

MATEI VIȘNIEC AND “THE QUICKSANDS” OF JOURNALISM

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Abstract

The study discusses the interaction between the creative osmoses of two aspects of creation: Matei Vișniec-the journalist and Vișniec-the writer, starting from the analysis of the novel *Preventive disorder* (2011) and of the reportages included in *Chronicles of the stirring ideas* (2010).

The complex set of the established semiotic codes, conventions and values the journalist analyses and makes use of are superposed upon the narrative strategies of the writer, while, in his turn, the writer influences the journalist with his writings. Changing of the optical lenses of the writer with those of the journalist and, respectively, those of the journalist with the instruments of the writer occurs along the whole above-mentioned manifest-novel – *Preventive disorder*.

Even if radio broadcastings provide the immediate and the instaneous, they tend to escape the “tyranny of the present state” (Régis Debray) towards the profoundness and concentration of the artistic imaginary.

Keywords: *representation, Matei Vișniec, image-information, show-information, performance.*

In the epoch of “postculture”, reality is most frequently grasped by representation. The predominance of representation depends, to a great extent – on the postmodern character of culture, where the real world is substituted by mediatic images. The power of each representation does not longer consist in the mimetic reproduction of the existing world (opened towards the universe), but mostly in creating an expressive image (oriented towards the subject), of some “illusion” of reality. The contemporary cultural and mediatic discourse, in which the artefact substitutes reality, is based on the effect of representation, which becomes more important than its real reference. Shifting of the bary center towards interpretation explains why, in the present universe – so fragmented and rhysomic – representation itself acquires a plural and polysemantic nature.

The scope of the present essay is of analyzing this “augmented reality” starting from the experience of Matei Vișniec, an author who,

living in two different countries, cultures, languages (Romanian and French and, lately, English, as well) and professions (writer and journalist), a keen observer of human adventure, of the social show and of the contradictions feeding one’s being, transposes it in the “quick sand” of his journalism and, equally, of his artistic creations. Fiction as a source of the mediatic construction, and information as a source of fiction constitutes the origin of Vișniec’s writings and synesthetic reportages. In his *Chronicle of stirring ideas*, Matei Vișniec will describe the contact of these two professions: “It is difficult to be a writer and a journalist. (...) Taken separately, both are extraordinary. However, when performed together, they become contratsing, up to rushing violently against each other. Literature somehow succeeds in raising one towards eminence, towards the sublime nature of the human being. Journalism, on the contrary, especially when involving a daily basis, strikes one against the ground, against reality, against the present time. (...) The writer gradually loses faith in man, while the image of humanity provided by the journalist is catastrophic. In his turn, the journalist comes to have no faith in the writer, any longer, as each story imagined by the latter around the human being is contradicted by reality”. (Vișniec 2010: 9-10) The first aspect making these professions quite similar to one another is the creative character of both; in this respect, Laurențiu Șoitu entitedly wrote: “Between the writer and the newspaper journalist, on one side, and between the radio and television reporter, two different types of creative tallent should be distinguished, interacting between inspiration and work, two different semiotic types, within which the process of creation itself is established and consolidated”. (Șoitu 1993: 137)

The deadlock of the global society involves world's radical restructuring based on the control of information, as well as on a systematic maintenance of a "preventive disorder" – which is actually the title of the manifest-novel, written in a journalistic style, about the mediatic order of today – equivalent, in the vision of the writer-journalist Vişniec, with the instauration of a new religion. In the mediatic universe, *disorder* appears as a keyconcept, synonymous with the mediatic success, with imagination and creation¹, while "the direct experience is always more complex and somehow ill-regulated". (*Ibidem*: 141) "A creator producing disorder is an *artist* who imagines scenarios for introducing fiction into reality". (Vişniec 2011: 37) The enormous hypocrisy of the press lies in the fact that "it generates this chaos of voices, happenings and events to which it itself attempts at providing a meaning. It simultaneously asserts and denies, making a statement today and retracting it the next day (...)".² Press is so proteic, so uneasy, so chaotic and so surprising, that no truth is valid for it". (Preda 2006: 10,11)

The novel *Preventive disorder* is focused on the fabrication of the mediatic strategies, on the totalitarianism of transparency, and ratio between information and fiction. The mediatic machine, as suggested by Matei Vişniec, creates disorder. Faced with a real revolution as to the *treatment* of information, Vişniec attempts at decoding the mediatic ritual: "In the beginning, when the young journalist makes his first paces in his profession, his struggle with the *void* and with the *useless* is still invisible. The journalist thinks he is a sort of judge of the present time, or at least one of those selected to *interpret* it, to decode it, to translate it into human language". (Vişniec 2011: 88)

