

TECHNIQUES AND LATERAL THINKING STRATEGIES IN C.T. POPESCU EDITORIALS

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Abstract

The present study emphasizes a new trend in modern press. This present tendency is more and more different from informative neutral discourse and gets closer and closer to an energetic and subjective type of discourse, filled with figures of speech. The current article discusses and analyses the success known by the editorials of an important Romanian journalist, Cristian Tudor Popescu, a success that explains itself through the author's talent and his own style. His technique is characterized by a harsh moral attitude and a never ending discursive creativity that seems to be inspired from Edward de Bono's "lateral thinking" technique and from some specific means: suppositions contestation, thinking delay, fractioning, reverse approach, analogy etc.

Keywords: lateral thinking, vertical thinking, creativity, editorial, opinion genre

The crisis that has been affecting print journalism for several years now seems to go along with a sharp discourse crisis and consequently, a crisis of journalistic genres. Everything that has happened during these years (edition dramatic fall, tabloidisation of the content, migration to other media - mainly online) commits a serious review of the theory and practice of media. New and important sources of information have appeared (such as blogs and sites specialized in different fields). They are already talking about a new journalistic style, more dynamic and subjective offered to readers under different labels and names: gonzo reportage, feature etc.

Print journalism is struggling to maintain the primacy of information, and it is desperately seeking new ways to counter the offensive of broadcasting. Still, there's no return to the way that the newsmedia started, over the last 20 years. Neutral and objective news style will be, many years for now on, just a recollection. We already entered the era of personalized and full of fantasy type of journalism, which seems to confirm the idea of Marshall McLuhan, who said premonitory early 70s:

“Classified ads and stock quotes are the foundation of the press. If an alternative source of easy access to such diverse daily information is found, the media will fall”. This source was found (Internet) and, despite all efforts, the future of traditional media seems to be a gloomy one. That does not mean a total extinction of newspapers. The printed press will last as long as it can – frail and concealed in ultraspecialized niches –, the future print journalism will be a type of press characterized by an undertaken subjectivity, a press sustained by well known personalities and various celebrities more or less invented (the TV format), excessive

and mainly oriented to comment and vehement impugnability on behalf of principles or general earthly values, such as ecology, love, affection, spiritual and climatic balance.

Signs of this change can be easily spotted nowadays. It is enough to notice the hesitations of the most strict, official and honored journalistic genre – the editorial. It is enough to read closely and analyze the impressive success of a columnist like Cristian Tudor Popescu.

Personal style or new journalistic approach? It must be stated from the beginning that CT Popescu's editorials do not meet almost any of the theoretical requirements of the editorial. It's about choosing the subject (often a humoral choice) or outright ownership of subjectivity. It's about a blatant presence of neologisms or slang elements. It's, finally, an exacerbated voluntarism, which removes the sharp journalist traditional editorial format requirements and approaches it more to more liberal genres of opinion: the chronicle, the tablet or the note.

Apparently, in the case of C.T. Popescu we are dealing with a new style – a very personal style, filled with rough verbal expressions and aggressive polemical formulations. In fact, his success as an editorialist lies not in the stylistic repertoire, but his attitude and especially the novelty of his own journalistic approach: eccentric, gaudy, filled with his own licenses; something more like a literary approach (a bit more “non-journalistic” one), something already tried by Ion Cristoiu or Cornel Nistorescu (two very successful Romanian journalists) with some success to the Romanian well known newspaper “Evenimentul Zilei”, who published as any other editorial article: travel notes or reading ab, small pamphlets and literary evocations, lyrical notes, etc. C.T. Popescu goes further, sensing that the new direction heading for the modern journalism (a journalism of expression, much more personal, more committed and more blogg like), raises the purposes of originality and journalistic creativity, cultivating a certain rebellious iconoclasm – both at a discursive level and political one, an attitude of man always angry at those who are holding the political power and something less at those who are not.

