The dynamics of postmodern identity

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Abstract*: This paper shows that postmodern identity is built by assuming different roles and an image construction. Hermeneutical and criticizing reading of the images proposed by visual culture offer the understanding of the identity's fragmentarism, reconstruction and fragility in postmodern era. Contemporary society is strongly mediated by the images obtained through mass-communication means. They offer models and patterns that help the personal identity shaping. The individuals' identification using or imitating these patterns place them in positions specific, contradictory, fragile and put them through quick changes and reconstructions. Personal identity is formed according to everyone's option. Identity's change and transformation according to contemporary trends comes as something natural. Analyzing Romanian movies and soap operas proves that through the presented themes and images they encode the fashion and identity discourse specific to the period and to the society they belong to. They have an influence upon individuals' fashion, look, life style and behavior from that era. These images lead to a new style and permanent changes. Adopting a new look and changing one's identity has become modern and desirable attitude.*

Keywords*: identity, postmodernism, visual culture, image, fragmentary, changes, fashion*

Discussing problems referring to the constitution and dynamics of postmodern identity requires a short excursion to the period preceding the configuration of such identities. In traditional societies the individual's identity was stable, being determined by a pre-established social role. The place of the individual in the world

known and familiar to him was established by myths, which offered behavior models, thought patterns, the entire system of relations in which his life was inscribed. The roles of hunter, fisher, chief or member of a tribe did not change during the life of the individual, so his identity did not suffer radical transformations. Identity was established according to the tribe, the group or the collective of which he was part.

The modern era brought with it a certain level of distancing from tradition in the sense of gaining the right to self-conscience. The main acquisition of the modern individual was the autonomous, self-constituted subject, the realization of the modern self by opting for the ideal choice, that whose coordinates were depth and coherence. Despite the developments of individual conscience, which allowed changes and renewals of the identity, it was still relatively stable in the modern era, because it was constituted by the selection operated between a narrow set of roles. For example, the individual can have one or more roles simultaneously, but limited to those offered by the organization and social constructions of the era: mother, husband, son, teacher, orthodox, physician, British etc. The innovation, compared to the premodern eras, lays in the fact that the individual can choose and build his identity according to the opportunities that come up within his lifetime. Another characteristic of identity in the modern era is determined by the possibility to choose a socially well-defined role, with norms, customs and goals and reproduce them to be recognized by others as a character "playing" a certain role. Thus, the "other" becomes a constitutive element and a factor that has to be taken into consideration in an attempt to establish an identity. We are now referring to a personal and social identity and one in relationship with the others' identity. The effort of constructing an identity, the impossibility of being certain of the choices made, the wish that identity be validated by the others bring with them a state of anxiety and the thought that an identity can be changed or modified in the limits of the social roles existent in modern society. Outdated or socially invalidated identities can bring about alienation, a feeling of not belonging to the world but also the impulse to identify with a potential role and the construction of a new identity, according to the newly chosen role. Also, there are individuals who "play" several roles, hindering the construction of their identity and causing personality crises. Nowadays, identity is related to individuality, with the development of an individual self. (Douglas Kellner, 2000, *Cultura Media*, Iaşi: Institutul european).

The economic rise, the social and cultural development, the massive industrialization permitted by the economic options of western countries after the 2nd World War have led to overproduction and the consolidation of a strong exchange market. The individual's choices are more varied, and they are linked to the new roles that have appeared in society (designer, journalist, manager, advertiser, sales agent etc.) and also by the condition of consumer who can choose from a rich and varied offer of products and services. In the media society and the consumer one identity had begun to be connected to the way in which an individual looks, by the creation of an image, of a personal style. It is true that style and image models come from the culture of the

consumer society that influences the creation of individuality. Starting from the analysis of experiences and social forces that undermine personal identity, postmodern thought rejects the notion of identity as affirmation of the inborn essence of the individual and prefers constructivist solutions which it later subjects to problematization. In a more and more complex world, excessively fragmented and with an accelerated rhythm of renewal, identity becomes more fragile, it loses stability, being always subjected to changes, adjustments. As we shall see, the postmodern identity depends on the way in which the individual constructs, perceives, interprets and presents himself to others. The individual is aware that identity is a construct that involves a permanent process of innovation and renewal in accordance to societal evolutions and to new models, even if they are imposed by the consumer society through the mass-media. Naturally, postmodern theory formulates the notion of identity and explains the way in which it is constructed, within the postmodern cultural forms.