Quite a long time had to pass prior to "becoming aware of the fact that man's fundamental right is not that of being informed", but "of understanding (...). The huge force of mass-media relies not on information, but on its commenting" (Preda 2006: 10). The defy between the two different conceptions as to journalism – a consequence of press' industrialization: on one side, "the old journalism", involving uttering of opinions, debates, structured around politics and literature, supported by

"dilletant" journalists (mainly writers and academics) and, on the other, starting with 1880, the "new journalism", based mainly on interviews and reportages, oriented upon information, according to the pattern of the American press –, assumes a permanent contrast between these concepts. (*cf.* Ferenczi *apud* Arpin 2006: 191) The machine of the media has become extremely complex, so that even journalists deal with already commented information, to which they can only add second-degree comments³: "*The machine* is so completely greased that, nowadays, neither investigation nor analysis journalism are possible any longer, whereas the information media do not need us for such activities, any longer (...). In order to feed us, they have a whole army of intermediaries at hand – *imagine managers, spokesmen and press executives*, which means that the crumbs we are so insatiably grubbing have been already pre-conditioned, more precisely that other mouths had already chewed them for us...". (Vişniec 2100: 193-194).

The origin of information's formation and decanting is an important theme for Vişniec: "Nowadays, information is *formed* exactly as follows. A *source* appears somewhere and everybody becomes a pilgrim in search of that *source*." (*Ibidem*: 24) However, not even journalists have direct access to information: "We are like rats, as we are actually living in the *subsoil* of information. We are fed with the crumbs thrown by *our superiors*, which are, nevertheless, extremely tasty". (*Ibidem*: 193) In time, we shall come to understand that the unique source does not differentiate the profile of an editorial office, and also that reforms will be necessary for the diversification and distancing off the homogeneity of an unique source: "Information should be also produced by *ourselves*"; "let us reach a new stage, that of *producing information*"; "nowadays, everybody produces information". (*Ibidem*: 101) In this way, Matei Vişniec goes all way until reaching the last and decisive element of this mediatic mechanism: "Our agency can *organize the happening*." (*Ibidem*: 26) Consequently, "at the origin of the source lies *fiction*." (*Ibidem*: 24)

Vişniec discusses, from the inside of the media concern, the fabrication of mediatic wars, as well as the disputable principle of total transparency⁴.

Having in view the hypocrisy the contemporary society, the field of media stakes on – at least for the 10 years to come – the fact that preventive disorder might be almost exclusively generated by the exploitation of the democratic principle of transparency, related to the publication of some secret – technological, financial, diplomatic, economic, political, scientific or medical – documents, and of other personal data⁵.

The alchemy involved in the elaboration of a news journal is based on the augmentation of some classical principles of representation, bearing a high emotional potential, such as the introduction of a pronounced sense of performance, e.g. a shocking opening, dynamic conflict, morbid topics, heroes coming from the underworld, murderers and rogues. The list of horrible things and disasters, news commonly involving the idea of death, catastrophe and misery are daily provided⁶ with an ever-increasing frenzy: "Each day, journalism offers exclusively a list of horrible things – the up-dated list of catastrophies produced by man on his own planet. Explored by the writer, man appears as an entity with infinite potentialities. In the presentation made by the journalist, the human being remains for ever the same beast incapable to give up violence and his immediate desires." (*Idem* 2010: 9) That explains why the listener, already immune to the news based on malefic subjects and motives, expects the worst⁷. The mediatic message with a degraded ideation charge⁸, the language itself gets modified: "I have sometimes the impression that the *information* and the *languages* communicate between them, yet not at all with the people... We are but a huge fabric expected to produce extremely perishable goods: information... sometimes we are ready to give our life for our *products*, not realizing that all we can offer are only soap bubbles." (*Idem* 2011: 89) This situation brings about a modification in the nature of language itself: "Gradually, a planetary wooden (*i.e.*, stiff and inflexible) language of journalism appears, including all the generous contributions of the national wooden languages, all their perfect stock phrases and stereotypic formulations..." (*Ibidem*: 88) Even if living inside the machine of news production, Matei Vișniec does not appear as immune as his audience is, recognizing bitterly that: "This

profession simply intoxicated me. Nobody considers that we should receive an extra fee for *working in a toxic environment*. Around us, horrible things, always horrible things, exclusively horrible things". (*Ibidem*: 71)

The danger lies in the fact that the individual receiving political, economic, social and worldly information becomes a marsh-man, intoxicated with useless information, who feels no need to take actions, any more. The process is reversed from one extreme to the other – from the one paralysed by the communist censorship to the over-informed one of today. The manifest-novel, which is actually a radiography of the new forms of brain-washing, proposes an one-minute reflection.

