

Myth in the Communicative Space of Modern Culture

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Abstract—The article analyzes the process of constructing myth within the context of mass communication and the role played herein by traditional mass media. The semiological paradigm was chosen as the unified base of analysis. Myth is considered to be a universal element of social communication, reproduced at all historical stages; myth-making is regarded as the process of creating a mythological message or message system. The special role of the mass media in modern myth-making is based on their function of "doubling" the reality. The images and values of the constructed reality look hyper-real due to multiple repetitions, even in the case when they have no basis in the objective reality. The consumer of the mass media content has no distance from these images, which opens up the prospect of turning "history" into "nature", that is, the possibility of constructing mythological messages. The article argues that it is the mechanism of a mythological message emergence that serves as a clear basis for the classification of all sorts of mythologies. The task of clarifying the type of consciousness expressed in mythological messages receives a separate status and is therefore taken outside the limits of the article.

Keywords—myth; myth-making; mythological message; communication; mass media; connotation; semiology; sign; culture; constructed mythology; spontaneous mythology

I. INTRODUCTION

Myth is back in a new garb and with new features. This affirmation was repeated by many philosophers, culture scholars, anthropologists, psychologists and journalists at the end of the last century. However, in the grand scheme of things, myth has never left. Over millennia, it has changed its appearance but remained one of the most important forms of culture.

The emergence of post-industrial and then information society, initiated by the development of science and the coming of new ways to process and replicate information, has by no means led to a total rationalization of cultural and social life. The new century reproduces the old network of mythologies and creates new ones, which, like those in archaic societies, support the reproduction of social order and help humans in self-understanding. Myth is neither an "underdeveloped" form of culture nor a past stage in its development; it is constantly present in culture, being one of its foundations—the primary form of "constructing" the human reality itself and a stable element of social communication. Today, mythological components are found in art and religion, politics and science (in para-scientific and

quasi-scientific forms), and in the mass media space. The mythological "logic" works both in the sphere of thinking and in the sphere of action, regardless of whether the subjects of thinking and action are aware of it or not.

Myth and the mythological have been the subjects of rational understanding and rethinking throughout the history of philosophy. However, in the context of this article, we are interested in modern and contemporary research. In the 60s—70s of the 20th century, the interest in this topic was caused by the transformations of myth and mythology that occurred in the mass society. Myth-making became a part of manipulation techniques in politics, culture, mass media and advertising. In many respects, the specifics of the new research came to be the result of this very circumstance: for the most part, they it is of applicable nature. The contemporary stage in the study of myth can be dated back to approximately the second half of the 90s of the 20th century. These studies are related to the global spread of the Internet and the emergence of a new type of myth-making practices in this connection. The Internet combines personal, group and mass communication, being a mass medium, a global reference book, and an environment for socializing. The myth-making on the Web is a very interesting and, for obvious reasons, little-studied topic. It seems to us that it should be interpreted after analyzing the myth-making in the traditional mass media, since it generally develops following the same logic.

II. MYTH AS UNIVERSAL ELEMENT OF SOCIAL COMMUNICATION

We treat myth as a universal element of social communication, reproduced at all historical stages in the unity of its spontaneous and consciously constructed elements. Firstly, this approach states that myth is not an "underdeveloped", archaic, and therefore overcome form of culture. Secondly, it claims that myth manifests itself in social communication as one of its elements and does not exist outside of it. Thirdly, through the concept of communication, this approach fixates the connection between myth and language, attended to by researchers coming from various theoretical paradigms. Fourthly, this view of myth opens up the possibility to apply the methodological apparatus of the communication approach to the analysis of myth and myth-making, which, in turn, will help explain why the mass media play a leading role in the modern myth-making.

In research papers on the problems of myth and the mythological, there is often confusion associated with the use of the concepts of archaic and modern, natural and social mythologies. These pairs of concepts are regarded as oppositions. The basis of such an opposition is understandable in the case of modern and archaic mythologies [1], however, there is no clarity regarding the case of social and natural mythologies. As a rule, natural mythology is understood as arising spontaneously, and social mythology, often equated with political mythology, is seen as constructed. In some cases, they equate archaic and natural mythology, as well as social and modern mythology — without any specifying of clarifying whatsoever. Obviously, the meanings of these terms require clarification.

