

THE ROLE OF ALTERITY AND OF THE DIGITAL MEDIA IN OUTLINING OF THE POSTMODERN INDIVIDUAL'S IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT. The Role of Alterity and of the Digital Media in Outlining of the Postmodern Individual's Identity. The postmodern individual forms his identity, his self-image and self-perception not only through self-reflection or through reference to his own convictions, his own system of values and principles. The construction of the self-image is dependent upon social recognition and on the messages transmitted from the other, during the interaction between them. The relevance of the other for the process of defining one's self-identity leads ultimately to dependence on mass-media, which offers to "gratuitously" help the individual in obtaining the social recognition that he aspires to, by constituting and reinventing himself in such a manner as to distinguish himself through superiority from the masses. Such dependence on mass-media leads to the alienation of the individual from his self, to his forming a subservient relationship towards trendy cultural models, opinion leaders or group opinions, dispensing with the individual's autonomy and capacity of critical reflection on the information he is presented with.

Keywords: *community of comparing finitude, identity, alterity, media culture, alienation*

Introduction

The postmodern individual forms his identity, his self-image and self-perception not only through self-reflection or through reference to his own convictions, his own system of values and principles. The construction of the self-image is dependent upon social recognition and on the messages transmitted from the other, either verbally or non-verbally, during the interaction between them. Social recognition, the admiration and envy that others may manifest towards an individual, is a source of feelings of self-contentment, of fulfilment, understood as a confirmation of the human value of the individual. The relevance of the other for the process of defining one's self-identity leads ultimately to dependence on mass-media, which offers to "gratuitously" help the individual in obtaining the social recognition that he aspires to, by constituting and reinventing himself in such a manner as to distinguish himself through superiority from

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the masses, in relationship with a catalogue of advertising images and famous personages (celebrities) depicted in them, as desirable models to follow. Consumer goods become the mark of the personal identity of the individual, the act of consuming as such being considered the sole criterion of individual and social worth, of distinction, of the affirmation and presentation of a proper identity, exposed as sign of prestige.

Such dependence on the others and on mass-media as a medium of reference leads to the alienation of the individual from his self, to his forming a subservient relationship towards trendy cultural models, opinion leaders or group opinions, dispensing with the individual's autonomy and capacity of critical reflection on the information he is presented with. The TV screen becomes the optical apparatus determining his vision of the world and of his own self. The function of the individual is relocated to that of a consumer of images, goods and services that pre-determine his understanding of the environment, promising a make-believe world in conformity with his desires, a world of wish-fulfilment. Without such an intersection of the real with the imaginary realm of desire, the advertising images would lose their significant effect on the individual.

I. The vision of Jean-Luc Nancy on community and on the existence and status of the individuals in its frame

The postmodern vision on the community, presented by the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy in his work *The Inoperative Community*, is focused on understanding it as *a community of co-appearing, or comparing (com-parait), of finitude and of alterity*. A *community of comparing finitude* is made of singular beings leading a finite existence, that share between themselves through communication and comparing, that expose outwardly their singularities and, through the interplay of the articulations of their singularities, together establish reference to a totality considered as a common purpose: the community as unity of articulate singular beings – the only place that makes possible their existence as co-existence.

Articulation is the act of joining together of different/distinct singular beings in the totality represented by dialogue, a bilateral interactive communication process, based on reciprocal vision and perspective exchange, through which the singular being's exposure towards the exterior takes place, its exposure towards other singular beings. Being exposed to the other signifies situating oneself on the limit where the interior (the proper vision of the individual) is intersecting the exterior (the other's vision), being neither pure interior, nor pure exterior, but an interior-exterior (a synthesis between them), that defines the existential situation of the singular being as being together with the other, as being in the other, as being in exposure. This is, in fact, the singular logic of an interior-exterior, something that is neither pure interiority, nor pure exteriority, a logic of the limit, in which something belongs simultaneously to everyone and no one.¹ The exposure towards

¹ "Being together (and the possibility of saying »we«) has its place there where the interior, as interior, becomes exterior without the formation of a common »interior«." Nancy (2005), 138.

the exterior has as its fundamental end the realization of consensus between the communicational agents.