The consequence of this mediatic invasion will be "man's transformation into a monster of consumism, more exactly – into a mutant". (*Ibidem*: 151) "Someone wants to transform us into well-informed stupid persons" (*Ibidem*: 137), incapable of action, any longer: "Such an excessively informed person of the consumistic society feels so happy to be over-informed that he does not feel at all the need *to act*. What's the use of acting when you have real-time, direct access to every event produced in the world?" (*Ibidem*: 181) This gives birth to an extremely risky new human species: "The interconnected individual does not realize he gradually becomes intricably bound to the immensely complex interconnection networks. In no other moment of its history human being had been so close to mass imbecility. Such an objective, never attained, on the whole, even by totalitarian systems – in other words, creation of the new man, so proudly proclaimed by their ideologies, was unfortunately attained by a hyper-informed society, in the absence of any ideology". (*Ibidem*: 184) Such a new species requires, obviously, journalists of the same value: "The only thing we are doing today is to *serve* the unique mediatic machine. Or, what does the machine want? Nothing else but being fed by teachable consumers, served by teachable journalists..." (*Ibidem*: 180)

The post/postmodern society, a society of simple amusement⁹ expects from the journalist to focus his concerns mainly on an ostentatious mediatic representation, on the delivery of "performance-information": "What impresses

one most is the staging process of information, its aspect of show". (*Ibidem*: 183) The theatrical-type representation is preferred to any other types of information delivery: "Let us amuse our listeners, let us oblige them us to attend our show and not others"; "We all have become but clowns. Consequently, we have to be funny", (*Ibidem*: 102) the consequences being, beyond any doubt, serious: "Any educative aspect of our work is thrown away. Long live amusement!" (*Ibidem*: 102). Mass-media becomes more and more an industry and a technology of culture: "As information is already distributed all over the world as a form of pastime, why shouldn't we propose to our globalized client a *package*, in other words, information associated with *soap-type* serials, *horror-type* movies, sports, advertisements, *disco-type* music and other forms of *live* pastime. Actually, these products form a *totality*, responding to the natural expectations of the globalized humans." (*Ibidem*: 122)

Matei Vişniec also provides an "information paper case" of the main themes of the journalism of today: "In parallels, we shall analyze the evolution of other domains of preventive disorder, especially of spiritual and moral type, such as the gradual exhaustion of the attraction once Western democracy used to exercise, and the renewed occurrence, in the close-up shot of the political scene of the religious currents. As early as 2012 and 2013, the transformation of democracy into a farce was obvious in some European countries. In East Europe, we are now witnessing the incredible show of alliances among church, mafia syndicate and political power. (...) Adaptation of religion to globalization and modernism, as well as the return of Inquisition right in the middle of the XXIst century will constitute two cultural-polemic themes of special interest." (*Ibidem*: 150) Even if the approached themes are extremely serious, from the perspective of the audience, "the moral content of the messages is of no interest, the only interesting aspect being *excitation*." (*Ibidem*: 183)

As a professional, Vişniec is caught in the trap of the classical principles of the audio-visual messages' structuration (standardization, uniformization, stereotypy, homogenization, simplification, underlying of the meaning etc.), however he will adopt other, more personalized

formal strategies, involving a modified syntax, creation and maintenance of tension and *suspense*, verbal challenging, specific restructuration, a new organization form. Here present will be reflections on the double significance of the sonorous message: *representative meaning*, descriptive, with a cognitive function, and *expressive meaning*, of aesthetic nature, bearing affective value. The irreversible nature of radio broadcasting makes that "once uttered, each word cannot be *withdrawn*, any longer, nor can it be *modified*". (*Ibidem*: 147) If the oral word represents "the primary meaning", the written one is "a secondary sign", bearing a different potential. "By its irreversibility in time, as well as by its special ubiquity, radio broadcasting assures rapid information and pseudo-participation to events produced all over the world". (*Ibidem*: 138)

