

Conference Paper

People and Myths in Mediaspace: On the Question of Cultural Ecology

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Abstract

Considering the role of media culture as a factor of the information age, the author argues that media reality – the new sociocultural environment artificially created during the digital revolution – is mythological. This means that the myth becomes a certain control mechanism; penetrating into the individual's inner world of, it affects both conscious and unconscious spheres, "programs" them. In this regard, the "cultural ecology" of the media space becomes particularly important. The crucial part of such ecology is the system of media education contributing to the formation of a new personality type for the 21st century.

Keywords: digital revolution, mediaculture, media reality, media space, myth, mythopoeia, mediaeducation, cultural ecology.

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1. Introduction

The relevance of this research is based in the rising importance of media culture as a result of digital revolution. Media culture exhibits strong influence on public consciousness as a powerful tool of information, cultural and educational contacts, and a factor in personal creative development.

The goal of this paper is to explore interactions between humans and myths within the space of media culture and the future perspectives for cultural ecology under the conditions of increasing mediatization of society when "the reality... is grasped totally, completely immersed in virtual images, in the imaginary world..." [5, p. 351].

2. Methods

Using comparative historical approach, as well as analysis, synthesis and generalization, the author explores interactions between humans and myths in media space, as well as co-existence of the real and the mythological, and their influence on the future development of individuals and society.

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3. Discussion

Digital revolution created a situation where human communication moved from the physical world to the global digital platforms and mobile networks. We can agree with Kirill Razlogov that the study of “information cosmos”, which has become an intellectual foundation of the 21st century, “is a culturological problem, because it comprises technological, social and artistic factors that become intertwined in the sphere of culture understood in its most broad anthropological definition” [17, p. 5].

Cultural and educational environment today is also mediated: information and communication technologies have become firmly established in educational environment, distance learning networks are flourishing, “virtual museums”, digital archives and e-books are on the rise, and even conservation of historical monuments increasingly often happens in digital form.

Still, it is important to recognize that media reality, produced by humans and by the entire process of information revolution, facilitates the development of radically different social, moral and aesthetic norms and values.

On the one hand, digital photography, cinema and television, computer technologies, multimedia and Internet provide people with the opportunity of individual screen interaction both to realize their creative potential and to increase their knowledge. On the other hand, they facilitate false values, escape from reality and sociophobia.

Let us remember that back in 1981, when artificial reality was receiving increasing attention, French sociologist Jean Baudrillard wrote his famous work “Simulacra and Simulation”, where he postulated the humanity’s entrance into the era of “total simulation” where “the real sign is replaced by simulacra” [2].

Building on Baudrillard’s arguments, philosopher V. Savchuk writes that “information lives only through “knowledge simulation”, and “reality is dissolved within hyperreality”. As a result, “people are locked inside a world of secondary images, and any attempt to find a referent leads, directly or indirectly, back to the mass media reality” [14, p. 31].

Media reality, therefore, is a communicative system that connects human beings with the objective reality.

Explaining this connection, E. Cassirer stated that “man does not stand before reality as such... Rather, he lives amongst imaginary emotions, in hopes and fears, amongst his own phantasies and dreams” [4, p. 471]. Between reality and human beings there is always an intermediary that helps individuals to perceive reality and conceptualize it.

This function is performed by media as vehicles of various myths (social, political etc.) that “package” reality. This was demonstrated by Roland Barthes in his book “Mythologies” [1].

German philosopher N. Boltz believes that “mass media replace myths as a world horizon” providing us with “a preliminary choice of what is... As a result, a consumer is faced with the world of simplified cause-and-effect connections” [3, p. 29].

Therefore, mass media produce myths that facilitate individual’s perception of their environment. But myths also create humans themselves. Thus, Merab Mamardashvili, who defined myth as a “cultural machine”, wrote that “human being is an artificial being born not from nature but self-produced through culturally constructed devices, such as rituals, myths, magic etc.” [10, p. 47].

“Construction of human being” is, basically, the process of his/her socialisation – that is, the development of world-view, moral orientation and value “world picture”.

Philosopher and theologian Pavel Florensky had once noted that human is “a knot between the ideal world and the real world” [16]. However, we can hardly call mythological media reality which modern human beings inhabit “an ideal world”.