The basis of the community is communication, the bilateral, comprehensive and active dialogue processes between individuals. This is defined as the event of being with the other, of living in community (being-in-the-world) together with the others, the communion of singular finite beings that expose themselves constantly to their community, that depend on the existence of the other singular beings, and that recognize themselves as subjects only through their reciprocal rapport, as relation to another different from the self. Thus, community may be understood as the community of individuals that participate in their alterity. Finitude implies co-existence (being with the others), a necessary and permanent rapport to the others, living besides the other, the living together of a plurality of individuals that compare, that are distinct one from the other. The order of comparing consists in the appearance of a "between" among me and the other, through which the other and I (the fact of being between us) demonstrate that I am always another for the other, as well as that the other is another for me (there are no identical beings, since every being is different from another).² Communication is the operation of sharing that comes before all singular experiences and renders possible the instauration of an "together with" (as the essence of being) between me and the other, as an intermediary operator between us, that enables the interaction, the comprehensive act of communication and the possibility of consensus.

Comparing is understood by Nancy as the act of sharing to the others that what the individual is as human being (mode of thought, values, principles, vision) through his participation in society. Through such sharing, the community acquires dynamism. In it, the singular finite beings interact between themselves, aiming towards building consensus, acquire access to the fact of being-in-common, have access to the other, becoming open towards it, accepting diversity as a source of plus-knowledge that enriches the community and the self, instead of a communicational obstacle. In this sense, community may be considered as a process of building connections, links and relationships between the human beings that co-exist inside its frame.

The individual recognizes himself as subject only insofar he can say "we". Thus, individual existence becomes possible only through its relationship with the existence of the others, as co-existence. The possibility of saying "we" implies being-in-common, presenting and representing ourselves as a community. Community may be understood as participation in existence, meaning the fact of being exposed to ourselves as heterogeneousness, and to be exposed to our becoming as singular finite beings.

The community, in Nancy's vision, is not considered as a common being that would constitute the basis of being together, as a unified collectivity with a substantial

² "Being-in-common means that singular beings are not, do not present themselves, do not appear, only insofar they compare, are exposed, presented or offered one to the other. This comparison is not added unto their beings, their being itself can come into being only through it." Nancy (2005), 85.

principle of unification, but as an existence-in-common of diverse, singular human beings, that live with each other (*being together; dwelling together in the world*) in such a way that the existence of a finite human being is dependent upon the existence of the human beings around it, without implying their unification in a substantial collectivity (hence: *being singular plural*). This impossibility of the unification of the individuals in a complete totality should be considered as being a strength, inasmuch it renders possible the diversity and richness of sharing. Lacking such diversity, the individuals would lose their own identity and specificity, their own self-worth as irreplaceable human beings, being dissolved in the identity of the community, renouncing to think on their own, and adhering completely, losing themselves in the perspective and vision imposed by the community. Being-in-common cannot be reified, it does not represent a thing on which common ownership could be claimed. It cannot be understood as communion or common propriety to which all individuals of the community may claim access and right of use. The fact of being-in-common, of being together with the others, is not something added to the fact of being a self, or the fact of being alone. The words “with”, “in-common”, “together” do not signify being one in place of the others, because finite being cannot subsist by itself, since it cannot claim to be absolute being. The finite being needs the existence of the others and of communication, dialogue, with them. The finitude of the human being implies the fact of being with the others, as being in their exterior, of being exposed to them and of comparing.

The individual human being is communicative, dialogical, relational, and therefore distinct from its peers. Its existence can be guaranteed only in the frame of a community, only as co-existence, through living in the common with its peers and interacting with them. The morality of each member of the community (of the singular beings with finite existence that expose their singularity towards exterior), as well as the respect owed to the other as human being first, then as fellow citizen, guarantee co-existence, common co-belonging, as well as the sharing of this common – through bilateral, transparent and comprehensive dialogue whose finality consists in the realization of a consensus between the involved parts, that debate different points of view, different visions, different ideas pertaining to an event, a situation, a problem with which they find themselves confronted with. Such bilateral dialogue implies situating oneself on a position of openness towards the other, the acknowledgement and understanding of what the other communicates in his quality of communicative actor. In order that the dialog between individuals should not become a monologue only effective in strengthening the persuasion of its emitter, its starting point should be the acceptance of cultural diversity (the model of community proposed by Nancy is one of difference, of alterity) as beneficial both to the community and to the individual, as a chance to widen one’s worldview, a chance to learn from the other, instead of being considered as a communicational barrier or an obstruction to common cohabitation. To accept cultural diversity includes accepting the fundamental rights and freedoms which every human being should enjoy, while also accepting that reaching perfect coincidence,