Matei Vişniec analyzes the mechanism of the scoops ("important information or sensational news, characterized by exclusivity"), which may be prepared, built, produced for reflecting the relation between information and fiction¹⁰ in a specific way. Consequently, a *collective world scoop* may become only the scoop with "a certain logistic determination, and no clear ideas upon the scenario". (*Ibidem*: 31) For Vişniec the writer, the reportage is not only a pile of confessions, being meant – whenever possible – at following destinies and at narrating "their story": "These are the hidden messages of my *stories*." (*Ibidem*: 86) As already demonstrated above, any mediatic story is included in a process of *fictionalization* of the real world, in "a process of bringing reality into fiction"¹¹. The mediatic speech builds up its own reality, by negotiating with our imaginary world. (*cf.* Charaudeau 1997: 237) At the other extremity, the receiver requires and obtains stories: "As a spectator watching the show of information, which he expects to be as spectacular as possible, the super-informed person is actually behaving as a consumer of fiction." (Vişniec 2011: 183)

Great writers have been always characterized by a specific equilibrium between content and their technical means. Along his whole novel, Vişniec will make multiple references to the characteristics of the language and of the means available to the information media, invoking

knowledge on the different parts of the discourse, on the theory of figures, skeleton, components, of specialized rhetorics.

It is exactly here that the experience of Matei Vișniec as a writer will intervene, by imagining scenarios for the introduction of fiction into the reality, proposing to give up the commonly applied narrative and compositional strategies. Nevertheless, Vișniec recognizes that "this game which disturbs the hierarchy of news is stronger than me. I have the impression that I can break up the feeble rules of journalism, which shackle us all, the journalists, in a carcass of docility and obedience. Our submission in front of the *unique source*." (*Ibidem*: 73) The proposal put forward by the journalist is often the result of his experience as a writer, such as, for example, introduction in his reportages of the game modifying the hierarchy of news, or by using, in the beginning of his show, of a metaphor suggesting human madness. When proposing his metaphors, Vișniec always introduces an extra-metaphysical level: "In any happening – be it the most commonplace of all, be it comic, unusual or absurd – I always detect its universal dimension, its metaphysical force." (*Ibidem*: 68) Once again, it is the writer that will occupy the leading position: "Personally, between a news item which picks up *world's breaking points* (to cite Glucksman), and a common information, I certainly prefer the exciting poetry of the former." (*Ibidem*: 85) Such an assertion is important, as "information as such is neutral, possessing no explosive force." (Șoitu 1993: 117) However, considering that "the whole communication process is but a continuous dialectics of meaning and significance", some "*level and amplitude*" of the meaning shall be also assumed. Here too, the postmodern epoch witnesses some modification, when "in the process of universal semiosis, an insuperable gap occurred between the significant and the significate". (Manolescu 2003: 156) Vișniec will discuss this aspect in the study entitled *The mediatic capital*: "Under normal conditions, the word is a meaning-carrier. The mediatic explosion of our times has nevertheless evacuated the word from the expectations of the audience", (Vișniec 2010: 225) the conclusion being that we are simply facing a disaster of intellectual nature: "We are all the children of

a seven-headed monster, namely the TV set. While our eyes get specialized to catch as numerous images as possibly, our brain, initially created as an organ of thought, gets atrophied". (*Ibidem*)

It is precisely this aspect that differentiates between information and reading, whereas the reader is seen by the mass-media agents as an enemy: "one who reads Thomas Mann or Dostoievski is *our foe*." (Vișniec 2100: 122)¹² This explains the development of strategies specific mainly to journalism: "Another method *to peacefully take over the cultural time* are our filming of novels, meant at making known the masterpieces of the great literature", (*Ibidem*: 123) or issuing of abstract-catalogues which substitute full reading. If the journalist Vișniec observes that he lives in an epoch wholly depending on information, the writer will bitterly observe that these mutants are perfectly OK without reading, however they can no longer live without information, especially without the information-image¹³.

The idea desperately put forward by Vișniec is to consolidate the reflexive aspect of the newsreels, hoping that, in this way, information could regain its function of improving life, of making it human again: "the only direction you could possibly take is that which will bring you to the surface once more. Humanity has no other escape but to regain its dignity, now, when it has reached the bottom of the marsh." (*Ibidem*: 67)

In the end of his novel, Vișniec imagines a possible transformation of the world by changing the vector of the communicate into a positive one: "From now on, all I shall announce to the world will be full of light and magic." (*Ibidem*: 259)

Unlike his colleagues, Vișniec, who is also a writer, understands that "our transmissions need some poetry." (*Ibidem*: 103) A good example is provided by the Institute of Theater of Avignon, which organizes "a course of systematic tracing of the poetic sources in everyday life", thus creating a movement by means of which "more and more numerous people begin to seek for the poetic meaning of their life, as well as from the tiny nuclei of poetry hidden in the most commonplace things surrounding us". (*Ibidem*: 261)

