

EXPRESSIONS OF MAGIC IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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Abstract: This text starts from Ioan Petru Culianu's theses on the survival of magic, understood as a pre-modern spiritual discipline, in today's society. The emphasis is placed on magical (as described by Giordano Bruno) fantasies that can be found nowadays in public relations and communication, on the political scene, in the new media and in the cutting-edge technologies of today. The originality of the text consists in the interpretation of the Romanian presidential elections of 2014 as being, among other things, the perverse effect of a manipulation scenario that used fantasies of the "magical" kind. Another original element is the identification within state-of-the-art automotive technologies of certain human dreams and nostalgias that used to belong to the fabulous world of magic. The reference is to the GINA concept from the German group BMW and to two concepts (one from Mercedes and one from BMW) that allow "seeing" into the future and operation using only the owner's vocal commands. These are present-day "magical" actions: voice-based remote control, changing the appearance of the car and enhancing human sight by using automotive technology.

Key words: magic, fantasies, persuasion, manipulation, perverse effects, politics, technology

1. Magic is dead, long live magic!

Classical sociology and anthropology literature, be it of positivist or Marxist inspiration, support the idea of evolution and progress, including in the order of cultural and spiritual realities. According to this paradigm of thought, everything that is new is necessarily superior to what is old. Also in the order of spirit, we, modern people, are progressing. Today's religion has replaced yesterday's religion, and tomorrow's science will celebrate the extinction of all that was old and obsolete.

By referring to authors that were more subtle and more detached from the communist clichés (Mircea Eliade, Hans Peter Dueer, Ioan Petru Culianu, Michel Mafesolli etc.), we believe we can contradict and add nuance to the validity of the positivist and Marxist theories concerning spiritual progress. Today we can support the idea that old spiritual disciplines – magical healing, alchemy, astrology, classical magic – have survived in the modern world. According to Ioan Petru Culianu's theory, today, at the height of (post)modernity, magicians are not an extinct species. They are merely wearing

the mask of respected experts in human relations. "The magician is dealing today with public relations, with propaganda, with market prospecting, with sociologic inquiries, advertising, intelligence, counter-intelligence and disinformation, censorship, espionage operations and even cryptography, a science that, in the 16th century, was part of magic proper." (Culianu, 2013, p. 330).

Thus, much sought-after university specialisations of today's world disguise ancient magical desires under new, modern and secular clothes. The communication and public relations expert, for example, defeats space and time with the help of the *new media*. The Internet, Instagram, Facebook have updated the magician's dream of the past. It is no longer necessary to have techniques of *contagious* or *sympathetic* magic, both researched by James Frazer in a classical work of social and cultural anthropology, *The Golden Bough*. Seduction occurs directly, face to face, or via a medium, in the virtual space, with the help of modern communication technologies.

The modern magicians apply their persuasion and manipulation techniques, while still observing rules formulated by the classics of pre-modern spiritual disciplines (Giordano Bruno, Marcilio Ficino etc.). They are reflected, in essence, in the mediated *social action* of magic; in the *importance of fantasies* in the game of erotic or political manipulations; in the magicians' *total faith* in the success of their practices; in *the altruism of the magical manipulator* and in the relative easiness in manipulating *the masses* (rather than the individuals taken separately); in *the fate-related circle* of magical action and in the importance of *unseen beauty* in the erotic type of magical manipulation. Last, but not least, we are dealing with the paradoxical fate of the contemporary magician – his ability to achieve within himself that miraculous *coincidentia oppositorum* (Nicolaus Cusanus). (Gavriluță, 2000, pp. 91-94).

2. Magic in modern society

Rightfully, we believe we can argue today in favour of the existence of a genuine social destiny for magic. Drafting on Ioan Petru Culianu's thesis regarding the disguised survival of magical arts in the modern world, we offer a few examples for the troubling historical and cultural path followed by magic. Thus, the expressions of magic in today's world concern, above all else, *the contemporary archaic* (Marc Auge). It is the name given to certain instances of survival in the rural environment (and not only) of authentic, classical symbols, myths and rituals. Two well-documented examples are *molybdomantia* (divination using tin) and *the transfer of sickness from man to fowl*. Meanwhile, the Romanian media illustrate very well another face of contemporary magic, *the dissolution of magic into superstition*. One conclusive example is the broadcasting of *Baba Vanga's 11 rules for banishing bad luck*.

From our point of view, a noble and refined expression of magic has been the manipulation using fantasies. The idea is argued convincingly by Ioan Petru Culianu in his books. Based on his model of analysis and interpretation, we believe we can find examples to point out the current validity of his theory using relatively recent cases in politics and technology. The events that could be mentioned here concern the election, in 2014, of Klaus Iohannis as the president of Romania; the election, in 2016, of Donald Trump as the president of the United States of America; and the election of Igor Dodon as the president of the Republic of Moldova. Last, but not least, contemporary magic surprises again through its renewed public and ultra-publicised validity in the present, when it highlights the technologies of the future. We are dealing, among other things, with the dissimulation of human nostalgias and with the satisfaction of deep desires using futuristic technologies from the automotive domain.

3. The "magic" of Klaus Iohannis' election as the president of Romania

Social reality has proven that the principle of Greek medicine (also enunciated by Aristotle) regarding the precedence of fantasy over articulated language is still in operation. Dwelling upon the Romanian political scene, we illustrate the pre-eminence of fantasies over articulated language using the example of the presidential elections in Romania, in 2014 (Gavriliuță, 2015, pp.143-150). What is this about? About the relationship between images and words, above all. More precisely, over the campaign images shown by the TV channels favourable to the Social-Democrat Party (SDP), the broadcasters overlaid the propaganda discourse in favour of Mr Victor Ponta. Obviously, the entire pro-SDP propaganda discourse was virulently attacking his counter-candidate, Klaus Iohannis. The latter was stigmatised from every possible angle: *Nazi, anti-Christian cultists, incomplete human* etc. The precise insults referred to Klaus Iohannis' situation as a member of the Saxon ethnic minority of Romania, to the fact that he is a Lutheran and that he does not have children.