perfect identity between different individuals is impossible. To accept that individuality rests on difference means accepting the fundamental fact of the presence of alterity, to relate to the other as such, as to someone different from the self, while understanding this alterity as beneficial to the self and to the community in which he lives, in other words to the singular beings that live in-common with each other inside the community that guarantee their existence.

II. The role played by the other in the self-perception of the individual

A similar vision on the community, the status of the individual and the relationship of the individual with the other members of the community, as that of Jean-Luc Nancy, may be found in the theories of Hubert Hermans and George Herbert Mead. These theories are focused on the relationship between individuals and the mode in which the transmitted messages influence the individual's perception of the self and the world. The self is considered as formed by two components, two voices: the "I" (the proper self of the individual, the self-as-knower, the knowing subject that interprets and organizes subjectively his lived experience) and the "me" (the social self, comprised of a set of attitudes belonging to and assumed by the peers with whom the individual interacts).

a) Hubert Hermans, in *Voicing the Self. From Information Processing to Dialogical Interchange*, argues for the importance of communication, of interaction between individuals, in the formation of self-image, of how the individual ends of perceiving himself. The self is considered as dialogical, relational, open towards the other, inclined towards continual improvement, dynamic and capable of adopting multiple positioning. The self is permanently in relationship with the world, with the other individuals around itself, with whom it entertains comprehensive dialogical relations, aiming for consensus as the common aim of the communicational partners. Insofar as the individual lives besides his peers in a community, co-existing in common with them (as Jean-Luc Nancy considers), his existence and self-perception depend on the interaction with his other, on the message transmitted by the other, or more exactly on the influence of the other's position with regard to the self. The other's attitude and position with regard to the individual influences from the exterior the internal dynamics of the self, having a signifying impact on personal self-perception and self-conduct. During dialogue with another, the individual will take hypothetically as his own the other's attitude and position, even if is contrary to his own, in order to assess the other's view. The characterizing distinctiveness of the self is derived from the fact that there are no identical individuals, each one having his own voice, his own perspective on the different situations he encounters, living in his own world of significations, and consequently being irreducible to the others. In other words, Hermans confirms Nancy's theory on the community, maintaining that each individual is distinct from the others,

each being the author of his own narrative, all the eventual resemblances being considered as accidental, contingent. Taking over the other's attitude during the dialogue implies its internalization. As such, the other's point of view becomes a part of the self, like an interior voice, beside the individual's own one. Since both these voices (the own one and the one just internalized) are in the interior, they allow the instauration of an internal self-dialogue, an imaginary dialogue between the internal interlocutors with their contradictory views on the respective topic. Being analysed by the subject, this internal dialogue will influence his internal thought dynamics, leading to the formation of a certain vision on the debated topic, but also of how the individual perceives himself.

