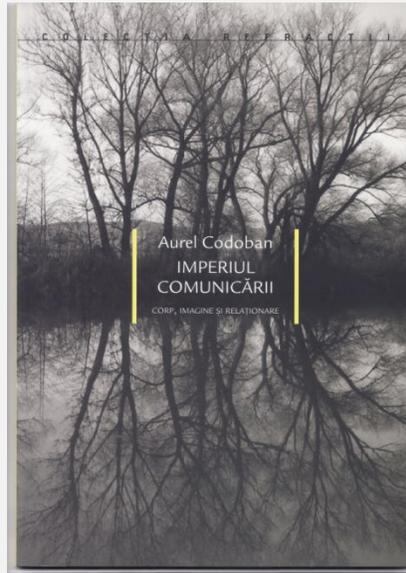


ADRIAN COSTACHE

Postdoctoral fellow within the Romanian Academy, Iași
Email: adrian.costache@me.com

TOWARD A NEW MIDDLE AGES? ON AUREL CODOBAN'S
THE EMPIRE OF COMMUNICATION



Codoban, Aurel. *Imperiul comunicării: corp, imagine și relaționare* (*The Empire of Communication: Body, Image and Relation*). Cluj-Napoca: Idea, 2011

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Intellectual life has its own temporality, perhaps similar only to the temporality of the geological. For months and years, apparently nothing happens and then, suddenly, it proves that endogenous and exogenous processes that cannot be contained any longer had animated it. Aurel Codoban proves this very well. After a nearly five year period of silence, he brings out not one, but two works at a distance of only few months one from the other: *Interpretation Exercises* (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia XXI, 2011) and *The Empire of Communication. Body, Image and Relation* (Cluj-Napoca: Idea, 2011).

The first work is actually a collection of texts previously published in various cultural and academic journals, anthologies and collective volumes over thirty years (1979-2009). Its relevance therefore stems from the fact that it makes Aurel Codoban's theoretical journey easily accessible to those interested and offers a few additions and clarifications – when needed – to his other works.

The situation changes with *The Empire of Communication*. Even if its different chapters are based on various talks and public interventions over the last years, the work presents itself in unitary form – in spite of its sometimes tiring repetitions – and deals with a theme anticipated in *Sacred and Ontophany* and *Sign and Interpretation*.

Coming as a follow-up to his previous works, *The Empire of Communication* deserves attention for itself. And this all the more the book in question is not an introduction to communication theory *per se*, despite that it does not shy away from dealing with the central concepts and theories of the discipline. We find pages upon pages of elaborate analysis of the relations between verbal and body language, utterance and enunciation, medium and message, of the way a culture of writing gave birth to the one of the image, of television and internet and their impact on our daily lives, etc. But here communication is only the pretext, the canvas upon which a vivid painting of our times is being painted in shades of gray. This is stated already on the first page of the book, in the "Author's Note," where Codoban speaks about an "apocalyptic attitude" that accompanies the generalization of communication in our times, an attitude which, even though it does not clearly hint at an ending still announces the "coming of a new Middle Age" (p. 5).

Therefore, for those already familiar with the field, listening once again to its mantras – "one cannot not communicate", "to communicate means to get into tune" etc. – is not exactly gratuitous for, through these, the book shows why our times are a new Middle Ages, what this implies and how we got here.

In few words, the philosophical thesis Codoban wants to defend is: the generalization of communication brings along an "apocalyptic attitude" and places us within a new Middle Ages because the

communication that is generalized is first and foremost relation, that is, communication for the sake of communicating, where it does not matter whether what is communicated exists or not, whether it is true or false. The generalization of this style of communication places us within a simulacrum world and a world of simulacra, with no connection to the real one. In such a world it is impossible to distinguish between good and bad, true and false, up and down, right and left, beautiful and ugly and so on.

For Codoban, there are multiple cues pointing to this. Starting with the social networks such as Facebook and Twitter on which we spend our leisure time doing nothing else than showing our virtual friends that we exist and acknowledging that they exist in their turn, passing through the domination of the televisual among mass-media, which hides what shows and falsifies reality through the very process it uses to present it as real, we reach the death of the book and of the culture of erudition that gives birth to the analytical spirit and the critical mass capable of self-determination and to distinguish between true and false, good and bad etc.

