

***BETWEEN THE CURRENCY OF SIGNS AND THE TRIBUNAL OF SIGHT; THE ORIGINS OF THE ADVERTISING ENCODING AND DECODING PROCESSES IN THE RENAISSANCE CULTURE***

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*Abstract: This paper analyzes the origins of advertising encoding and decoding processes identified in the Renaissance culture approached by Ioan Petru Culianu in his works, especially in the volume *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance. 1484*. As a historian of religions and an imaginary analyst, he studied the role of the fantasy in the human cognition process and the connection between religious and magical procedures. The Renaissance culture was focused on the science of the magic, framework within which humans were perceived as image processors in an input-output mechanism meant to produce intended reactions and results. The magicians used to attach an intention to a particular image delivered to a subject which determined an automatic reaction within his mind that was then exploited by the operator. This is similar to the mechanism of encoding and decoding processes used in the advertising industry meant to influence the consumer's behavior and his perception on a particular commodity. It is the process of attaching a symbolical value to an object that is afterwards absorbed into the consumer's sphere of stored meanings and former experiences to generate a synthesis and afterwards instrument this artificial desire placed into the consumer's mind to make him want that object and finally buy it.*

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Advertising discourse is generated and intermediated by the advertising specialists and therefore it is important to assess their cultural knowledge in order to understand the meanings they create and communicate to the consumers. It is considered that they use "embedded cultural knowledge as consumers" (Kelly et al. 2005) in the process of generating meanings thus making their approach twofold and difficult to evaluate. It is estimated that their activity is "under-explored" in the domain research and investigations, as well as "theoretically and critically informed insights" (Kelly et al. 2005) regarding their working practices are needed to understand the advertising discourse implications. In his study *Discourse of Advertising*, Guy Cook makes it obvious that for a good advertising discourse analysis, it is necessary to take into account the cultural particularities and the "cognitive processes" triggered by the elements that take part in the process as "advertising can tell us a good deal about our own society and our own psychology" (Cook 2005, 4). The advertising is viewed as a "prominent discourse type" communicated by the sender (advertising agency) to the receiver (the consumer) carrying multiple functions such as to persuade, to inform/misinform, to entertain/worry or to notify, and even if the product is not bought by the ad consumer, it is still watched, interpreted, and stored.

There is ambiguity regarding the meaning making of the ad as Cook warns that the receiver may understand something different than the sender intended to, and this may create "further complication". This becomes even more confusing as the ads are produced by groups formed by individuals who have in mind different intentions, "many strata of senders" categorized as addressers, senders, addressees, receivers each of them having in mind a different idea or "intended function": "Though the manufacturer may seek only to persuade to

buy, the writer may seek to impress other colleagues, or realize an aesthetic aim” (Cook 2005, 5). In analyzing the discourse, one has to assess the text itself which is the ad, and the context the ad is inserted into which is the society and its particular culture. The advertising discourse has to adapt itself to the cultural features which are valued differently by Europeans, Asians or Muslims. The paper titled *The influence of religion on attitudes towards the advertising of controversial products* signed by Fam, Waller, and Erdogan shows that religion is an important issue to be taken into account when creating advertising discourse as a certain “impact of religion on consumption patterns relates to the restriction of certain foods and beverages” as well as “gender roles”. Religion is part of the cultural system and it has a major influence in shaping the social attitudes and behaviors that are to be taken into consideration by the advertising industry representatives.

In the article titled *Advertising Ideology and the Encoding of Advertising Meaning: An Ethnographic and Discursive Approach*, Kelly, Lawlor, O’Donohoe consider that “the discourse of advertising has a dialogic and reciprocal relationship to other cultural institutions and social systems such as family, religion, arts, literature and music (Cook 1992; Tharp and Scott 1990), and through this interactive and fluid relationship advertising has developed into a potent “cultural system” which shapes and reflects consumers’ sense of social reality (Sherry 1987)”. The advertising industry exposes the customers to a series of stimuli meant to generate automatic reactions based on a range of behavioral commonalities identified in the social and cultural context. The psychology of advertising is interested in the perceptions, representations, and beliefs shared by the customers as meaning and decision makers in the process of buying, as well as by the advertising industry players which structure the advertisements delivered to the targeted audience.

