media, theoreticians are also interested in the way in which journalists use different narrative strategies to shape stereotypes related to migrants’ behaviour.

In Romanian and foreign scholarship, the term narrative has been analyzed in various ways. Discussions on the media narratives pointed out the tendency of the media to construct images of role identity. Various studies take into account the constructivist perspective in an attempt at analyzing the way media construct ethnic identities through discourse. Researchers have used the discourse-historical analysis to comment on “the discursive strategies and linguistic devices employed to construct sameness and uniqueness, and differences to other
national collectives”, speaking about “ego-, ethno and nation-centric view, mentalities of nations, nationalist attitudes and stereotypes articulated in discourses.”

Jeffrey C. Alexander and Ronald N. Jacobs understand identities as being guided by narrative meanings. One can speak about some imagined communities as class, gender, race, ethnicity and nation in which people connect their self-narratives to collective ones. In a plot based on the story of integration and participation via citizenship, the characters are organized around the opposition between heroes, who fight for the preservation of citizenship and rights, and the antiheroes who would threaten the social order. The civil society narratives are shaped through a semiotic code, so that heroes are on the sacred side and the villains on the profane one.

In a study from 2009 that surveys the media coverage of immigration from 1999 to 2009, in the U.K., Terry Threadgold emphasizes the following conclusions: the media frames the stories through certain narrative structures about immigration, the discourse being always built in terms of immigration control, in a context of fear about crime and misconduct; “the national media in the U.K. – through the regularity with which they reproduce the dominant asylum narrative and discourse about loss of control and dangerous invasion – have produced a very negative view of what immigration is.”

For some scholars, there is an obvious dichotomic narrative in media: national/ migrant people, because “contemporary news stories are stories about a particular nation, told to an audience that is seen and addressed in national terms.”

We may consider that media frames of immigrants involved in criminal acts represent another source for the Romanians’ tendency to see themselves as being inferior to other EU states. The journalistic storytelling is constructed around the criminal actions of an immigrant (or more) who becomes the protagonist of a plot, the villain who causes a diminished country image.

When considering the role of narrative structures in depicting the world in positive/ negative features, in our case - the host country vs. the immigrants, it is useful to turn to studies which have emphasized this role, narrative being seen as a strategy that “offers a fundamental epistemological way of knowing the world, involving sequence, setting, perspective, characterization, tone and a relationship with the public. All news narratives tend to be formulaic.”

Otto Santa Ana considers that we may speak about two types of media stories regarding immigrant voyages and apprehensions: one ancient story-type (the American cowboy

2 Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ronald N.Jacobs,“Mass communication, ritual and civil society”, in Media, Ritual and Identity, Tamar Liebes and James Curran (eds.), p. 31
5 Barbie Zelizer, Allan Stuart, Key Words in News and Journalism Studies, Open University Press, London, 2010, p. 77
archetype, similar to the USA foundational type myth), and a journey myth of Inanna, a Sumerian goddess, which contests the nation’s foundational myth.⁶

Some scholars have examined the effects of mass media on migration behaviour and ethnic identity, and illustrated how media intervenes to affect the reception migrants receive, how it plays a dynamic role in the cultural politics and cultural identity of diasporic communities. Media intervenes in the migration process each time host-country journalists construct the immigrants’ image as others or criminals/undesirables. Such a focus on migrant criminality creates stereotypes.⁷

In a previous study I stated that “the contemporary media creates new modes of signification by using various identity narratives with a high degree of denigratory connotation. Actual media discourse shows an obvious tendency towards inducing a complex of inferiority by comparing Romanian people to other EU states visibly seen as being more advanced in every aspect. Clearly marked self-discriminatory narratives, since the media practitioners are Romanian as well, are coded to render the idea that media consumers are able to identify numerous identity features as counterexamples in comparison to other nations. Identity narrative structures of television news play an important role in shaping some denigratory traits of the national portrait, and the result is a constructed low self-esteem image on national identity.”⁸

In an article which investigates the role played by mass media in structuring the public discourse regarding the adaptive efforts of the Romanian immigrants in the German cultural space and their relation to the host country, Ileana Rotaru states that “the problem of immigrants from the South-East has become one of the main themes in the West European public discourses. By the agency of media, the situation brought about an increase of the xenophobic level, certain racial attitudes, amplified by the mass media which has raised a series of debates regarding the possible negative consequences of the workforce liberalization for Romanians or regarding the menace of negatively interfering with the way of life.”⁹ Having as a start point the theoretical framework represented by two concepts, that of social representations and that of cultural identity, the author emphasizes the role played by mass media as the ‘main vector’ in structuring and forming the immigrants’ social representations and cultural identity. The author concludes that the social representation of the Romanian immigrant is predominantly negative.