The cinch and the shameless of its steaming adjectives, which work as the author's signature, make us almost unable to observe that C.T. Popescu seldom complies with the theoretical principles of opinion journalism established by Voirol, H. Montant and Curtis MacDougall. Surprisingly, the theoretical benchmarks used by the well known Romanian columnist may be found in the very principles of “lateral thinking” – a method less suitable to the basic journalistic rigors (or better yet, utterly opposed, in our opinion), but a scheme which has found in C.T. Popescu a great and inspired illustrator.

Edward de Bono – a prestigious inventor, philosopher and professor – introduced in 1967 the concept of “lateral thinking” (*The Use of Lateral Thinking*) and offered us a method of working and seeking ideas in a special way, “out of the box”.

Lateral Thinking – Strategies and Techniques. There are many ways to think “in a different way” – by addition or omission, by dilating a detail capable of generating the bizarre, the weird, the fantastic. De Bono (2003) proceeds in a different way, based on uncensored freedom of thought opposed in many cases to analytical thinking, “vertical” thinking. Lateral thinking philosophy is not about to limit the ways to solve a problem. Do not

look to the best approach, but as many possible approaches. The objective of this search is to shake rigid models and to invent new models. To achieve this, we have several techniques and strategies:

a) *Challenging assumptions*. Start from a premise – almost all assumptions persist inertia and do not verify their validity. When assumptions are contested, it is disputed the need of boundaries and arbitrary limits. There is no wrong or right in the way it is handled a situation. The main goal is only to redesign models.

b) *The “Why” Technique*. Everything may be questioned – an interesting but uncomfortable exercise: why are the wheels round? why chairs have four legs? why students go to school? why girls wear different clothes than boys? why do people have two legs? etc. The goal of the question is to get new reading angles and, therefore, new information.

c) *Thinking Ahead*. That means rather than build something new to look at something old (retrospective thinking). To think proactively to achieve two things: 1) *Suspension of thinking*. In lateral thinking you can go wrong along the way. The important thing is to be right in the end. 2) *Delay judgment* – when we intentionally make mistakes.

d) *Fractionation*. It's important not to find the components of the situation, but to try to “create” parts. Do not try to find the “correct” point of view, but the “different” point of view. Example: we want to divide the problem of collecting apples. We start from the idea to make a picking apples car, and through subsequent fragmentations, we conclude that it is more useful to have dwarf apple trees, easy to harvest. It wasn't the car the problem, but the tree. The goal is not to break down a situation (as in the analysis), but to recompose the original restructuring situation.

e) *Inverse Method*. Reverse thinking is more effective than fragmentation. Through this method, it may be produced the most unusual reorganisations. Any action indicates the opposite direction, too. If you go to Arad (an important Romanian town from West of Romania), you get away from Bucharest (South of Romania). If you fill a bathtub with water, we proceed “against” the action of draining it. The main objective of reversing is to challenge and force some fresh angles of reading.

f) *Analogies* represent a narrative, metaphorical or imagistical equivalent, of a different reality. De Bono speaks of analogy by similarity to Mathematics, where things turn into symbols. These symbols work through Math denominator and finally, you turn symbols into things again. Therefore, we can turn a problem into an analogy and what is happening in the analogy (as a process or relationship) is transferred on the real problem. That is why we do not care if the analogy is “appropriate” or not. Sometimes it's even better not to be a correct analogy. When using analogies, we “do not want to demonstrate anything”. They are designed to “stimulate” novel concepts or other types of reality reading.

g) *Random Stimulation*. Nothing is rejected as useless. The more irrelevant a piece of information, the more useful it is. Therefore, we accept all that is unplanned. The fundamental premise in lateral thinking: “Never look for something in particular”. Do not think about anything, just wait for something to draw our attention. Let us not look the useful, but the “challenging”. Some suggestions: “throwing dice, search the dictionary for random words, introducing a formal criterion in perception (eg nearest red object). A random information may sometimes act as a solution trigger.

h) *Polarization. Relabelling and Reinventing Models.* The enemy of creativity will always be the stereotype - of thought, of action, of speech. The stereotype never combats openly. Sometimes it is fighting itself, by the action of relabelling. Simplifying, we have three ways to get rid of tags: to fight, to remove, to replace them.