Ioan Petru Culianu considered human civilization a cultural “conjunction” and synthesis” that allowed heterogeneous elements to enter a convergence process. The Romanian scholar perceived religion and magic from a systemic and cognitive perspective as a computational process. According to Nicu Gavriluta, in his research, Ioan Petru Culianu used the multidimensional complexity method or thick description which analyzes an object of study filtering it through several interpretative grids. In developing its methods, Ioan Petru Culianu was influenced by the thick description theory stated by Clifford Geertz who interpreted religion as a cultural system, and the complexity theory created by Edgar Morin. These theories take into account the complex subject matter and the complex context into which it is inserted in order to understand it in its whole complexity. The epistemology of complexity is based on the systems theory and information theory. Matei Calinescu considers that Ioan Petru Culianu’s scientific method falls outside the paradigm of phenomenology of religion, and the historicist or materialist paradigm. Following the discussions with the Romanian scholar, Matei Calinescu framed Culianu’s religious phenomena in the area of cognitive, computational, and integrated sciences, where religion precedes and generates multiple dimensions of reality, including the economic and the cultural ones.

The morphodynamics of the dualist system is developed in the study titled *The Tree of Gnosis: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism*, San Francisco, Harper Collins, 1992, where religion is compared to a computational process. Morphodynamics is defined as “the study of events in a space-time continuum” (Culianu

2005, 8), and religion, magic and human sciences are explained as human thought processes, a cognitive approach which studies the methods by which the human mind processes information. The cognitive paradigm focuses on the analysis of the human psyche understood as a “cognitive information processing system” able to achieve representation and computing operations. The representation is “the projection of reality in the human cognitive system” which is performed usually by “symbols - perceptual and mental imagery, semantic and linguistic expressions” (David 2000, 21). The representations calculation processes is based on generating rules. In the study *The Tree of Gnosis: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism*, Ioan Petru Culianu proposes the morphodynamics concept, whose methodological basis is cognitive, and its purpose is to interpret the sciences, in this case, religion as “ideational systems” by eliminating biological determinism. Ioan Petru Culianu investigated the impact of ideas on society and culture and the relationship between idea, its thinker and the state authority. Giordano Bruno’s case is emblematic of the pressure phenomenon exerted by the state system on the innovative ideas and their authors.

In Ioan Petru Culianu’s vision, magic is a type of transitional operation which performs “a transfer of ownership” through an agent. The magic is called an art by its practitioners: *ars memoriae*, *ars magna*, *ars intellectiva*, *ars regia*, *ars medendi*, while the concept of mind in Ficino’s pneumatology is a membrane, a “shell of the soul” and a “fine particle” intermediary between body and soul, and the tool that provides the soul the ability to perceive the material reality. The pneumatic element, the spirit, communicates with the soul using a *phantasmatic language* (Couliano 1987, 28) within which the sensory information is imaginary and its words are phantasms. Therefore, the phantasms (images, symbols, signs and codes) penetrate the human mind through an invasion of information that will be stored consciously or unconsciously. Thus, the person who directs the flow of information can control the invaded psychic by the type of the information released. Ioan Petru Culianu argues that the Renaissance magician has metamorphosed in the modern society into psychologist, psychoanalyst, sociologist, media specialist, soft developer, intelligence agent, marketing and advertising agent. Culianu thinks that Giordano Bruno’s magician is hiding under all these facets, striving to uphold the principles of his master, now concealed in “technical and impersonal turn of phrase” (Couliano 1987, 104) and the technique is based on unconscious processing of information. In this essay, the focus is on the depiction of the advertising agent as a contemporary magician, and on the phantasmatic communication and its seductive approach especially in the body image, researched by Ioan Petru Culianu in a series of academic articles. Culianu is amazed by the huge capacity of modern media to disseminate information on a global scale as he thinks that at the end of the twentieth century, “manipulation through picture and speech has reached an unprecedented level owing to mass communication” (Couliano 1987, xx).

The study *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance. 1484* was originally published in 1984 at the French publisher Flammarion, but was reprinted in 1986 at the Italian Publishing house Arnoldo Mondadori, and in English at the University of Chicago Press in 1987. The Romanian first editions were published at Nemira in 1994, 1999 and in 2003 at Polirom. The French edition was prefaced by Mircea Eliade in February 1982 with a text in which he introduces the young Culianu as a historian of religions specialized in late antiquity and

