

Iulian Boldea, Dumitru-Mircea Buda (Editors)  
**CONVERGENT DISCOURSES. Exploring the Contexts of Communication**  
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## REALITY STAGED. POSTMODERN PARODY VERSUS SOCIAL INQUIRY

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*Abstract: Theatre has always been a means of displaying societal flaws and criticizing behaviours. Placed under a theatrical microscope, community begins to look as fragmented as the individuals themselves, with shifting identities, biased attitudes and dislocated meanings. When the audience is included in the dynamics of the play, the staged reality becomes a shared one, and the classical mechanisms of mediation are dissolved and reconstructed. Symbols and metaphors challenge the borderline between objective reality and on-stage simulation, while the narrative of the play is turning into a subversive representation of life-on-TV.*

*Keywords: parody, postmodern, Dreaming Romania, fragmentation, media culture*

“Dreaming Romania” is a complex interplay between utopia, dystopia and simulated reality – along a line of criticism addressed to a wide array of social and political issues. It also functions as an inquiry into the problems faced by the individual. Basically, it is a partly parodic, partly ironic approach to the intricate ways in which the individual can relate to a shifting social environment, while being subjected to fragmented information, manipulation and mass-media brainwashing. Acting like an artistic interface between a fictional script and the objective reality of present-day Romania, the play actually becomes a complex entanglement of subjective realities, from the views expressed by the characters themselves to media fabrications.

On display there are five environments whose (dys)functionality is symptomatic for the Romanian reality: a town square full of people who simultaneously act like a much-needed revolution and the robotic voices of a manipulated collective consciousness; a classroom exhibiting the major faults of an entire educational system; the waiting room of a hospital, presenting the unnecessary clash between doctors and patients; the studio of a television show that dwells on the suffering of a family; and a party where teenagers seem to pose a threat to morals and oppose authority, the latter being represented by two police officers. One striking feature of the theatrical event is the inclusion of the audience – spectators are not only included in the play, but they also interact with the actors in a contextually adequate manner, not staged, but contributing to the significance of the events on stage. The entire play can be defined as an

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essentially postmodern representation of an essentially postmodern society, exhibiting an entire array of traits theorized as being fundamental for the postmodern(ist) world-view. A primary feature of the play is the extensive use of parody – but, first and foremost, in a characteristically postmodern fashion, parody is a carrier of social and political criticism<sup>1</sup>, aimed at the public consciousness as well as the individual lost within the complexity of an economic and societal dynamics he cannot fully grasp. Consequently, “Dreaming Romania” moves away, conceptually, from Jameson’s theory of parody being replaced by pastiche in postmodernity, and having lost its ulterior motives, focusing solely on mimicry which is devoid of substance<sup>2</sup>. Here, we have a clearly stated ulterior motive – social critique – and, even though all scenes are overshadowed by persistent ambivalence, the overall vision of the play is coherent and purposeful.

Throughout the whole play, the spectator is included in the action just to be offered a wider view on each situation, becoming aware of the shifting patterns of perception used by each individual to paint a seemingly objective, but deceptively subjective image of every-day reality. A television channel is the voice-over of the entire theatrical narrative, simultaneously criticizing other channels for the disinformation they spread, praising its own objectivity and overtly displaying its own inadequacy. While allegedly mirroring a collective consciousness, it acts as a subtextual deconstruction of the mannerisms characterizing the social dynamics of the play.

The beginning of the play is painted in dystopian colours, augmenting the negative traits of life in Romania and its reflection in the minds of the citizens; the ending is, apparently, radically utopian, presenting an overly enthusiastic crowd, happy thanks to the ascension of a political party that would allegedly transform Romania into an earthly paradise. Paradoxically, if we apply Baudrillard’s theory of simulation to the ending of the play, the entire play seems void of coherent or real changes, since the obvious level of artificiality sets the surreal utopia against a dystopian background<sup>3</sup>.

Consequently, if we compare the two dystopias presented (the reality-infused dystopia at the beginning and the artificiality-fuelled, media-induced dystopia at the end), the former looks tangible, accessible, relatable – since it resembles objective reality with such fidelity, it acts as the mirror-image of a reality that can be grasped. There is a certain sense of immediacy about the first hypostasis of dystopia in “Dreaming Romania”, whereas the second version, at the end of the play, is so blatantly flawed by simulation and artificiality that its representation ends up beyond any extent of the suspension of disbelief deemed by Coleridge as essential in enjoying any artistic endeavour.

<sup>1</sup> Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 1989, p. 24

<sup>2</sup> Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, p. 17

<sup>3</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994

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The ending of the play can be decoded in ambivalent terms. On the one hand, there is a fabrication of utopia, against a background of social turmoil and the ascension of a make-believe political party. On the other hand, there is the dystopia of subtextually-induced disbelief and media simulation. Subsequently, there are two possible readings of the play: a societal transformation from dystopia to utopia, anchored in people's actions and a pervasive need for change, and a cyclical – and cynical – repetition of history, heading towards non-existent actual transformation and an obtuse passage from dystopia to dystopia. However different in appearance, both readings relay a state of hopelessness and a sense of futility, as if no matter how great the social and individual struggle, change is banned by the very nature of society and its individuals altogether, cancelled by the carefully designed media mechanisms of manipulation, simulation and brainwashing.

The audience is simultaneously invited behind the scenes of these mechanisms and made part of them; the spectator grasps the true dimension of fabrication while questioning the superficiality that prevents actual opposition to it. There are three distinctive elements involved in an intricate interplay: the stage/ the actors, the audience and the voice-over provided by the fictional television channel. The audience finds itself mirrored by the actors, and the (staged) consciousness of the actors is mirrored by the news bulletins on TV. Both the play as a whole and the television channel act as perfect examples of Michel Foucault's conceptualization of heterotopias; they both act as virtual spaces opening up behind a real surface (in this case, the real is the objective view on the Romanian reality held by the audience), providing a chance for the viewers to find representations of themselves in a completely fictional environment and opposing real and unreal perceptions<sup>4</sup>.

The play can also be regarded as an inquiry into the matters of authority and hierarchy; the dichotomy order-disorder is challenged from multiple angles throughout the entire display of social environments. Norms are broken and rebuilt according to biased criteria, and the very concept of authority is fragmented. It is unclear who holds the dominant position, since both teacher and students seem more inclined to antagonize than to collaborate. The teacher uses verbal aggression as a tool for convincing her students to act in a polite manner, but she fails in doing so – the students look unaffected by the repeated threats concerning their immediate future, namely the baccalaureate, being solely interested in various patterns of antisocial behaviour and the image they project upon their classmates.

The staged version of real-life Romania seems a mathematically constructed and fictionally designed demonstration of Debord's theory of the spectacle. Similar to Debord's perspective, which viewed detached images coming together to form a common stream, the separate scenes of the play paint a wholesome picture of the Romanian society; the pseudo-reality constructed by the media can only be perceived, but never truly grasped, since television feeds delusion and a false consciousness; just like Debord preached, the spectacle goes beyond the level where it is a mere collection of images – it becomes a social relation between people,

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<sup>4</sup> Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias". In Edmund Leach (ed.), *Rethinking Architecture*. London: Routledge, 1997

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mediated by images<sup>5</sup>. In an environment whose societal mechanisms are biased by media-created simulacra, the individual is forced to abandon the search for a personal utopia, choosing, instead, to fabricate one; when representation is oscillating between parody and pastiche, the borderline between the real and the artificial become blurred, and individuality is diluted against a background of fragmented norms.

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<sup>5</sup> Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit: Black and Red, 1970, p. 35

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