b) George Herbert Mead, in *Mind, Self and Society*, emphasizes the role played by the other in forming the personal self-perception, taking as his starting point the analysis of how the self operates within the community or social group to which he belongs. The community and social processes determine a specific type of individual behaviour by influencing the formation of a certain self-image of the individual. The self exists as such only by being relational, only through its direct dialogical interaction with the others and only if one is part of a community or a social group. The formation of the self is dependent on the others opinions on it, forming its self-image through identification with the social group to which one belongs (defined as the other, or as a generalized other). Self- knowledge implies the internalization in one's own direct experience of the attitudes and views of the whole social group to which the individual belongs, with regard to the common activities undertaken, to the relationships of cooperation that take place between the members of the group and that are realized in the framework of society. Inside each social group there are rules that establish the attributes and roles of each member, and that also determine the commonly shared purpose of the group. In order that this purpose be realized, and also to help prevent the apparition of inadequate behaviour, it is necessary that the individual, as member of that group, adheres to its values, principles and rules, and internalizes them in his own direct experience, relating them to the concrete situations where they are applicable. The process of internalization presupposes the inclusion of these elements into the structure of the self, as its own voices (similarly as in the theory of Hermans), thus becoming effective influences over the social and group behaviour of the individual. Relating to one's social group actually implies relating to the opinions of the other members, which will become constitutive elements in the construction of one's self-image. The individual recognizes himself and builds his self-identity through assuming the value system, the principles and norms of the social group to which he belongs, together with the roles occupied by the other individuals. Assuming the other's role, placing oneself in the role of the other and analysing the situation from the resulting perspective constitutes the first form of objectivation available to the self and is essential for the realization of the self. During the process of critical and objective reflection on a problem or situation, the self undertakes an inner dialogue, communicating with himself as if he communicated directly with the others.

III. The role of media culture and of consumerism in forming the identity of the individual

Postmodern society may be defined as a communication and information-centric society, dominated by the processes of media culture. Media culture is eminently communicational, a culture of the image, a culture that bets on the determining power of the image on the mode in which the postmodern individual perceives himself and on the way in which his identity is constructed. In this type of culture, the identity of the individual is no longer a given, as it was in traditional societies, in which the individual, as member of a stable social group, had a prescribed identity, defined by his birth or marriage and tailored in accord with the system of values, principles and norms of the social group of belonging, with the social role he had to play inside it, and recognized through signs such as the type of clothing donned as symbol of belonging to the respective social group. In postmodern society, identity becomes unstable,³ fluid, subject to permanent change/renewal/reinventing following the individual desires. Identity is defined as a construct of the individual, pertaining to his choice of a certain social behaviour, a certain style, image or appearance under which he presents himself to society and in function of which he will be judged by it.⁴

Thus, individual identity is formed partly in relationship with the others, based on their opinions on him, and partly through recourse to the various blueprints promoted through media imagery and the values and principles dominant in postmodern society as a whole or at the level of the respective social group. Inside these social groups, the individual assumes a personalized set of values, principles, attitudes and viewpoints and becomes aware of his difference from those outside his group, this leading to his desire to manifest these differences through his actions.

The role the church, school and family played in the past as instances accredited to establish an adequate system of universally valid values is taken over in postmodernity by mass-media. Now it is it that provides the criteria of what it means to be good or evil, moral or immoral, successful or not, an ideal spouse. Mass-media has taken seriously its self-proclaimed title of arbiter of taste, values, successful ideas, offering to the individual that is willing to affirm himself a large set of varied identity models with which to identify with in order to be in step with the tendencies of fashion and thus to be a successful human being.⁵

³ The identity of postmodern individuals is "unstable, fluid, fragmented, lacking unity, multiple, open and subject to dramatic transformations". Keller (2001), 289.

⁴ "Building a stable identity represents an effort that requires will, action, engagement, intelligence and creativity, and these qualities are lacking to many of the postmodern identities; Such postmodern identities are only a little more than a game, a pose, a guise which may be renounced even the next day in favor of a new guise and image, identities that get thrown away when they become worn-out, easily replaceable identities fit for the postmodern carnival." Kellner (2001), 307.

⁵ "The images and media celebrities come to replace family, school, church, in their quality of arbiters of taste, value and ideas, proposing new models of identification and producing resonating images of style, fashion and behavior." Kellner (2001), 29.

The individual has the possibility of permanently changing his self and his identity, he can even hold multiple and plural identities.⁶ This is why it cannot be said that identity is vanishing in postmodern society. In effect, now we are facing a permanent reconstruction and re-defining of identity. The individual is encouraged to be receptive to what mass-media transmits towards him, to take into account the various models of ideal identities that are being presented, to be flexible, to reinvent himself permanently, this implying a permanent process of testing by himself the multiplicity of various identities that are being presented to him.