Gnosticism, balcanologist, specialist in the history of Romanian culture and publicist, and emphasized the “novelty” of the study. The study was initiated at the University of Bucharest and was completed in 1981 in the Netherlands, but it was printed three years later. Within this study, Ioan Petru Culianu approached the cultural shift conducted in the sixteenth century Europe, sparked by the imaginary censorship that allowed the further development of the modern science. Culianu believes that the theory of “cognitive amputation” and the theory of imaginary censorship analyzed in *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance. 1484* determined the cultural paradigm shift in Europe. According to Patapievici, the study *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance. 1484* falls into the first scientific thematic category centered on the Renaissance study. The first major theme, the Renaissance, was treated in the following works: *Marsilio Ficino e il platonismo nel Rinascimento*, *Iocari serio: Science and Art in Renaissance Thought*, and *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance. 1484*. The advent of the global culture and modern science was illustrated by Ioan Petru Culianu using the metaphor of the biological mutation the apterous fly was subjected to which allowed it to survive and evolve. The imaginary censorship was part of the sociological strategy that targeted the collective consciousness change which sought to modify the social representations, a process similar to the Darwinian evolutionism through which the society and the modern science were created by “the complex interplay of multiple ideological and spiritual forces” actioned by the Reformation and Counter-Reformation (Gavrilita 2000, 14). The terror imposed by the atrocious punishments applied as burning at the stake generated the great fear which invaded the social mental triggering self-censorship and imaginary censorship causing a mental shift that favored valuing practicality and scientific certainty at the expense of imagination, idealism and gullibility. Consequently, the modern society is equated by Ioan Petru Culianu with a Reformation secularized appendix.

The study *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance. 1484* examines the science of the Renaissance in an attempt to realize a scientific anamnesis and rediscovery in the way Michel Foucault<sup>1</sup> put it. Culianu tried to review old texts, update and then reintroduce them into scientific circulation, analyzing the Renaissance magic theorized in the Renaissance by a long series of scientists starting with Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Giordano Bruno, Giambattista della Porta, Johannes Thritemius and Cornelius Agrippa. Among them, Giordano Bruno stands out as a master of psychological manipulation, whose principles Ioan Petru Culianu considers were taken over and applied in the modern society mass control strategies. The origins of the psycho-sociology, political science and the brain trusts mechanisms procedures were detected by the analyst in Giordano Bruno’s treaty *De vinculis in genere* which along with the most popular politics handbook in the world, Machiavelli’s *Prince* have influenced the evolution of modern society in two different ways of manipulation – psychological and political one. The origins of semiotics can be also traced in Giordano Bruno’s *On the Composition of Images, Signs and Ideas* translated by Charles Doria, New York, Willis, Locker & Owens, 1991. Culianu enjoys analyzing his research subject from a

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<sup>1</sup> "By "rediscovery" I mean, rather, the effects of analogy or isomorphism which, based on current forms of knowledge, make perceptible a figure that has become blurred or disappeared", Michel Foucault, *What is an author?*, translated by Bogdan Ghiu and Ciprian Mihali, foreword by Bogdan Ghiu, afterword by Corneliu Bălbă, Idea Design & Print, Cluj-Napoca, 2004, p. 50.

variety of angles, ability defined by Kuhn as "perceptual transformation" or the capacity to see inside the box, as well as outside the box from above (Kuhn 1999, 184).

In his study, Ioan Petru Culianu defines magic as a fantastic operation that "makes use of the continuity of individual pneuma and the cosmic one" (Couliano 1987, 23). Renaissance magic is a human manipulation technique accomplished through spirit which invades the imagination as an infallible psychological tool for manipulation of the masses and human individual taking advantage of the above stated continuity between the personal and the universal pneuma. The magical mechanism described in its mode of action seems to be similar to the process of verbal and visual communication "Magic action occurs through indirect contact (*virtualem seu potentialem*), through *sounds* and *images* which exert power over the senses of sight and hearing (*Theses de Magia*, XV, vol. III, p. 466). Passing through the openings of the senses, they impress on the imagination certain mental states of attraction or aversion, of joy or revulsion" (Couliano 1987, 91). The visual or auditory sensory inputs are communicated to the mind through the sign / *nota*, mark / *signum*, figure / *figura*, image / *imago*, character / *character*, and in this process "every sign should be referred to the atrium of sense and the tribunal of sight" (Bruno 1991, 35). The Renaissance thinkers understood the individual human being as a mechanism formed by three different elements: the material body and the ineffable soul linked by the third intermediate element, the spirit. All beings are interconnected through the human pneumatic element, the spirit, resulting in endless combinations engineered in an universal pneumatic network: "In fact, since there is no act which does not involve the pneuma in one way or another, we can say that the whole existence of an individual lies in the sphere of natural magic. And since the relations between individuals are controlled by "erotic" criteria in the widest sense of that adjective, human society at all levels is itself only magic at work" (Couliano 1987, 103). In this pneumatic network, each individual can be both manipulative, manipulated or a mere instrument. The Eros is "the big tool for manipulation" being convergent with the magic as an early stage of manipulative operations since all things relate to Eros, because "aversion and hatred merely represent the negative side of the same universal attraction" (Couliano 1987, 91).

