# CATHARSIS AND AND CREDIBILITY IN THE TODAY MEDIA SPACE

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**Abstract:** In this study we aim to analyze how a story is built in today media space. Besides the linguistics norms concerning the meaning issues, the media story is a source of catharsis which can consume psychosocial energies. The public event becomes a media event and so it becomes an aesthetic event. The contemporary soul burns the pain and the anger watching TV, doing symbolic gestures, looking for uniformity. For our case study we chose to analyze the stories around the disaster from a Romanian nightclub; during a concert, a fire started and over 60 people died. We aim to describe the lexical ritual that we identified in the media discourse. We describe the patterns that generate meaning. We show how the subjectivity and the ideology bring closer the media discourse and the fictional one, and so we see that the report on such a tragedy means more empathy and less information, more emotional release and less storage of meanings. We can speak about the haste of a collective self to impose the ritual anger as a unique direction in front of a disaster.

**Introduction**

On the 30th of October, 2015, a fire started in a nightclub from Bucharest (Romania). The fire was extremely bad – 64 people died and 186 were wounded. The fire started during a concert of a rock band, Goodbye to Gravity, which had organized that concert to announce its new album, "Mantras of War". The public had free entrance.

The research showed the fire was triggered by the fireworks used during the concert. The fireworks set on fire the polyurethane sponge (a lightweight sponge, used for noise reduction). The fire caused wound or death by combustion, asphyxia, carbon monoxide and other gases poisoning. The impact of the event forced the Ministry of the Interior to set The Red Code for intervention, and the Romanian Government to enact three days of national mourning. The emotional impact was so powerful that many protests started all over the country.

The Colectiv Nightclub was functioning based only on an own responsibility statement of its owners. In this statement is specified that the nightclub has a 425 meters surface and only 80 seats for customers. Many other documents are necessaries for opening a place like this, but most of them are issued based only on this own responsibility statement. After the fire, the witnesses said that usually hundreds of persons had used to come over there. In the night we are analyzing, there were around 350 persons in the club.

Moreover, the nightclub didn't have the fire brigade's approval neither for fire security or pyrotechnic shows. Nonetheless, the representatives of the national control bodies had visited many times this place, but they hadn't had anything to report about the customers' safety within the club.

As a result of the massive protests following this fire, Prime Minister Victor Ponta resigned on November 4, 2015, along with his government, and also the Mayor of Sector 4, Cristian Popescu Piedone. The club's owners, the fire-fighters who controlled the nightclub and the firemen's suppliers were arrested.

**Questions and hypothesis**

The emotion and the expressiveness can affect, can fake the reality, can jam the report, can even transform the narration in fabula, the history in fiction. We can speak about a sort of trivialization of emotions. Some researchers spoke about emotional public reactions as a kind of "utterly insincere" hysteria (Jameson, 2002, p. 297). This marketing game was also analyzed by E. Ann Kaplan (2005), who identified an "empty empathy" regarding the level of these emotional public reactions. About that same emotional exhaustion spoke researchers as Moeller (1999), who used the expression "compassion fatigue", Dominique Wolton, who used the word „detachment" (1997), or Szasz, who argued on a sort of "public emotional anaesthesia" (2007).

With these ideas, we came to the following questions on the role and impact of this media world on the public state of mind:

Q1. Are the expressiveness and the emotion intricate traits or are they writing rules, rules for proposing the text in the competition for public reception?

Q.2. How does the journalistic text touch the emotional public sphere?

*Hypothesis 1*

The event had a powerful emotional impact over the civic society. We believe the type and quality of the impact is due exclusively to the press,

because the journalists wrote about it in an aesthetic manner. In fact, the journalists' attitude was closer to the writers' one. We could say, in this emotional context, that the journalistic text is based on a mimetic attitude towards the literary text. This time, the literary text in itself is the object of mimesis for reality, for understanding that reality.

*Hypothesis 2*

The aesthetic object implies aesthetic attitude and reception. Thus, the media absorbed and consumed psychic energy, and moved them from the public space into the private space of media reception.


**Methodology**

Many other researchers have analyzed the emotion generally and the emotional impact in public space. One has spoken about the emotional literacy (Orbach, 2001) and, of course, about the emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995). Others as Reay (2000) or (Thomson, 1998) have spoken about the emotional capital. One have spoke about emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), or emotional public sphere (Richards, 2007, 2009) in the context of the politically debates. In a very well documented paper Barry Richards and Gavin Rees (2011) find a link between the 'emotional public sphere' and the 'emotional governance', paying a deliberate and informed attention to the emotional dynamics of the public (p. 853).