Meanwhile, the profoundly negative discourse directed at the liberal candidate did not have the support of an inner narrative of fantasies. More clearly put, it was not credible. Therefore, the Romanian voters were not convinced of its reality. Moreover, the SDP's election campaign broke one of the old principles of intersubjective magic subtly nuanced by Giordano Bruno in his book *De vinculis in genere*. In modern terms, it requires election propagandists and citizens alike to truly believe in the reality of the message being broadcast. On the contrary, "SDP's people" did not believe for a second the contents of the anti-SDP propaganda.

We can state that the SDP's entire propaganda activity in November 2014 was a failed political project aiming to manipulate a collective subject. Something truly spectacular happened: *the social sensitivity awakened, nurtured and amplified by the TV channels that were in favour of the SDP's ended up producing "perverse effects"*. Instead of garnering sympathy and enthusiasm, it produced adversity. The magical manipulation, did occur, but in reverse. The magical fantasies caught in the game of reversed manipulation turned instead on the SDP. We know, for instance, that not all the Romanians living abroad had wanted to vote. However, when provoked by the SDP's virulently negative discourse, those abroad urged their relatives in Romania to go out, vote and support Klaus Iohannis.

Continuing Ioan Petru Culianu's idea, we could argue that modern magic had a very important role in the campaign for the Romanian presidential elections of 2014. The magical devices used at the time were television, the Internet, Facebook, other social networks, text messages. Through their use, time and space were defeated. Communication and manipulation were achieved in an effective manner. The big difference was that the SDP's magic (television) was slower. The laptop, the mobile phone, Facebook and text messages made the difference in communication. People sprung into action. The political conviction was there – the mobilising discourse of the Romanian citizens living abroad worked much better when coupled with the images of the long waiting lines outside Romanian embassies. The magic of communication worked much better. A snowball effect was created, amplifying the emotional and frustration reaction of millions of Romanians in relation to the propaganda discourse of the Romanian Social-Democrat Party.

To conclude, the unlikely became likely. The miracle occurred. The magic worked. Klaus Iohannis won the presidential elections in November 2014, with the help of modern magic, through the professional manipulation of political fantasies and through the effective use of modern communication technologies.

4. GINA - BMW's "magician"

Modern politics is not the only social space in which modern magic is at work. State-of-the-art automotive technology is another illustration of magic in disguise. We shall use as an example the German car concept called GINA (GEOMETRY and FUNCTIONS IN N ADAPTIONS) BMW LIGHT VISIONARY – 2001-2010, which brings old magic back to life. What is this about? GINA works by "magic". It does not require being initiated in uttering magic formulae, instead, when a simple command is voiced, GINA "magically" changes appearance and shape, like an ancient magician. The magicians of old used to hide the tools of their trade (wands, swords, crystals, staffs etc.). Today, GINA the "magician"

hides and reveals her headlights upon hearing a simple command "GINA, blink". Another "magic formula" – "GINA, show us the oil" – the hood opens "as if my magic" and reveals the oil gauge.

The car's body is flexible, built on a metal structure. The secret consists in the fact that the car is covered in an impermeable and flexible fabric that can also withstand temperature variations. The car can "magically" change shape, no longer having the habitual bonnet, wheel arches and trunk. It can adapt both to a trip to the mall for shopping, and to a pleasure cruise. It all depends on the owner's will or whims. To conclude, such a future car concept, which will (probably) be mass-produced, causes us to have many dreams and nostalgias for old magic performed using revolutionary automotive technology.

5. The car that can "see" into the future

The next example of modern magic also comes from the auto industry. In 2015, at the CES in Las Vegas, the Mercedes people "magically" conquered distances. In other words, the Mercedes specialists presented a new car concept *that had no windows*. They were replaced by *touchscreens*, and thus the driver no longer steers the car, but instead controls it by touch. The touchscreens help one see much further than human sight would, through the classic windows. What is more, the sensors installed at the car's front and sides help to brake it progressively, thus preventing accidents. Thus, the car that "sees" can become a form of magic accessible to those with deep pockets.

6. BMW magic. "Magically" summoning the car from the parking lot

The third technical instance of modern magic also comes from the automotive industry. This is the BMW concept car that listens and responds to its user's commands. In the old tales, Prince Charming's enchanted horse would arrive presently, crossing seven seas, when summoned by its master. Today, the car – the postmodern "magic horse" – can drive itself out of the parking spot when summoned by its owner using a smartwatch. This car will follow you, avoiding obstacles, wherever you may be. Here is how another dream of classical magic – long-distance communication – becomes reality due to modern European auto technology.

7. Conclusions

We can rightfully talk nowadays about a veritable social destiny for magic. Magic is consubstantial to the human condition. The path taken by magic through time and history can be traced from ancient, pre-Christian rituals to the present-day incarnations of magical rituals. One socially dominant

instance is that of *the dissolution of magic into superstition*. A transition is made from "magic" to "gimmick", as Camelia Burghel would put it. Another noble and refined expression of magic is *the art of political manipulation by means of fantasies*. Last, but not least, contemporary magic surprises again through its renewed public and ultra-publicised validity. We are dealing, among other things, with the fulfilment of human dreams and the realisation of ancient magical projects with the help of futuristic technologies, primarily from the automotive domain. Interpreted in this manner, socio-human sciences and the technologies of the future appear to be expressions of magic in a modern society.

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