Spontaneous and constructed mythological complexes can be found both in archaic and modern times, although their proportion would be different. A single type of consciousness expresses itself in archaic, modern, natural or social mythology, whereas the difference lies in the mechanism behind the origin of the mythological message. In one case, the process is spontaneous, while in the other case, it is deliberate. Thus, firstly, it is possible to single out spontaneous mythologies, usually combined by researchers under the umbrella of “natural mythology”, which include a significant part of archaic mythology. Secondly, it is viable to distinguish consciously constructed mythologies, that is social and, in a narrower sense, political mythology, which also include a significant part of modern mythology. It should be noted that archaic mythology probably had constructed elements, and modern mythology is partially the result of a “natural”, or spontaneous, myth-making. In our opinion, it is the mechanism behind the emergence of a mythological message that serves as a clear basis for the classification of all sorts of mythologies. Meanwhile, the task of clarifying the type of consciousness, expressed in mythological messages, is viewed as a separate one. Its fulfilment will make it possible to isolate the actual mythological messages from the general corpus of connotative messages dominating the space of modern mass culture.

Thus, myth is a universal element of social communication. Communication is the subject of interdisciplinary analysis: there exist hundreds of its definitions and dozens of its theories. Communication is understood as public speaking, information transfer, socializing, dialogue, the creation of social reality, the transmission of meanings, the exteriorization of a person’s sensual abilities, etc. [2] However, we aim to analyze myth, not communication, which allows us to choose the concepts that will help achieve this specific goal out of the whole range of other goals. We also understand that this implies the necessity to focus on some features of communication while ignoring others.

It is theoretically acceptable to define communication as the process of creating, broadcasting and interpreting messages. A message is a kind of “atom” of communication, or a “unit” of presenting information that makes sense. Messages, both simple and complex, can be names, sentences, images, brands, memes, etc. Mythological

messages amount to of these types. Communication is a basic human activity; it is the interaction aimed at creating and transmitting messages that get interpreted and cause a certain reaction. In communication, people create and transmit meanings. In turn, the created worlds of meaning, if not form, then in many respects determine the consciousness and actions of people who participate in further communication. In the space of communication, both the creation of messages and their interpretation are connected to people’s actions. This space unites the participants of communication, their goals, values, rules of interaction, the messages proper and the means of communication. It exists as a feedback system, where each stage depends on the previous one and affects the next one.

We consider myth as an element of this space of communication. In this regard, myth-making is the constructing of a mythological message or a message system, which is one of the types of social communication. A mythological message, like any other message, is a collection of characters carrying information. In the case of a mythological message, this information deals with values, ways of seeing and experiencing the world and streamlining the social reality. A mythological message is aimed at the formation of some intention.

In this article, we analyze how myth is constructed in the domain of mass communication, what role is played by the media here, and why the media play this particular role. The semiological paradigm can be seen as an appropriate unified base for such an analysis. In particular, one can refer to the ideas of the French philosopher Roland Barthes [3]. On the one hand, they comprise a theory of the media and mass communication, since they deal with signs that distributed through the media. On the other hand, they present a theory of a modern, consciously constructed myth, which becomes a “tool” for the dissection of politics and management, advertising and fashion, daily routine and everyday life. In other words, the methodological framework used by Barthes allows us to simultaneously study modern myth and the role that the mass media play in its creation. In addition, we intend to use the idea that linguistic communication influences the image of cultural and social reality by creating symbolic worlds through communication, and people are at the same time shaped by the worlds they created themselves. While it would be an error to say that language can construct and determine any kind of reality, we have the right to argue that language communication influences our image of cultural and social reality. This point of view is shared by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann. We use the implications of his analysis of the mass media to solve our own problems.

The mechanism for constructing a myth (a mythological message) was analyzed by Roland Barthes in his book “Mythologies”. The French philosopher defines myth as a secondary semiological system, which is created through the “deformation” of the natural language. Myth is a word, and the main thing in a mythological message is its form, not its content. This constructed myth is discrete and does not form a narrative: it is a set of stereotypes and replicas. The task of myth, as stated by R. Barthes, is to justify the contradiction

and to disguise the social and historical (that is, the transient) as something natural, and therefore eternal and inevitable. This constructed myth turns history into nature and the existing social order of things into the natural and inevitable one. Myth does not explain anything, but its stating formulations create the appearance of explanation and clarity. This clarity is euphoric, says Barthes, while myth does not go beyond immediate visibility; “myth is a type of speech defined by its intention... much more than by its literal sense...; and that in spite of this, its intention is somehow frozen, purified, eternalized, made absent by this literal sense” [4].

The basis for the construction of myth is the natural language. Barthes states that the method of construction is deformation, which he analyzes in detail. A sign is the unity of the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the material form of the sign, i.e. the image perceived by man. The signified is the meaning (an object, a phenomenon, etc.), which is replaced by the sign and with which the sign is associated. The sign has a certain meaning. The signifier is an empty form. Myth is formed as a secondary sign system based on the primary system of the natural language. What was a meaningful sign in the original system becomes a signifier, i.e. an empty form, in myth. Barthes calls this signified “a concept”, however, this is not a logical concept. “Truth to tell, what is invested in the concept is less reality than a certain knowledge of reality... In actual fact, the knowledge contained in a mythical concept is confused, made of yielding, shapeless associations. One must firmly stress this open character of the concept; it is not at all an abstract, purified essence; it is a formless, unstable, nebulous condensation, whose unity and coherence are above all due to its function” [5]. Thus, it can be said that some vague ideas and perceptions that carry a strong emotional charge act as the signified in myth or a mythical “concept”.