We will now present those postmodern theories that discuss the very notion of identity, going as far as its disappearance and the leveling out of individualities caused by the rationalization and bureaucratization of the consumer society and the media discourse. We need to mention the fact that the disintegration of the subject in a flux of moments that are impossible to tie into a whole is insisted upon, the fragmentarism and discontinuity being characteristic to both the nature of the individual and the postmodern texts. The effect of the information and media society of the last decades would lead to serial identities, constructed exclusively by simulating the materials offered by the media. Among the theorists who have analyzed, more or less fragmentary and schematic, the texts and practices of the media culture we mention Fredric Jameson - *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalism*, 1991, Durham, NC:Duke University Press, Gilles Deleuze şi Felix Guattari - *La révolution moléculaire,* 1977, 1980, Jean Baudrillard, *Les strategies fatales*, Grasset, 1983.

According to the theories advanced by the aforementioned researchers, in its postmodern instance, the image shadows the narrative on which the programs of commercial television stations were based. It is known that the realist representation esthetics tries to produce the effect of reality by using familiar, easily recognizable narratives, topics and characters. Compared to these narrative conventions, the dynamics and shine of the images gradually become an intense but ephemeral, fragmentary, esthetic experience. Though artificial, the images are compelling, they produce pleasure and represent a seductive force, but are superficial and have lost the connection with the past. Lacking substance and significance, postmodern images no longer represent a subject of hermeneutics because, beyond the surface there are no significations to be discovered and explained. But we do need to mention that some of the theorists have returned to the subject in later works, speaking about the resistance to standardization and homogenization produced by global capitalism (e.g. Felix Guattari in *Soft Subversions*, 1996).

In reference to these affirmations we recall the observations of the French researcher Jean Baudrillard, who attributes the main role in the constitution of the framework of the development of the postmodern paradigm to the media culture, and the systematic studies of Douglas Kellner (*Media culture*, 2000) on media texts and their effects in the birth of postmodern identity.

The investigation of media culture can offer precious information about identity in contemporary society. Analyzing the television series and cigarette advertisements, Douglas Kellner noticed that in these media products features characteristic of postmodern culture can be found: "the proliferation and dissemination of images without depth; blinding intensities obtained through the latest technologies; pastiche and implosion of forms; reading and repeating previously existent images and forms". Also, the analysis of media products can underline the dynamics of identity in postmodern society. The analysis made by Kellner on the identity of the image in *Miami Vice*, the television series, (1984) allows the author to affirm his position in contradiction to those of the aforementioned authors. On the one hand he rejects the idea of uniformization and platitude, of the primacy of forms and lack of content of the postmodern culture of the image. On the other hand, Kellner suggests a complete image analysis, of surface and of depth, of significance, of the political and the erotic element of cultural products. The British researcher is opposed to Baudrillard's idea regarding the noise produced by television, the kaleidoscopic whirlwind produced by images that multiply at a dizzying speed, become useless and devoid of significance. Kellner draws attention to the fact that the flow and speed of images does not obstruct the selection that individuals operate in search of events and shows that satisfy their taste for beauty, spectacular, interesting and fascinating curiosities.

Indeed, we note the fact that there are fans for all types of programs, from cinema stars or sports, to specialty shows that address a niche audience. Also, it is clear that television plays an important role in politics through the battle for image that takes place during the electoral campaigns, but not only. Or, simply, through using the remote, one passes from one show to another from a desire for general information, without emotional involvement. Moreover, individuals model their attitude towards events, their behavior and their lifestyle or fashion sense according to the images spread through television shows, films and through the characters or topics that they offer.

Kellner maintained that „both television and other forms of media culture play an important role in structuring contemporary identity and shaping thought and behavior... Television takes on the functions previously handled by myths and rites (namely integrating individuals in the social order, establishing dominant values, offering thought, behavior, including sexual, models etc.)" (*Media Culture*, p. 282). The analysis of *Miami Vice* (1984-1989, producer Anthony Yerkovich, director Michael Mann) discusses both form and content, both image and the narrative support, the surface and the underlying ideology, at the same time clarifying the

polysemic nature of images. We are shown, with a plethora of details, all the elements of postmodern culture that offer models of identity in the contemporary world through the observations made by the authors of the TV series. In comparison to previous action films and series, in which policemen such as Kojak or Colombo (Peter Falk) were intelligent but modestly, or even poorly dressed, they had a stable role, tics or other attitudes to facilitate their recognition, this show promotes the image of the young policeman, well-dressed, elegant, an adventurer, the image of the *macho* man. The elegant clothes, the hair-styles, the relationships with beautiful women, luxury cars, make the policemen into desirable heroes that can be proposed as models, shadowing the previous fascination with negative characters, belonging to organized crime. Of course, the enviable financial status of the policemen in *Miami Vice* has a logical explanation: they play the parts of mobsters and have to fit into their lifestyle without being discovered. This is why they permanently change their look and behavior, they have multiple identities and an eventful past.