Lateral Thinking Processes. Paradoxically, creative thinking does not create anything. It simply arranges the existing information in a more interesting (novel, surprising) way. Provoke creative thinking by:

- *Juxtaposition.* Join two unrelated things together and see what happens.
- *Introducing a random word.* De Bono cites the word “raisin” which is introduced to talk about “efficient use of study time”. Through the introduction of the random word results some practical suggestions to improve the process of learning: *raisins* (sweet, concentrated, summary of the material in a short and enjoyable way, the introduction of short and sweet breaks and funny small talks etc.).
- *Disordered Jumps.* Abandon successive steps of logical thinking. Firstly, we jump and then we fill the empty spaces.
- *Doubt.* Whenever the discussion gets sluggish, we can restore using doubt. The most commonly used phrases are then: “if, suposse, what if...”
- *Voluntary mistake.* Start from a problem: we see what happens in the back. To solve the problem, we can replace “rear-view mirror” with an aberration “to go into reverse”. From here, we can arrive to an idea for another domain, railways, for instance (to have an engine and rear cabin and thus, exempt complicated maneuvers of the train by another locomotive etc.).
- **Add.** In some cases, we solve the problem not by simplifying it, but adding additional elements. De Bono provides a good example for lateral thinking: to solve crime using one handed policemen. Getting over the first phase of astonishment (one handed?), the challenges begin to clear up: it’s not the force that prevails, but intelligence, how to manage with less funding? how to use all the forces of equipment and so on.

Discourse of opinion between fantasy and rebellion (short journalistic application of lateral thinking). We have no doubt that C.T. Popescu editorials obtain their typical grain of challenge and at the same time, madness from the principles of lateral thinking rather than from the resources (otherwise remarkable) of journalist and science fiction writer. The chaotic leap, the challenge, use of information as a stimulus, using fantasy and nonsense, inventing new terms and new verbal combinations (for example, “**Pseudonia**“), are obvious starting with the headlines: “President – *gurnalist*” (rom. *gura+jurnalist*, the romanian for *mouth* and *journalist*) (20.07.2011 , gandul.info), “The Red Indiovirus (rom. *Indio+virus*, the romanian for *invidie*-envy and *virus*)” (13.04.2011, gandul.info), “The Fucking Midget, The Bulldog and the Bargain” (11.04.2011, gandul.info), “Earthworms and worms” (17.03.2011, gandul.info), “Macbeth-Duncan, Boris-Gorby, Petre- Băse” (13.03. 2011, gandul.info).

While some titles are believed to be mere play of words or puns (“Resignation of

death” or “Sexgate or Sexspate? Rom. spate- back”), the crowd of the other titles speak for themselves about the “lateral” model of uninhibited forced puns – with any risk, even bad taste or frivolity: “From Worms to Queen” (09.02.2011, gandul.info), “Invisible Corpse” (02.05.2011, gandul.info) or “Pig Nostalgia” (25.12.2010, gandul.info) etc.

Beyond the multitude of means and methods that may belong to other forms of creative thinking, or “vertical” thinking, like polemics, elements of sarcasm, metaphors and elements of humor, the columnist from the Romanian newspaper “Gândul” reveals his “lateral” matrix along with the ostentation of the game, the ostentation of combination, flashy and bold premise (for example, in one of his editorials, C.T.P. builds his entire argumentative structure on an typical “lateral thinking” like assumption: *what if we draw the Romanian political parties in colors?*)

The well known columnist is also characterized by impulsiveness, playful hermetic expression, borderline nonsense, as presented in his article “Macbeth-Duncan, Boris-Gorby, Petre- Băse“ (13.03. 2011 Gandul. info): “As for the *actualisation* of the play in the playbill *Like in Shakespeare. Boris and Gorby*, together with a picture of the funeral of a Soviet leader, I would have a suggestion for Romania: *Like in Shakespeare. With Petre and Băse*“