In the volume titled *Decoding Advertisements. Ideology and Meaning in Advertising*, Judith Williamson creates the theory of encoding and decoding ads consisting in four processes: currency of signs, interpellation, identification, and differentiation. The first process is called the currency of signs through which the transfer of meaning is achieved and the customer is viewed as a meaning maker in the mental connections process generated by the cultural codes widely shared. The customer interprets the signs according to the sphere of stored meanings structured within his mind by the cultural system viewed as a referent system by Williamson, being a mythological, religious and ideological symbols depository. The main role of the advertisement is to differentiate the product among the others by transferring meaning from the referent system to the product, endowing it with emotions and urging the customer to buy it. The second process is called interpellation through which the advertising message welcomes the consumer into a symbolical reality and determines him to assess value and make a decision. The third process called identification deals with the imaginary structure of the symbolical reality the customer enters, an artificial network of desire. The advertisement creates desires and calls for their fulfillment where the fourth process comes

into action generating social differentiations according to the value added to the objects acquired as the customers wish to position themselves favorably against the others and gain social value by making their buying decision. The viewers as potential buyers are meaning makers and interpreters by projecting themselves on the product based on their cultural knowledge, their cultural intelligence, and their symbolic communication abilities.

One of the first Culianu's attempts to analyze the human body's reflection in culture is the review titled *A Corpus for the Body* published in *The Journal of Modern History* no. 63 in March 1991. The article reviews the book titled *Fragments for a History of the Human Body* edited in three volumes and coordinated by Michael Feher, Ramona Nadaff and Nadia Tazi, published in 1989 by Zone Publishing, New York. In this article, the reviewer assumes the idea that the corporality is an "extension of the mind" and a mind game through which the body is metaphorised. The healthy and beautiful body is outlined as being the focus of advertising communication and its organic structure is projected on the outer space based on the principle of microcosm-macrocosm correspondence perpetuated in modern society in the metaphors of social and political bodies. Culianu points out that the current advertising discourse shifts the emphasis from the textual messages, spiritual to the imaging, bodily, having a seductive persuasive purpose. He thinks that this trend is based on the Freudian psychology of the masculine scopophilia or the pleasure of looking (libido to look) and the female exhibitionism or the satisfaction to be seen (libido to be seen), plus a dose of esthetic voyeurism. Further on, Culianu refers to the theory of "consumption transfer" according to which the male population is characterized by a masculine desire to express social status and financial situation through women's clothing, cosmetics, jewelry and hairstyle. Ioan Petru Culianu takes Flugel's view in the volume *Psychology of Clothes* highlighting the contradictory aspect of garments which on the one hand cover the body, but on the other hand expose the body to the external gaze through the mechanism of "the transfer of unconscious conflict between exhibitionism and decency" (Culianu 2002, 312). If the body is a "continuation of the mind" clothing becomes a "continuing body", a symbol of social status and a message communicated to the outer world by colors and shapes in a structured fashion code.

Culianu thinks that fashion products are status symbols that make up the identity of the wearer according to the coordinates given by "the fashion cycles" and their variation researched by Agnes Brooks Young in the study *Recurring Cycles of Fashion. 1760-1937*. He is certain that fashion actually speculates the neophilia and the neoteny obsession of the modern society highlighted by Desmond Morris and his sociobiological theory of fashion. Ioan Petru Culianu wonders to what extent the woman becomes trapped by these trends and criteria set by fashion: "How can we assess the fashion and cosmetics? Do they really turn women into slaves to male fantasies or, on the contrary, allow them to express their creativity?" (Culianu 2002, 323).

In the study titled *The Discourse Analysis*, Roventă-Frumușani considers that the advertising discourse encourages the consumer to accept a "complicity of pleasure" into a fictional world. The ad may carry both an overt meaning and a hidden one, persuading or even pressing the consumer to identify herself or himself with a "model", a "dream" or a "phantasm" into a fairytale like paradigm scenario (Roventă-Frumușani 2005, 166). Aurel

Codoban thinks that the shift from the textual communication containing cognitive information to the iconic discourse consisting of images was generated by the psychoanalysis' advent and by the technological development. The balance between the text whose function is to persuade and the image whose role is to seduce and manipulate was altered for good, thus making "the shift from knowledge to the show, and the shift from a textual ideology that claims the utterance to the ostensive ideology that simply shows what it actually has to say" (Codoban 2011, 82).