In consequence, we can safely affirm that media culture, besides influencing the construction of the individual's identity and the way in which he perceives himself, also bears upon his social behaviour, his mode of thought, his worldview, and on the dominant values of postmodern society. The effects of digital media on individual self-perception, on the mode in which the individual forms his self-image and his identity through recourse to the messages transmitted through advertising imagery are evidenced in the two theories on consumerism elaborated by Jean Baudrillard, in *The Consumer Society. Myths and Structures*, and respectively by Gilles Lipovetsky in *The Paradoxical Happiness. Essay on Hyperconsumption Society*. It must be specified from the beginning that the individual as consumer appears on a background of an increase in the quality of living conditions, of an unconditional individual access to goods, without regard to his social class, and of individual autonomy, freedom and equality, promoted as fundamental values of humankind. Nevertheless, this equality between individuals with regard to their access to consumer goods is a false equality, because it masks the existence of a discriminatory system, one that has taken a new guise. It is a discrimination centred on purchasing power and on the type of goods that are being purchased. The individual will be judged, catalogued in function of the value of the product he is buying. The equality promoted by consumerist ideology is not absolute equality, referring exclusively to equality with regard to the principle of satisfaction of the requests for absolute happiness, promised by the consumer goods glorified through their excessive publicity.⁷

Consumption in postmodern society is seen, both by Baudrillard and Lipovetsky, as sole criterion of individual and social worth, of distinction and affirmation of the proper identity of an individual. The desire that seduces and determines the individual's alienation and his integration into the world of consumerism is desire of social recognition and of

⁶ "Identity becomes in contemporaneity a freely assumed game, a theatrical presentation of the self, in which the individual may present himself to the others in a variety of roles, images and activities, without having to preoccupy himself with the rapidity of these transformations or dramatic changes. And yet, exactly this condition of multiplicity of options has represented the main problem of the modern self, leading him to a state of anxiety and a crisis of identity. For the postmodern self such anxiety disappears, being replaced by a plunging into a multitude of fragments and euphoric experiences, and frequent changes of identity and image." Kellner (2001), 292.

⁷ "All people are equal with regard to need and in front of the principle of satisfaction, because all people are equal with regard to the use value of objects and goods (although they are unequal and divided with regard to exchange value)." Baudrillard (2008), 63.

confirming his quality and value as human being. Social recognition from the part of his peers offers the individual member of the community the possibility of distinguishing himself from the others through a perceived superiority acknowledged through the others' admiration. The individual doesn't perceive himself any more exclusively through his own point of view, he is no longer completely autonomous in defining his self-image, renouncing to reflect critically on himself and his environment. His self-perception and his degree of self-contentment are dependent on the opinions of the others. The individual's dependence on others in defining his self-image is at work also in his reliance and dependence on mass-media as a reference media that promises a recipe for acceding to social recognition: the individual just has to follow the models provided by it. In consequence, the postmodern individual defines and recognizes himself, or, in other words, constructs his identity, not only through unmediated recourse to the people around him, but also, and increasingly so with the advances of the communications technologies, through the influence of the messages transmitted, directly or indirectly, through the media, including the messages of advertising images.

The individual's dependence on mass-media in the formation of his identity generates his privation and alienation from establishing his own point of view on himself. He does not look in the mirror anymore, meaning that he does not perceive himself exclusively by relating to his own beliefs, conceptions and system of values (on the contrary, his essence and determinations are fluid, ever-changing). He is dehumanized and transformed from a rational subject into an object customized by the specifications of the market. The role of the mirror is taken over by the glittering shop window. The shop window represents the perfect, ideal projection towards which to tend, always the missing piece from the puzzle of the self-image to the realization of which he aspires, offering him a diversity of identity models from which to choose from and through which to reinvent and redefine himself in his quest for desirable social recognition, self-fulfilment and access to the promised happily-ever-after, thereby integrating the subject in the world of consumption. Publicity sells lifestyles and varied desirable identity-models, as modes of compensating for and filling the gap left open by the death of the autonomous subject. The individual, seduced initially by his desire of pleasing the other, of being admired in order to feel good in his own body, ends up by identifying with the character from the advertising image, wanting to be as it is, taking over its attitudes. This is how the postmodern individual in our consumer society forms his self-image.⁸