This situation can also be seen in other action films and TV series that take on certain elements from this postmodern series, and combine them with situations specific to the geographical spaces, dominant ideologies and other particularities. The heroes are young men, in search of adventure and they take on a lifestyle and behavior appropriate for the age, profession and the environment in which they live. Another characteristic feature that can be found in most action flicks is the fact that family relationships are virtually inexistent or very anemic, being replaced with the very close relationship that the heroes have with their co-workers. The love of family members is replaced with a strong feeling of solidarity with colleagues and a good knowledge of the personality of the partner, and care for his safety.

For a better understanding we will discuss aspects from several, relatively recent, feature and television productions. We will first mention the Romanian television series *Băieți buni* [*Good guys*], launched in 2005, directed by Bogdan Bărbulescu, Bogdan Tiberiu Dumitrescu, Laurențiu Rusescu, Theodor Halacu-Nicon. We can find a lot of the aforementioned elements in this show, taken from different Western productions. The characters take on the typology of negative heroes of American series in the form of a character involved in organized crime, Ciupanzeu (Ștefan Bănică Junior) and other characters belonging to the criminal world. The Positive heroes are represented by two young policemen, Călin Boboc (Dragoș Bucur), Edi Bălan (Cabral) and their boss, comissioner Andrei Marcu (Florin Călinescu). In this case too, the young policemen have different attitudes and behaviors, being infiltrated undercover in the mafia network. They also have connections with other characters that come from very different environments, who are informers, criminals or witnesses of events under prosecution. We have to say that the footage does not manage to reach the speed and spectacle of the Western productions, and the "good guys" syntagm is perfectly adapted to Romanian reality. The police stations' logistics (cars and state of the art technology) are insufficient, and the policemen's clothes and style is lacking.

On the other hand, Ciupanzeu, the leader of the local mafia, gives the impression of an elegant and refined character. Still, the show manages to offer varied positions of the citizen that values certain behaviors and a certain style through the different social role-models presented. Such images and figures are identifiable for the viewers. Frequent role changes, of look, and thus of the characters' image have become modern and desirable, managing to influence the building of the identity of the individuals that adhere to this type of show.

The comparison with older types of policemen brings out the fact that the modern identity, centered on profession, position in the public sphere or in the family, requires fundamental options, defining for family, profession, political orientation. Postmodern identity contains elements that belong to the sphere of consumption, image and leisure. Often, characters play, mocking the rules and social conventions, trying to be remarked through ritually coded rituals: sports, gambling, drug traffic or use, intense sexual activity, social or relaxing activities. *Gambling* is often reflected in action films, most often as a pretext for triggering the action. *The game* can sometimes be the way in which criminals try to compare themselves with the police officers, to state their superiority through offering clues and confusing policemen (for example, in the television series *CSI* (*Crime Scene Investigations*, 2004) or in *The Bone Collector* (1999). Interesting and truly inventive is also the director John McTiernon's remake of the 1968 film, *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1999). In this film, Thomas Crown, the millionaire hero played by Pierce Brosnan, aptly organizes the theft of a Claude Monet painting from a museum, only out of the boredom of having everything, out of the desire to "play" and highlight his intelligence, to prove his ability to organize and lead an operation that the police could not solve, and out of the desire to show off to a woman, expert in solving art thefts. He is a relatively young man, intelligent and daring, but refined and elegant, managing to keep an aura of mystery until the end, when he allows the detection of the trick by which the painting remains in the museum. He *plays* Catherine and the two policemen, knowing from the start that he will not cause any harm to the museum. Although it profits from a vigorous epic thread, in this film, the narrative does not lose the right to lead the heroes' destinies towards an ending the more unexpected the more the hero manages to increase the mystery of the operations through which he throws the policemen off the trail. Without detaching themselves from the narrative, the images manage to stand out through ingenuity and camera work. The scene of the duplication of the man in the bowler hat in the museum, the repetition and movement in opposing directions of the same character, infinitely repeated, manage to amaze and pleasantly surprise, becoming the main element in relation to the narrative plane.