Similar to the precepts issued by Bono, C.T. Popescu editorials will show that, in a modern journalistic approach does not count as much the logic of assertions and the rightfulness of the arguments, as counts what the author actually wants to convey: vehemence, protest, political antipathy, disgust. It's one of the requirements lateral thinking: not the means, but the aim matters; the most important thing is to overthrow some templates and get somewhere else where none else was thinking of going. The same growing inner freedom at the expense of critical thinking it is found in inventing intellectual slang expressions: Among all the losers of the Romanian politics over the past 20 years who have struggled even to embroid ribbons to one another, Mr. Basescu's only through a total „idontgiveadamn” to his incoherence diversions and deceptions – “From Worms to Queen” - 09.02.2011, gandul.info (Între toți clănțării politicii din ultimii 20 de ani, care măcar s-au căznit să-și facă panglicile să se brodească una cu alta, dl. Băsescu e unic printr-un miserupism total față de incoerența diversiuinilor și minciunilor sale – “De la râme la Regină” - 09.02.2011, Gândul.info).

Auto-suspension of critical censorship is found especially in the “juxtaposition by analogy” process, both playful and metaphorical technique giving the “cetepiste”(written by C.T.P.) texts an unmistakable air of fantasy and rebellion: “Proportionally decrease Mr. Funeriu [*the former Minister of education n.n.*], leave undamaged his early baldness, dress him in a school uniform and ask him: <Hey, you: tell me your name and your grade>. With the same sober figure, the 7 months born intellectual, the schoolboy Funeriu answers: <My name is Funeriu Daniel and I am in my one grade. A voice in the back of the class, a colleague with ribbons, the future spokeswoman of the minister whispers: <First grade, not one grade, you fool!>. It's too late. Increase Mr. Funeriu back, dress him up with a suit and tie, write underneath the TV screen, the Minister of National Education and listen to what he says to the teachers and students on the first day of school autumn 2010: <Welcome to school the one grade students. I want to tell the parents that everything that the ministry and the government do is that they have confidence in the system of education> “. (*Fac Funner First Class*, 13/09/2010)

As in lateral thinking, the watchword of his editorials CT Popescu seems to be the “challenge”, with all its entails: information as a stimulus, using fantasy and nonsense by pushing all boundaries. Force comparisons. Force analogies. Force language and grammar rules: “Bin Laden, rest in *mild brine* (Bin Laden, fie-i saramura uşoară)” ... “People are stunned, paralyzed, without reaction. They are the faces of a society affected by immunodeficiency, lacking the antibodies against such an enemy (...) In this respect, the Beast should be hanged after trial course, and long halter, if I may choose that option outside the reasoning that follows. No shot, because he does not deserve to die as his victims. You will say that this means the death penalty. No, I do not sustain this idea. Not because of death, but due to punishment” etc... (“Death is good at something”, 26/07/2011)

With a remarkable consistency (the columnist does not change the style that made him famous in 1991), CT Popescu seeks to demolish the rules and to recompose them after other working criteria, exactly as De Bono (2003: 34) method sounds like, a method that creates the premises of the “new” by:

- Challenge. Juxtapositions.
- Postponing judgment. Overturning judgments. Removing labels.
- Alternative. Anti-arrogance. Relaxation. Reexamination a concept. Review.

Our analysis, applied on a corpus of 10 editorials written from February to June 2011, only describes a discursive strategy (taken and adapted from De Bono method), while identifying a new direction that faces present opinion journalism – subjective assumption and the “literaturization” of the journalistic commentary. Thus, from 10 editorials randomly selected from the of five months interval, we identified as the dominant strategic lateral thinking process: reversal of judgments (5 presences), juxtaposition (2 presences), add (2 presence), doubt (1 presence), voluntary error (0 presence).