The thesis of the self-alienation of the individual effected through the influence of mass-media in his life is also upheld by Marshall McLuhan. He states that the electric processes— meaning the emergence of electric media, formed from cold means of transmitting information (telephone, television) that allow an active sensorial participation from the consumer, and respectively hot means (radio, cinema, photography) that, being

⁸ "Media culture does not tend to build something akin to a subject and neither to interpellate individuals in order that they perceive themselves as subjects, but to build identities and positions of the subject, inviting the individuals to identify with certain very specific figures or positions, like the Marlboro man, the Virginia Slims woman, the mother from soap operas or Madonna." Kellner (2001), 306.

highly charged with information, require a lower participation from the user – has a negative effect on the individual, who becomes alienated from himself, transformed into a “nobody desperately seeking his own identity”.⁹ In virtue of this observation, McLuhan argues that the analysis of consumption should be based on the formula that “the medium is the message”, that the means/medium of transmitting information, and not the content being transmitted, is the essence of the message. This implies that the medium of the message, irrespective of the content, has impact on the individual, determining how he relates to the world and to himself. For this reason, McLuhan considers the medium to be “the agent that provokes brainwashing”.¹⁰ This theory provides support for arguing about a deepening tendency of the process of self-alienation of the individual in postmodern society. Mass-media provides to the individual already structured and pre-interpreted information (pseudo-events). Direct personal experience and critical reflection are no longer necessary for the comprehension of the transmitted messages, the only duties of the individual consumer being to be obedient and tuned in, to accept and to trust all that he is presented with. Only under this conditions, the pseudo-event – the reality of which is already cut out, altered and pre-interpreted – receiving credibility from the consumers, becomes legitimized, and transformed into a real event.

Being absorbed by the way he is perceived by others, the postmodern individual becomes a consumer. His choice of acquisitions is no longer made with regard to the utility of the goods, their use value, but with regard to the logic of consumption (that determines him to pass up no occasion for spoiling himself, to deny himself no pleasure that the advertising industry offers). He will choose to buy any object that he is promised that it will make his life more beautiful, that promises a quick shortcut to happiness, and that constitutes a sign of prestige and of an elevated status with regard to his peers. The use function of consumer goods is replaced by their function of signs in a realm of signs (they become signs of prestige, of differentiation, of abundance, of plenty). Exchange value may be considered the paradigm of the signifying function of the objects that had become consumer goods, to be exchanged through the medium of the market, and which the individual may acquire here and now, without effort and through any means possible. In other words, it is not a real need that awakens in the individual the awareness of the need to possess the respective object.

What triggers the act of consumption is the advertising message, given credibility due to its highlighting of the distinction that the consumption of that product is supposed to provide.¹¹ The bought good represents the mark of individual identity, of taste, of a distinction through superiority with regard to others. This is an alteration of the formerly

⁹ McLuhan (2006), 10.

¹⁰ McLuhan (2006), 324.

¹¹ The principle of the social logic of consumption is: “we never consume the object in itself (its use value) – we always manipulate objects (in the widest sense possible) as signs that distinguish us either by marking our belonging to the group we consider as the ideal reference, or by delineating us from our proper group of reference by referring ourselves to a group with superior status.” Baudrillard (2008), 76.

direct relationship of the individual with his peers. Now this relationship has become mediated by consumer goods and legitimized or compensated by the gain perceived to be received following the act of acquisition. The effectiveness of the brand of the product, the sign par excellence of prestige, is directly proportional to its fame, constructed through media publicity. This publicity becomes a guarantee of the quality of the good, and clear proof in front of the others of the individual's integration in society, his adaptability to the dominant trends, his ability to keep up with fashion, with the rhythm of consumption and of youth. The advertised objects are defined as products having been specially designed with regards to the needs of every individual consumer in part, by teams of professional experts, who address themselves to the consumer using a familiar language, suggesting closeness and the impression of an authentic care that the industry of consumerism has towards every individual consumer.¹² Since what is in play is prestige and social recognition, the postmodern individual will take great care in choosing the most appropriate product.¹³

Our self-image, the mode in which we perceive, interpret and present ourselves, is our calling card, in function of which we are judged by the others, since it determines how we are perceived by them. The body becomes the sign par excellence of prestige, the mark of our identity, the image that defines us. Thus it is eulogized, transformed into a consumer good, in a profitable enterprise. Beauty and success are presented as intimately linked and available to anyone, depending only on the postmodern individual to reach them, by acquiring the hyper functional products that are being sold.