Contrary to this singular scene, in the aforementioned television series most of the images offered by the producers are artificial because of their denial of natural hues, because of the harsh chromatics, impressive skyscraper images, use of state of the art technology by the heroes. The way the lights are used, the camera angles,

editing, sound, the exotic spaces, produce fascinating images, that together create a veritable esthetic spectacle. The characters suggest and set the fashion, the way to dress, the shoes to wear or the way to style your hair. Moreover, American shows project images of race, gender and class. Even the Romanian show *Good guys* (2005) there is a mulatto officer together with his white colleagues. The images of luxurious houses, expensive cars, beautiful women, reflect the lifestyles of characters from the criminal world, or an easy and well-off life in which the viewers are invited to partake or at least to desire it. In American films and series, usually, this lifestyle is marked by speed and mobility, values entertainment offered to the heroes by the consumer society, oftentimes through media products: films, television series, entertainment shows, electronic and social games.

In conclusion, we can say that postmodern cinema productions promote type of the young police officer, intelligent, daring, elegant and refined, having access to the newest technologies, but lacking the convictions and bitterness of officers in older films. They are more relaxed, solving cases seems a game of intelligence and is combined with an as pleasant as possible spending of leisure times, even if always in action. This image has influenced the creation of postmodern identity through valuing adolescent behavior and values that have been imposed in the last decades even upon the older individuals. In the last two decades though, a change of perspective can be noticed.

We need to mention, for this purpose, the beloved British series *Midsomer Murders*, launched in 1997, after a screenplay by Anthony Horowitz, and currently filming the 13th season. Leader in audience numbers, the show offers a different image of policemen than the one we are used to from the American or Romanian films and series we have talked about. The chief inspector (CI), Tom Barnaby (John Netteles), and sergeant Gavin Troy (Daniel Casey), later replaced by Dan Scott (John Hopkins) and Ben Jones (Jason Hughes), collaborate to solve numerous unexpected murders, in the quiet fictional county of Midsomer, executed with the most unusual weapons: kitchen knives, golf clubs, disused machinery etc. In our opinion the series reinstates the master-disciple relationship, valuing the role older character's role of initiator for his younger colleague. The numerous scenes bring out the insight and methods used by the chief inspector, taking advantage of a vast experience, gained in numerous years of practicing the profession. In this case, experience trumps intelligence and spectacular actions, more often than not limited to a few scenes surprising the murderers in their own homes, a few chases through the yards and gardens in quiet Midsomer, and a few short car chases on country roads or the beautiful woods of British villages. Chief inspector Barnaby often acts according to methods and deductions exercised and tried in a detective's career. Another major change refer to the personality of the main character who is a tidy, civil man and slightly distant. He is impeccably dressed, but somber. The relationship with his younger partner is limited to the cases which they need to solve and certain small reflections on personal problems that

seem rather small slips meant to warm up the collegial relationship and reconfirm the authority of the master. The accent is now placed on the relationship with his family, wife (Joyce) and daughter (Cully), sometimes involuntarily participating in solving the cases, through the information they contribute. The care and devotement of the chief inspector towards his wife and daughter is natural and touching. The humor and light irony from the conversations within the family gives the scenes credibility. We need to mention that in this show there are no beautiful, sexy women, being replaced by women leading a quiet life in the British villages. Most often, they are involved in charity work, organize local celebrations or cultural activities, such as the theatre productions in which the chief inspector's daughter appears. The hero simultaneously plays the role of experienced police officer, father, husband, member of the community. Together with these, the show promotes the roles of mother, wife and daughter with which viewers can identify and which become models in building their identity.

On the other hand, we have to mention that in a lot of series and action films, women can be criminalists, coroners, prosecutors or lawyers, or even mediums, helping the police in solving more complex cases. This situation greatly increases the number of roles played by women, and offers them a totally different status, by promoting models of intelligent women, tenacious, with a well-established professional status, who can successfully deal with the challenges they face even in this traditionally male field. In more recent films and TV shows, such as *CSI*, *The Mentalist*, *Damages*, women have roles of police officers and even team or department leaders. *CSI* started in 2004 and in 2008 already had 100 episodes and is successfully continuing to this day. The New York Police Department is led by detective Mac Taylor, and his deputy is detective Stella Bonassera. The investigator team is made up of specialists that join together, each one using their own special abilities in a field, managing to find evidence contributing decisively to the resolution of the case. The relationships between them are based on professional trust. In *The Mentalist* (2008) (directed by Chris Long and David Nutter), the head of the Bureau for investigating serial murders in California is detective Teresa Lisbon (Robin Tunney). Difficulties from the past, when, left motherless, she has to take care of her father and her brothers, contribute to Teresa's profile. She is an intelligent woman, tenacious, able, managing to protect the collaboration of her department with a medium, who, because of unusual qualities, helps in solving the cases.