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⁹ Ileana Rotaru, “The Role of Media in Structuring the Social Representations of Romanian Immigrants in Germany”, in *Journal of Media Research*, vol. 9, Issue 1 (24)/2016, p.117
Bianca Florentina Cheregi’s study entitled “The Media Construction of Identity in Anti-Immigration Discourses: the Case of Romanian Immigrants in Great Britain” is a survey on the press from 2013-2014, and starts with an overview of the concept of national identity which is shaped and reproduced through discourse. Starting from the theories related to the framing process the author notices the existence of an anti-immigration frame within the anti-immigration media campaign in the British tabloid press. The researcher speaks about the campaign launched by Adevarul in March 2014 entitled “The truth about Romanians from Great Britain” with its 16 articles in which the journalists aimed at breaking up the Myth of the Romanian Invaders. The author outlines some of the most mentioned stereotypes of the Romanian people in the British press: “beggars, criminals, corrupt, fraudsters, thieves, vampires, parasites, communists, insects and delinquents.” Even the British quality press “employs stereotypes about Romanian migrants, associating them with crime, corruption and thievery”, along with the tabloid press where “the Romanians are portrayed as being criminals and poor.”

A rather common narrative strategy in news stories is that of naming the Roma ethnic identity in the introduction as if it is a depreciative trait in itself such as A Romanian of Roma ethnicity. The news stories referring to acts of criminality and misconduct begin with such nominalization in order to draw attention upon a high score of acts with negative implications in creating a worldwide image of Romanian people. One can easily notice the existence of an anti-immigration narrative strategy within a specific media rhetoric.

The narrative scheme in the media story

In a news story from “Italy is not at home” on Kanal D TV Channel, in the show This is Romania, from 12/21/2014, we could observe that there is a narrative specific scheme of the atmosphere reportage and the one of the collective portrait, but in the denigrating portrayal version. The introduction is constructed by the TV news presenter in the studio in the formula of irony pointed towards the ethnic affiliation, referring to illegal ways of earning money such as begging or stealing. By using the theirs deictic the journalist creates the feeling of distance with pejorative connotations in respect of the pronouns we/ they dichotomy, with obvious denigrating intention for the countrymen.

The sententious comment of the TV presenter who introduces the story contains the following formulas in the field of linguistic achievement of irony: colloquial expressions derailed to slang register, terms of lexical-semantic field of Roma culture (gypsy camp), cult hint of ironic allusion — the quote from a short story by Costache Negruzi, Alexandru Lăpușneanul: “They broke into pieces Spain, Italy, France and Germany. They have frightened the foreigners since the buses filled with Roma people have been continuously flowing; the

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11 Idem, p. 14
12 Idem, p. 17
13 Idem, p. 20
Roma were dissatisfied with the money earned from the national begging. Why is that? In their pocket the big Euros do not sit well? Just like that, young and old, with the tribe after them, our countrymen were installed where they dreamed at night. They also are the sons of lady Europe and have rights too. No matter the brothers yell that they are not well educated and have a little bit long hand? Following the Romanian principle of “If you do not want me, I want you” our fellow countrymen do not let slip away the Western honey pot. Now you see the colored part of the Romania in the boot.”

The narrative scheme of the news story has the following components:

- Characters ridiculed by the tone and ironic voiceover commentary by framing (close-ups with faces that show moral decay, detail-plans with gold teeth and fake smiles), by trick-questions like “What time did you go begging?”, by zooming on the Roma lingering and trying to look busy, by cult and biblical allusions of ironic intention (“Roma living in Italy as in the bosom of Adam”). It is obvious the antithesis formula specific to the narrative fairy tale, but in the collective character variant: the positive - the Italians (who offered, in good faith, asylum to the Roma people, providing them with basics) and negative – the Roma people, who rewarded the generous hosts with illegal acts.

- Spatial framework presented in detail-plans for the most of authenticity.

- Action is a chain of reports on thefts and begging told by some participants who seemingly are not aware that they are building an unfavorable image for themselves.

- The reporter on the set is offensive, being prepared to ask questions which will receive self-incriminating answers.

- The end summarizes in the same ironic and accusatory note to the characters presented: “Just in Rome the number of Roma reaches 11 to 12 thousand people (...), and half of them are Romanian. They are dealing with begging and smuggling, and are carriers of drugs.”

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