These products, marketed as little pills of instant happiness, are constantly improved upon, under the narrative of an ideology of constant progress, each new generation of products being better than the previous, where the newest one is the best of the series. Internalizing this ideology, the individual becomes an addicted consumer, whose induced pleasures, prescribed in the name of profit, will never attain complete satisfaction, being permanently deferred, existing only as promises.¹⁴ A process of sacralisation of the body as

¹² "The objects do not serve for something; primarily they serve you. Without this direct complement, without a personalized »you«, without this total ideology of personal performance, consumption would not be what it is: the warmth of reward, of personal comfort that gives its meaning is more than pure and simple satisfaction." Baudrillard (2008), 25.

¹³ "The modern man of quality is exigent. He does not allow himself any omission. He doesn't neglect any detail. He is »select«, but not passively or through a natural grace, but through the exercise of a certain selectiveness. (That this selectiveness is orchestrated by others and not by himself is another matter.) It is not possible for him to be half-hearted or complacent, he must distinguish himself. To know how to choose without being wrong is equivalent here with the military and puritan virtues: intransigence, decision, virtue." Baudrillard (2008), 23.

¹⁴ "The industry always deceives its consumers in what it permanently promises them. The circle of pleasure promised by the action and its packaging is constantly deferred: the malicious promise to what everything is reduced to means nothing else than that it will never be fulfilled – it is as if the client of a restaurant could be expected to become satiated by just reading the menu." Adorno (2012), 161. "The principle imposes that he be presented with all the needs that theoretically the cultural industry could satisfy him, but simultaneously that the respective needs be in such a way previously arranged that through their mean he would not perceive himself otherwise than as an eternal consumer, as an object of the cultural industry." Adorno (2012), 163.

an exponential value and as a narcissistic cult object occurs here.¹⁵ The ends aimed at by “the little adjustments” realized by the so-called “surgeon-specialists in beauty” through esthetical surgeries legitimize the slogan of consumer ideology: “The body you dream of is your very own body.”

According to this slogan, the ideal body to which the individual aspires to is his very real and imperfect body, under the imperative condition that the body be modelled, perfected, made to fit into the requirements of the market. If it lacked a real basis in the intersection of the imaginary with the real, consumer ideology would have had no effect on the individual. For this very reason, this ideology takes as its starting point for its elaborations the real desire for social recognition of the individual with his imperfect body, promising the possibility of perfecting it. Aesthetic surgery is considered a means of quickly adjusting the individual to the model,¹⁶ but also a means in the struggle against getting old, extending the duration of the appearance of youth. A youthful appearance permits the individual to relive the feelings of a carefree youth, in his search for fulfilling emotions and sensations. Self-image becomes through consumption, as Douglas Kellner states in his work *Media Culture*, a magical image of a newer, more attractive, successful and prestigious self.

The care for the body, besides with the practice of shopping in hypermarkets and malls (the forefront representative institutions of the society of abundance) are considered marks of a lifestyle, a simultaneously ludic and therapeutic activity that helps increase the self-esteem and relaxes the individual after a hard day at work or even after professional failure. In other words, this form of therapeutic relaxation provides the individual an escape from the real, allowing him to forget for a moment his daily problems, his loneliness, the grind of daily routine, giving him access to an enchanted realm, where he may satisfy all his desires through acquisition of commercial goods. The act of consumption is to be defined in this case as a form of reward that the individual gives himself for his quality as human being. Such association between the ludic¹⁷ and the therapeutic in the act of consumption should be considered as symptom of the process of seduction that mass-media publicity directs towards the consumer’s unconscious. The consumer will consider himself as autonomous master of his own choices, capable of

¹⁵ “Beauty has become an absolute, religious imperative for women. Being beautiful is no longer just a natural imperative, a supplement added to the moral qualities. It is the fundamental quality of those that take care of their hair and silhouette as devoutly as of their soul.” Baudrillard (2008), 170.