The result of the association between the signified and the signifier in myth comes to be a new sign, and Barthes calls it a meaning, which does not seem to be an appropriate term in our opinion. Here we should rather talk about a symbol. The form of myth, i.e. the signifier, is not yet a symbol, but it is an undoubted, indisputable image, which forms a symbol in association with emotionally saturated, meaningful experiences.

By virtue of the mechanism behind its occurrence, a symbol, unlike a sign, does not have a clearly defined area of meanings (or the signified, as per Barthes), therefore, it is appropriate to speak of a symbol as of a sign with an infinite number of values. When the sign of the original sign system is transformed into the signifier in a myth, everything accidental is removed from it. However, the wealth of its meanings is not completely destroyed. Myth holds the meaning in its power. “The meaning will be for the form like an instantaneous reserve of history, a tamed richness, which it is possible to call and dismiss in a sort of rapid alternation: the form... must be able to hide there” [6]. The relation of the mythical signified to the signifier is that of deformation and alienation.

III. THE NATURE OF MYTHOLOGICAL MESSAGES

The weak point of Barthes' approach is the identification of all connotative systems in general with myth, which is interpreted too broadly and coincides with any semantic deformations of the natural language. Barthes' myth is omnipresent and inevitable; the whole modern culture is mythological. However, by turning myth into a totality, the French philosopher dissolves the very essence of myth in other cultural forms, and, as a result, loses the subject of his theorizing. The myth's predisposition to the connotative deformation is rooted in the natural language itself. Its expressivity and imagery, as long as the inability to express things in a strictly non-figurative manner, set the possibility for a discrepancy between the signified and the signifier. Only a language with zero degree of figurativeness could resist myth. In our opinion, by developing this statement, Barthes makes a mistake in his argumentation, namely, strengthening the premise. Natural language, in fact, does not provide the option to express something “non-figuratively”, as a minimal degree of figurativeness accompanies even strict scientific discourse. However, expressiveness and imagery should not be equated to the mythological, and any non-figurative thinking is not mythological thinking.

The fundamental limitation of the semiological approach lies in the identification of myth with any kind of connotations, and, consequently, in the impossibility to reveal the specifics of precisely mythological messages. It is possible to distinguish mythological messages from any other messages arising through the connotative “shift” by analyzing the type of consciousness that expresses itself in the myth. However, reviewing various philosophical approaches to the problems of mythological thinking, as well as comparing and analyzing them, is a large and separate research task that we take beyond the limits of this article.

Not only natural language words, but also other sign systems, such as photography, cinema, advertising, news, memes, etc., can bear a mythological message—even to a greater extent, since their expressiveness, inaccuracy of meanings and figurativeness are more pronounced. In modern era, in contrast to the archaic period, myth is frankly a side, albeit exceptionally important, product of cultural communications. As a rule, it is a subordinate element of a book, a film, a TV story, a photograph, messages in social media, and so on. The myth is “embedded” in communication practices, which might seem completely unrelated to myth-making and even opposed to it. One example of it is quasi-science [7]. This ability of modern myth is related to its discreteness, its being addressed to everyone at once and to no one individually, and its secondary nature. However, in spite of this secondary nature, modern myth is omnipresent in the sense that it permeates the entire space of mass communications, which is full of diverse variations of a limited set of mythemes and mythologemes.

Mythological messages are symbolic, imply something more than their obvious and immediate meaning, and have a broader unconscious aspect. The mechanism of their influence is based on the ability of characters to evoke

emotionally colored associations, to form perceptions and to push for certain actions. According to Barthes, the intention of myth lies in its signified, i.e. in the mythical concept. However, we should add that this intention can be realized only thanks to the symbol, i.e. the unity of the mythical signified and signifier. In myth, one signified may have many signifiers. Constructed myth is variable; it reproduces a limited number of the same ideas and schemes that can be borrowed from ancient mythologies, but their archaic nature is “masked” with the help of a variety of signifiers, i.e. forms. Ferdinand de Saussure, the creator of structural linguistics, insisted that there is no causal connection between the contents of the signified and that the form (image) of the signifier is arbitrary [8]. Barthes adheres to this tradition, but qualifies this interrelation differently, as quasi-arbitrary, suggesting that non-verbal signifiers can still have similarities with their signified. In other words, the form of a mythical concept is not random and arbitrary; it is chosen to actualize the archetype. The repeatability of fundamental mythological schemes, on the one hand, and the involuntary nature of mythological figurativeness, on the other, leaves us with the possibility of decoding and exposing the constructed myth.