Another aspect that deserves discussion is the fact that in more recent shows the clothing of police officers and detectives is the *office attire*, more somber and formal, like that which any company requires of its employees. Nothing of the elegance and nonchalance previously seen in the look and lifestyle of heroes. The accent is now placed on professionalism, correctness in exercising the job and in office relationships. Symptomatic for the period in which they are created, these films promote only collegial relationships, excluding intimate relationships and details

of the heroes' personal lives. This information appears in stages, only as much as is needed to outline the profile of the character. Their lifestyle no longer has the glamour and wealth of the eccentric youths of *Miami Vice*. The new detectives are relatively young or adult people, living off their wages, hard-working. They are respected for exhibiting professional probity and work for the betterment of society. The new look and lifestyle outline a new model, which the policeman role now offers the audience.

Besides policemen, the shows also offer other models in which the contemporary way of life is reflected: the preoccupation of individuals for their image, the desire for success, for professional advancement, a tendency for leisure activities, for travel in exotic locations, to attend fitness centers to be in as good a shape as possible, and the determination to work to afford all of these. The fact that television serials have a high audience is due to the fact that viewers identify with this type of characters. This suggests that we can talk about a reconstruction and redefinition of postmodern identity according to the ideology of the era to which it belongs. The dynamics of identity in today involves change, multiplicity, construction and reconstruction through the taking on of a large variety of roles, images and activities through which individuals express themselves and can expose to others.

Unlike in the modern era, the postmodern paradigm assumes that nothing is stable, anything can be subjected to change, can be transformed, renewed, in accordance with the individual's options. The modern project for constructions of the self is abandoned in favor of a mobile project that can be changed and renovated in view of the opportunities made available by the roles that have appeared in society and the people's desire for change. Irony and humor contribute considerably to this change, transforming the new construction in a voluntarily assumed game. The postmodern identity seems to be an extension of the multiple identities assumed by the individuals' selves, in search for the optimal option. The specific anxiety of the modern self is less present because of the possibility of the individual to identify with images, roles and activities that can be frequently changed. The presence of anxiety in the postmodern self can be recognized only in the identity crisis of the heroes, who prefer androgynous types, *macho* women, effeminate men or radical changes, like sex change, and that can frequently be seen in action serials and films as eccentric characters, that are a part of the contemporary landscape. They can play roles of collaborators, informers, witnesses, but also wrongdoers and vigilantes. Most of the times there is a motivation for this change, the tension that is installed being produced by the impossibility of heroes to accept them or even the fear that their new identity will not be perceived as positive.

A last observation refers to the possibility for individuals to create a virtual identity using the possibilities offered by the new technologies. It is one of the means of fulfilling personal goals, either to attract victims, women or policemen, by evildoers, as in *CSI: Miami*, either as games through which individuals find pleasure in creating a new identity, corresponding to a social role that is not accessible in real life. Thus,

postmodern identity offers individuals the possibility to immerse themselves in an experience that would otherwise be impossible.

The media culture continues to identify and emphasize main tendencies in identity's evolution, continues to create and offer images appropriate to certain social roles, with a certain behavior, style, appearance, corresponding to the ideology of the contemporary era, in continuous change and rearrangement. Identity becomes an option of personal activities and choices, allowing each individual to construct their own identity, unique in every case. Even in the case of efforts of groups constructing their identities according to religion, ethnicity, geographical space, common objectives, the individuals are not subject to these general rules. Some produce their identity through affirmation of belonging to a community (women, colored people, homosexuals, Protestants, Mormons), others try to construct their own identities that can be mediated by the community to which they belong, allowing for the surfacing of tensions and contradictions. The personal identity model can be in disagreement with the group, but it is important that after changes and renewals, the individual choose that role or status that fits and has coherence and makes sense in the society or era to which they belong. Fortunately, media products are a source of models if they represent tendencies in society, if individuals can recognized themselves in this and which can be acquired in the effort of constructing an identity.

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