The frenetic development of media industry and the chaotic, disorganized way in which modern humans engage with it starting from childhood (video games, movies, TV, animation, comics, shows, videos etc.), as well as its entertainment, consumer-oriented bent, does not in any way facilitate the development of personal media culture. Rather, it leads to the opposite effect.

In one of his last works Dmitry Likhachev focused on the problem of preservation of cultural environment: “While humans need nature for their biological life, they equally need cultural environment for their mental and moral life” [9, p. 11]. The source of this anxiety is obvious: modern humans exist in contradictory, often aggressive media environment that produces “mass” consciousness and “mass” society.

The myths of mass culture presuppose unification, simplification of world picture, stereotypical approach to life. While ancient myths strove to explain both reality and human actions, modern myths substitute reality with the artificially created matrix. The essence of this phenomenon was symbolically expressed in Wachowskis’ cyberthriller “The Matrix” (1999). The goal of this still-popular movie is to prove that humans have already been inhabiting an imaginary world for a long time, a world created by powerful artificial intelligence machines that control our being.

In the 20th century myths were channelled most successfully by cinema and television: through these media society received both political and social myths. Digital revolution, computers as everyday items, Internet, and multimedia systems strengthened the mythological component of media reality forcing humans to perform a constant “balancing act” between the artificial and the real worlds.

Today virtual reality (cyberspace) is an important part of sociocultural environment of younger generation. On the one hand, it includes interactive educational programs, digital training, e-textbooks and e-books; on the other hand, it features huge variety of interactive entertainment and services provided through games, videos, advertising, TV programs etc.

Virtual environment fashions a certain type of communication mediated through the Internet, which, according to M. Castells, is a “universal social space of free communication [6, c. 8]. Such communication has its own specific features, not only positive but negative as well:

1. Limited emotional experiences provided by social interaction in cyberspace;
2. Anonymity and multiplicity of “self” encourages the recipient to become “an invisible man” “peeping” into a virtual “keyhole”;
3. The blurring of space boundaries brings together users with anti-social motivation;
4. Prolonged “meditation” in front of the computer screen can create internet addiction and sociophobia.

As a result of teenagers’ and young people’s hyperactivity in virtual space, a new personality type emerges, which is based on the communicative culture of “unreal” interaction. This produces deformation of socio-aesthetical world image.

In late 20th – early 21st century increased influence of cinema, TV, video, computers and Internet led to the development of a so-called “screen generation”. Reflecting upon the extraordinary power of screen culture over minds and hearts of the millions, K. Razlogov introduced a metaphor of screen as a “meat grinder of cultural discourse” [13, p. 9].

Again we are compelled to agree with D. Likhachev who put great emphasis on the importance of “cultural ecology” [9] in creative sphere. By “cultural ecology” he meant active sociocultural regulation of communication system, including its perception and influence.

One of the ways in which we can regulate media influences today is a comprehensive system of media education, which in Russia comprises the following approaches: 1) professional media education; 2) media education for future teachers; 3) media education

as part of general school and university curriculums; 4) media culture in leisure centers; 5) online education; 6) continuous media education, life-long learning [7].

UNESCO describes media education as the most important part of the 21st-century pedagogy, and information factor as the leading factor in education of young people [11]. European system of media education emphasizes a number of priority trends and goals, among which – the development of media competence and critical thinking to prepare young people for their life in democratic societies [12].

As for the Russian education professionals, they mostly focus on the development of media literacy as a key competence required to perceive, evaluate and interpret media texts [15].

For the author of this paper, media education is a “culturological project” [8], which provides opportunities for comprehensive implementation of the process of socio-cultural interaction (dialogue) between the teacher and the student.

4. Conclusions

Having discussed the characteristics of “human being in mythological media space”, we may conclude that the positive perspectives for the future development of individual and society depend on the system of contemporary media education as an important sphere of sociocultural activity.

Only in this context it is possible to envision the development of media-active, emotionally and mentally well-developed individual capable of quickly receiving, systematizing and assessing information from diverse media channels, capable of dialogue and transmission of sociocultural experience.

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