IV. MASS MEDIA AS A TOOL FOR CONSTRUCTING MYTHOLOGICAL MESSAGES

A mythological message is not so much a means of communication or broadcasting information, as a tool of influence. It is addressed directly to emotions and the unconscious. The main goal of mythological messages is not to inform, but to motivate. The constructed mythological message is addressed to the public, the crowd, the audience, the mass, and so on, and not to an individual. That is, the agents (participants) of such communication are mass subjects, and its tool (means) is the mass media. The point that the media has a special, if not the key role in modern myth-making, has become commonplace, which creates the illusion of clarity and resolution of the problem. However, some questions remain.

What makes the media such an effective tool for constructing mythological messages? A preliminary answer may be as follows: the mass media have the ability to construct a symbolic reality, which may not have a basis in the surrounding objective reality, but, due to multiple repetition of images and meanings, is perceived as hyperreal, even more real than the objective world. The media are a relatively independent sphere of modern society; they are all public institutions that use technical means to disseminate publicly available messages. These include books, newspapers, magazines, radio, television, social networks, news aggregators, web channels, as well as the results of various kinds of photo and electronic copying. In other words, an exhibition, a performance, a concert, and so on, are not mass media in and of themselves, but their replication in photos, on CDs, on TV, via Internet channels, or in any other way, is already the media.

The main function of the mass media is to display a certain fragment of social reality and provide an individual with the opportunity to “own” this fragment. In order to get

to the bottom of things, the society must see the “essence” of them on the “stage” created by the media. In a sense, the only thing that is real for the modern man is what the mass media offer. They form the world of meanings and draw people into a common symbolic space through repeated messages. This space shapes the perceptions, attitudes and, ultimately, the actions of people. As a rule, we do not have the opportunity to participate in events in different parts of the world, but we know about them from the media. Due to multiple repetitions, the picture offered by the media, and the text that accompanies it, are perceived as the reality itself. The consumer of the mass media content has no distance from these images, which opens up the prospect of turning “history” into “nature”, that is, the possibility of constructing mythological messages.

The media actually exist in two realities. Firstly, the reality of mass media consists of their daily functioning, their own print operations, broadcasting, message distribution, communication and discussions related to all of the above. This reality is known to media professionals and is hidden from the audience for which the media work. Secondly, the mass media construct a reality that is different from themselves; it is this reality that is “seen”, “heard” and consumed by the audience, and it looks real thanks to the media. The mass media produce a “transcendental illusion”, says German sociologist N. Luhmann [9]. The more complex and differentiated the mass media system is, the more opportunities it has to create a “reality”, which is far from the world as it is in itself.

N. Luhmann believes that the media do not act toward the cognition of reality but create a kind of background knowledge on which any communication can be based. “Although the truth value or, at least, the expectation of the veracity of news and commentary are mandatory, the mass media are not guided by the true/false code, but—even in their cognitive program areas—obey the information/non-information code. For news and commentary, at least during the search for material... the exclusion of the untruth is not significant. Unlike scientific information, mass media information is not subjected to such reflection, in which... the untruth should be excluded even before it the truth is affirmed” [10]. Luhmann calls the background knowledge created by the media, the memory of society. This “memory” is comprised of some known assumptions about reality that need not be specifically introduced into communication and substantiated in it.

V. CONCLUSION

The mass media not only generate certain flows of information and content, but also control them. This management capability emerged thanks to the selectivity of their agenda. There are no such facts that could not be covered in the media, but only a select set of facts is highlighted; it becomes the agenda and exists regardless of the fact whether the outside world confirms its existence or not. The media label reality, actually creating something that will be considered interesting, and, consequently, true. The media does not directly impose what to think, but the news selection has an impact on what the audience will think.

Things that are presented as important in the media are perceived as truly important. The possibility of such a “reverse” influence on very different spheres of society is an essential feature of the media. The daily functioning of mass media creates a symbolic environment that, if not shapes, then at least affects the modern man. This influence escapes attention precisely because of the media’s commonness and ubiquity. Just as ancient myth used to actualize people’s experience, modern media-designed messages appeal to mass hopes, fears and fears. Not all of them are mythological in nature. However, the information created and broadcasted by the mass media is recognized as the information about reality, even though the facts selection mechanism has been discovered and analyzed. If we stretch it a bit, we might say that there is a rule that if the reality does not correspond to the media report, then the reality, and not the media, is to blame.

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