¹⁶ “The body becomes, through an absolute reversal of signification, a threatening object that must be overseen, reduced, tortured for delicately-»aesthetical« purposes, with the sight trained upon the emaciated models from *Vogue*, in which we may decipher the reversed aggressiveness of an abundance society over its own triumph of the body, and the vehement rejection of its own principles.” Baudrillard (2008), 22.

¹⁷ “The ludic is what establishes, with increasing frequency, our relation with the object, persons, culture, entertainment, with our work sometimes and even with politics. The ludic becomes the dominant tonality of our daily habitus, exactly in the measure in which everything, objects, goods, relationships, services are becoming gadgets.” Baudrillard (2008), 25.

freely rejecting the proposals of mass-media publicity, while actually all the choices have already been made for him by the media, his individuality having been reduced by it to the status of an object that has to be personalized through consumption (as it has been already argued here). Under these conditions, the individual will consider that watching TV, having a relaxing massage or going shopping are not forms of alienation but pleasurable rewards of real freedom.

Conclusion

The media's effect upon the individual is filtered through his daily relationships, also already modified by consumerism, and hence also affected by the media. Consumerist practices express a new kind of relation of the individual with the others, and implicitly also with himself. This change of the type of relation implies a double alteration: the relation with the others becomes mediated through consumer objects and services, while the relation towards oneself is characterized through self-alienation, the colonization by the media of the individual's perspective over himself and over the world. The individual doesn't have to sign a Faustian deal with a Mephistopheles in order to obtain money or prestige, since these are offered with magnanimity by the society of abundance that asks only for the meagre price of self-alienation and loss of self in the abundance of goods that it provides. The individual is reified from an autonomous rational subject into an object determined by the logic of consumption, losing his authenticity, originality, naturalness, replaced by personalization through consumption, in order to obtain social recognition, self-knowledge and self-contentment, in order to feel good in his own skin.¹⁸ Playing on the fact that the individual no longer has sufficient time for himself, to look himself in the face, to reflect on his own self (the measure of his time being the productive time spent at the workplace, followed by the equally productive time spent in consuming good and services) the specialists of media publicity offer their services of "helping" the postmodern individual to relax and even to get to know his "true" self (which, of course, is the self that is being personalized through consumption).

In order for the individual to escape from his addiction to advertising images that present their series of varied identities of social desirability, and hence success, Kellner proposes the solution represented by critical media pedagogy (a critically oriented media

¹⁸ "Finding your personality and knowing how to affirm it means discovering the pleasure of truly being yourself. You don't need much for this. I have searched for a long time and have discovered that a slightly lighter nuance of my hair is sufficient to harmonize it perfectly with my skin tone, with my eyes. I have found this blondness in the line of Recital coloring shampoo! [...] With the so-natural Recital blondness I have not changed at all: I am more myself than I ever was." Baudrillard (2008), 20. "Ultra-Beauty guarantees you a silky, unitary and durable make-up, that will impart to your skin tone that natural shining you dream about!" Baudrillard (2008), 111.

alphabetization). This aims to empower the individual consumer to always make use of his capacity of critical objective reflection. When faced with messages transmitted through advertising images, he should analyse them critically and objectively, using as criterion the actual utility of the object, without letting himself be seduced by the pleasure, happiness or success that are implied to follow the acquisition of the respective product. The postmodern individual should be educated, his taste for quality and culture reawakened.¹⁹ The means of the mass-media should be used as instruments of education and social progress (media as instrument of social change) with reference to the purposefulness of critical media pedagogy.

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¹⁹ “The statement that we are modeled by what we see and hear is as true as that we are »modeled« by what we eat; as such, it is important that we persuade the individual that it is necessary for him to avoid poor quality media culture. This implies learning how to distinguish true good taste, how to cultivate the taste for superior-quality cultural products and also for alternative forms of culture, varying from poetry, literature, paintings to alternative music, film and television.” Kellner (2001), 392.