These cues, Codoban argues, also hint to the cause that got us here. Through them we can see that the age-old struggle between text and image and the one between soul and body, was in the end won by the image and, respectively, the body. For, contrary to common sense and philosophical good sense (Cartesian reason) – which tied the text to the body (see in this sense the old hermeneutical tradition of allegorical interpretation initiated by Philo and Origen) and the image to the idea (let us not forget that *eidōs* that is etymologically at the basis of the modern word “idea” means “sensible aspect”) – for Codoban, these two wars are being fought together, or, better said, they are one and the same war fought on different battlefields (see pages 21-22). And, this time following common sense and philosophical good sense, it is well known that only by keeping the image away from the body the world order or the order of the world can be assured. Beginning with Plato (if not even before him) and ending with Hegel, all philosophers have repeated this.

But the Middle Ages of our times are not even by far as dark as they may seem. The triumph of the image and the body is in the end destinally inscribed in the history of this world. And this triumph is not even an absolute premiere. For the history of the struggle between image and text, as well as that between body and soul, is, in fact, a dialectical one. This means, on the one hand, that an overturn was to be expected. And, as the author shows, it has already happened before. The existence of the text and the soul is tied to that of the image and the body. The soul exists only as the soul of a body, be it even the body of the world. Phonetic writing is born as the abstraction of the ideographical one, and the latter

from the representations of things. It is easy to show that the genesis of verbal language is connected to that of vocal and body language.

In other words, the “danger” that is lurking today is an autoimmune disease that lies within the genetic code of our world, a disease that does not make you sick and whose symptoms have manifested themselves throughout history from time to time. The only thing that has changed is that today they have all rampaged all at once.

That is exactly why, we are taught, our task is neither to save something, nor to save ourselves from something. The only task – if this is actually a task –, the only “search” is that for “the means to keep silent in an over-talkative culture” (page 5).

If the merit of Codoban’s book comes from the fact that it offers a well-rounded narrative about our world – and this is truly a merit since it is really reassuring to know that the world we live in comes from somewhere and heads in a determinate direction –, its shortcoming is that typical to all totalizing discourses. As it becomes more and more articulated and encompasses more and more elements, that which escapes totalization surfaces as over-interpretations, contradictions, paradoxes which accumulate to the point that the very fundamental intention of the book is put in question.

Let’s take some examples: for Codoban, the techniques of relaxation, massage, fitness and body building, all this sort of activities that are so popular nowadays, are the clear expression of the corporeal ideology of our time. But, why wouldn’t these be simple therapeutic procedures for conditions that affect most people in an advanced (post-) industrial society where work nails the individual’s body down to a chair from 9 to 6?

Step by step, the book tries to convince us of the preeminence of body communication over the verbal one. But in spite of this, every time the analytical eye of the author falls upon it, body language is analyzed in the terms and through the concepts of linguistics and the semiology of language. It is difficult to understand what is holding the author back from formulating new terms, capable of accounting for the entire particularity of the sphere of body language.

Slowly but surely, through this kind of “slips” we reach the point where the dominant style of communication in our times is presented as a form of therapeutic-psychiatric communication (page 79 and the following). That is, exactly the type of communication that constitutes the primary means for reducing the dysfunctionalities parasiting the individual’s relationship with him or herself and his or her social life. But then, how can one justify the apocalyptic tone that dominates the text and the author’s confessed “apprehension” for the times we live in?

In this sense, the cover image fits the text like a glove, for it seems to grant us access to its maze. The forest mirrored in the lake appears as a natural extension of it. The reflected and the reflection are here parts of the same entity; the only difference between them is that one is darker than the other. It matters little whether we are dealing here with a play of lights and shades (something that exists in reality) or a simple deformation caused by the lens of the camera. In the image on the cover as well as in the text what truly matters is the impossibility to clearly decide that the dark side is the real one.

The impossibility of this decision and the contradictions, paradoxes and counter-meanings through which it is built are ultimately what make *The Empire of Communication* a truly interesting book.

Translated from Romanian by Daniela Duberea

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