In a former approach to magic, the article *Eros, Magic and the Manipulation of the Masses / Eros, Magic et manipulation des masses* published in *3 Millenaire* 18 in 1985 examines the history of magic, as well as the evolution and the mutation this ancient science went through starting with the Renaissance censorship, surviving it and then being transferred to the field of sociology, advertising and modern technology. In Culianu's view, Giordano Bruno has the merit to have created an "unique synthesis" of theories about magic, Eros and mnemonics built on the pneumatology phenomenology. *De vinculis in genere* was handwritten by Bruno just before being arrested and was rediscovered at the end of the nineteenth century. Within this thesis, the origins of psycho-sociology and psychology can be traced proving amazing "bold thinking" considers Ioan Petru Culianu. Giordano Bruno's magician knows that religion is a vast operation designed to manipulate the masses exerted through effective techniques for planned beliefs and behaviors. The phantasms operator designed by Giordano Bruno is a specialist in medicine, a prophet, and a magician, functioning in modern times as analyst, public relations specialist, marketing and advertising agent, social scientist, intelligence specialist, auditors, IT specialist, and cryptographer. These contemporary professionals are an extension of Giordano Bruno "manipulator" disguised in technical and legal form. Ioan Petru Culianu argued that it would be an error to think that the magic was eradicated by the modern science, as the radio and TV communication, air transport, IT technology and electricity are actually the former supernatural objectives of magic: "to produce light, to move instantaneously from one point in space to another, to communicate with faraway regions of space, to fly through the air, and to have an infallible memory at one's disposal" because technology is democratic magic (Couliano 1987, 19104). As regarding the human interrelations, this fully transferred into the fields of psychology and sociology which theoretically target to create a cohesive society, governable and ideologically evenly shaped. Ioan Petru Culianu's conclusion is that Giordano Bruno's Great Manipulator is now the state authority with its institutions and power instruments at its disposal to create a homogeneous society.

Culianu interprets the religion as a powerful tool, view shared in the article titled *Religion as an Instrument of Power / La religione come strumento del potere e mezzo di liberazione in ambito non-cristiano* published in the journal *Verifiche* IV in 1975. In this study, the reader can trace the roots of the ideas analyzed in *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance* volume where Culianu describes religious phenomena as a type of "collective hypnosis" instrumented by a religious leader considered a "transcendent instrument" which mobilizes a group of followers based on a set of altruistic rules (Couliano 1987, 108). The author aims to show to what extent religion can become an instrument to exert political and administrative power and to identify the techniques that facilitate the power control in the

religious context. Culianu explains that religion as a symbolic model precedes the effect of mass psychology through the mass opinion effect and that the power techniques are essentially psychological techniques. The analyst demonstrates how religious redemption techniques can be turned into efficient techniques to exert power. Among the religious techniques, Ioan Petru Culianu analyzes the confession technique, process by which any faults are transferred to a deity representative, who gets a psychological authority over the person making the confession. The initiation techniques use methods of manipulation of consciences in order to accomplish individual's integration within the community and to ensure its stability. The initiation is fulfilled through special knowledge transfer by being subjected to a series of difficult trials. Initiation takes place in two different stages: the common initiation related to age or competence, and the individual initiation. Generally, the initiatory scenario consists of the death and the resurrection sequence, dormant in the human psychic structure, emerging in the onirical life of modern man and woman. Culianu explains that in the shamanic initiation, the future shaman is exposed to very difficult conditions in isolation, physical and mental suffering imposed which causes mental imbalance and even neurosis while the military initiation involves the transformation of the individual into an instrument and "the magical and ritual identification with a voracious and powerful animal, the wolf or the bear". During the process of initiation into the secrets of religious power, the neophyte is instructed to be infallible and immune to the desires and vices caused by ignorance.

Somehow convergent to Culianu's view, in the study titled *Symbolic Communication. Advertising Discourse Architecture*, Vasile Sebastian Dancu defines the advertising image as an "intentionally and unintentionally multiply coded construction being decoded into an interactive, multi-layered process of interpretation" (Dancu 2009, 213). In his opinion, modern human imagination the advertising usually appeals to is structured by collective unconscious archetypal images. This "archetypal advertising registry" consists of multiple combinations of the four basic elements in the environment: water, air, earth and fire. Sacred religious dimension is present in advertising imagery with mythical valence to restore mental balance by their inherent sedative power to counteract the anguish caused by the disturbing daily news structured in a kind of media apocalyptic discourse. Here, the religious faith is described as a perception phenomenon processed by human mind according to the mental schemes and the frames of reference theory. In *The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary*, Gilbert Durand highlights the importance of religion in the human imagination pattern, religion being an essential element in "the imaginary heritage of mankind" (Durand 1977, 29) thus marking it as an important psychological and cultural threshold.

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