In this way, Matei Vişniec brings back the world within the limits of normality and aestheticism: "I keep on rummaging through the superposed layers of today, searching for poetic veins or at least for some *pearls* capable of throwing a different light upon the mystery of reality, a more human light, carrying metaphoric connotations." (*Ibidem*: 103)

Such a subjective and lyrical change of optics is immediately and promptly appreciated by the listeners, who congratulate him for "having joined the opposition". (*Ibidem*: 122) In this respect, the concept of "resistance through culture" is especially familiar to Vişniec, actually representing, on his coming to France, the subject of his *PhD* thesis. Nowadays, it is this concept that defines his noble mission and his original style.

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Endnotes

1. 'A world without disorder is synonymous to the death of journalism, to the death of media, to the death of the means of information of humanity. So you can understand why the media machine is not compatible with the entire peacekeeping of human adventure. Nobody is interested in the news from paradise, the universal serenity does not bring about

- any emotional chill. In order for the media machine to function it needs a whole army of desecrated creators of disorder. We need bold, imaginative creators of disorder.' (Visniec, *Preventive Disorder*, p. 37)
2. 'The press is so capable, so restless, so chaotic and full of surprises, that no truth matches it.' (Preda, 11)
3. 'The machine is so well greased that not even today the investigation and analysis journalism is no longer possible, the information media does not hire us anymore for this... No, journalism today means to go shopping, to make your own supplies straight from the image directors and to put everything back on sale on the big market through newspapers, radio or TV station you are the representative of.' (Visniec, *Preventive Disorder*, p. 194)
4. 'All western civilization enemies are ready to be advertised in the western media of information, all enemies of democracy are ready to keep a press section in the democratic countries press.' (Visniec, *Preventive Disorder*, p. 20)
5. 'our civilization is but a form of hypocrite ballet with imposed rules. The Wikileaks is nothing but the beginning of a new era. As terrorism has put an end to its media power, our Agency bets for the next ten years on preventive disorder offered by transparency.' (p. 61)
- 'The next ten years the preventive disorder will almost exclusively be generated by the publication of certain secret documents on the planet. The media machine will feed on diplomatic, economic, politic, scientific, medical, technological and financial secrets, and also from other ones or sexual and personal nature.' (Visniec, *Preventive Disorder*, p. 61)
6. 'I too feel, as George does, that dead of this world have invaded my every day life. The same as George and as other hundreds, thousands, maybe tens of thousands of journalists on the planet, I begin my news with the latest murders and massacres or with the latest sensational declarations uttered by politicians I hate. I wonder, how many journalists, on this planet, are subject to the same reflex: in order for the news to be 'cool' we need at least one more festering wound which has just appeared on the body of humanity.' (Visniec, *Preventive Disorder*, p. 58)
7. 'The voice of the evil fascinates from the media point of view, we have to recognize it. The media machine abhors educators, moralists and humanists. In short, the media machine considers the preachers of 'the good' as boring. The voices of the evil, on the other hand always bring about a growth of the audience and an obvious emotional thrill. (Visniec, *Preventive Disorder*, p. 19)
8. 'Most of the words we hear on the radio or TV are pronounced by people who normally should be in prisons or psychiatric hospitals.' (Visniec, *Preventive Disorder*, p. 19)

9. 'If the postmodernist world is one of multiple realities, of short narratives, nonlinear, the postmodernist world is that of generalized entertainment. Nothing goes unless is fun, and ludic fallacy became the fundamental value of the culture at the beginning of the century. Virtual reality, cyberorganisms, thematic space etc. acquired a common denominator, entertainment.' (Constantinescu, p. 16)
10. 'Suddenly the journalist has the epiphany of the golden mine which this subject represents. He obtains the broadcast coverage on the blocked ore and maneuvers its recovery in such a way as to last the longest possible'. (Visniec, p. 30)
11. 'the great present day feuilletons may be compared, as they have become a kind of narrative shows manufactured following a unique recipe based on some precise ingredients such as sparking emotion and voiarism' (Visinieci, *Preventive Disorder*, p. 161)
12. 'Between us and the person who reads *Muntele vrajit* there is in fact force relationship. In fact we are in conflict, in a conflict without issue, our positions being irreconcilable...' (Visniec, *Preventive Disorder*, p. 123)
13. 'These information consumers are, in fact, the mutants of a new world where everything became information. The mutants can not live anymore without information. They can live all their life without reading a book, but they can not live without information and especially without the image-information.' (Visniec, *Preventive Disorder*, p. 90).