We do not believe that it's a coincidence that CT Popescu cultivates all kinds of journalistic license and ostentatiously refusing editorial rigors of gender, he has the audacity to publish as its own political opinion fragments of science fiction prose: “In the first moments, the Golden Guards could not believe their eyes, even though - or precisely because – everything was happening as in nightmares and prophecies: the dusk belt went dark, moved ahead, come upon them. Then, they began to distinguish endless torrent of dark people, with black headsets, advancing with guns in hands among giants metallic assault that waving the black flag with stars. Above, the sky was full of black crosses. The Golden Commanders have uttered – some in low voice and resigned, others with a strange joy of a much waited liberation and fear: <This is the end of the world. We will all perish doing our job>. Then they raised all the flags on a blue background with gold disc and prepared to fight and die” etc. (*Pseudonia*, 30.12.2009, gandul.info).

Instead of conclusions. The success of C.T. Popescu audacity to turn a genre of comment in a sort of “fantasy” should not surprise us. On the one hand, columnist seeks to break a market saturated by analytical and political monotony and, on the other, his speech enters (volunteered or not) to a new trend of media – namely, a discourse of opinion as personalised as possible, an “untidy” speech, which is less “journalistic”; a type of uninhibited and challenging speech, able to recover (despite its imperfections) various non-academic expressions drawn from the language of the street which is always full of life and inventive.

The same thing may be observed more and more persistent with online journalism, where the coherence and the accuracy of the opinion journalism rules do not matter as much, but the power of the text to draw attention and to cause the most violent reactions.

Even a simple reading may deduce Mr. CT Popescu “philosophy” of writing – a philosophy clearly detached from lateral thinking: everything is allowed, why not, and if yes, why then?, It doesn’t matter where you go, but where you want to get etc. This explains the unusual verbal approaches (Party-cat), introducing elements of free dialogue (“Why not let them play for Romania, Sanda?”), the imaginary absurdities (The void is the guilty one... Herbivores Pubs...), Antiphrases (Pushing by pulling), infant games words (Hiperbula Palilula), ironic snowclone (*Românela*, the woman with a mustache ... The Lucifer of the Romanian roguery) etc.

If we want to understand the success of C.T. Popescu editorials, we must not remain confined to a simple and exhaustive explanation that the author exhibits obvious preference for verbal shocking juxtapositions: *the body filled with newspaper ... Pink rats ... Dancer with dirty socks ... Basescu loads and fires cannons on windmills* (some titles of articles published in the first half of 2012). Although many articles of shows, sometimes in detail, strategies and techniques of lateral thinking (destructuring, juxtaposing the technique of “why” etc.), that does not diminish the virtues and the specific moral intransigence of the journalist.

Thus, a secret is revealed, but this secret cannot be used only by an equally talented writer; a secret able to explain, in part at least, the meaning of the extremely rapid changes that takes place in the contemporary media discourse. To understand some of the more uneven battle (a battle already lost) between neutral journalism and colored journalism (strong subjective), we must start from McLuhan premise: media power does not lie in the domination of information (information is power), nor in its moral authority, but the authority of writing (I do not believe you, show me where it is written), in its remendous ability to be creating of meaning and significance. But let us not absolutize. Many times, as happens in the articles of C.T. Popescu, media frenzy practice their own limits and shows its weakness as some heroic victories, ignoring some less pleasant truths, the role and function of media:

- 1) *Media is not a court of power.* Power does not depend on the individual, but the court in which the individual is. For the Press, the most important thing is the status of instance of denouncing the power, nothing else.
- 2) *Media does not manipulate* as it manipulates itself.
- 3) *Media does not communicate* what is happening in social reality, but requires everything that makes a public space. (P. Charaudeau, 1997: 7)

In other words, even in literary and journalistic renewal forms, media should take its own condition. Far from being a relentless and objective mirror of society, it expresses a certain opacity through which it may observe only what it allows to be seen, thus building a vision and a particular sense, uncertain and subjective, of the world.

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