As Lazarus shows in his study on emotion, the implication ways of the Ego (Self) and the border points in between the sense and sensitivity are: self and social esteem, moral values, the ideals of the Ego, personal meanings and convictions, the relationships and wellness, the existential purposes. These are the keys, the starters, the ways and the possibilities to provoke emotional reactions. We find the best explanation into the Baron and Boudreau's work

from 1987 (Lazarus, 2011, p. 162). They see that between the Self (personality) and the medium there is a complementarily relationship, similar to the relation between the lock and its key (Baron and Boudreau, 1987, in Lazarus, p. 162). Looking back, we can find the continuous provocation of the exclusive emotional reactions.

As Lazarus states, each type of emotion implies a pivotal relational tag. We look only over those who interfere with our case study. So, the anger implies a degrading offense to the Self. The anxiety is nourished by confronting an existential and uncertain danger. The fear implies confronting the immediate, overwhelming, real physical danger.

### *Emotion and media*

Journalism means creativity, expressiveness and individualized lifestyles (Hanna and Sanders, 2008). Maybe that's why Barry Richards and Gavin Rees say „Raw news has both a cognitive and affective component" (p. 855) and C. Dent (2008) sees a link between the stylistics of confessions and journalism. More and more, the emotional language and the trauma vocabulary can be found in the journalistic text.

Barry Richards and Gavin Rees have claimed that through this more and more present trait of journalistic practice a distance from the objectivity ideal has been produced:

"(a) the threat to value-neutrality – since the journalist might be inclined, on the basis of his or her political feelings, to take a particular side in a con¬flict; and (b) the threat to detached pursuit of the reporting task – if, for example, a journalist prioritized what he or she believed to be a source's well-being". (p. 864)

Timothy Recuber (2011) stressed the link between the emotion propagation and this need for authenticity we find in the journalistic discourse. The emotional role in a text, in fact the role of the expressiveness should be to argue the authenticity, to sustain the credibility. But it doesn't have to replace the meaning. Not to give significance. There were researchers (Timothy Recuber, for example) who identified a "changing understanding of trust" (p. 101) for the sake of authenticity.

Other researchers have pointed out the very short distance from emotion to expressiveness when creating panic, the one that Cohen (2011) named "moral panic". By 1999, Glassner, as well as Furedi (1997) and Stearns (2006), was speaking about the fact that media was inducing a "culture of fear" using a precise type of stories. The discussion is very complicated, because there is also a discussion about the media agenda. Often, this excessive emotiveness was isolated in the sensationalist journalism area. But, in our view, this idea hasn't been useful anymore since a long time ago, at least regarding the media struggles, because the struggle, the conflict is the pivot of the information, as we know from P. Charaudeau (2005). Through panic, the cognition itself is questioned, and the cognitive link with the contemplated object as well.

### *Aesthetic emotion*

Speaking about the relation between art and emotion, Lazarus found a double and equal implication of the producer and of the receiver. So, the public emotional involvement is an effect generated from two directions. First, there is the author's ability to express, then, equally important, there is "our ability to identify ourselves with drama characters" (Lazarus, p. 148). The auctorial ability has to start the "important human capacity to connect to the aesthetic emotions" (p. 148) and the key used by journalist in this case is the amazement. Regarding amazement, Pareyson (1977) argued that it is built on surprise and

contemplation. The amazement "causes a disturbing and up roaring emotion" and it is inevitable (p. 267-268). This could be the first step to build a type of receiving that we can call passive, aesthetic – a sort of a patient, after the narrative grammar.

**Case study. adevarul.ro**

*An overview of the media during the analyzed period*

In the first days after the disaster, an average of 50 articles per day was published, and the emotional impact of the event could be found both in the articles wave and in the type of approach angles and the quality of the information. Thus, the Media Organizations Convention (an organization made up of over 25 media organizations) has published an analysis according to which a part of the press "abdicated from professional principles" and "contributed to the tragedy of the Collective Nightclub" („Analysis and recommendations. How did aggravate a part of the press the Collective club drama", Media Organizations Convention, November 23, 2015). In the conclusions of this analysis, it was shown that, immediately after the media event, media channels repeatedly broadcast explicit images with a strong emotional impact; they emphasized gruelling, morbid elements; they explicitly and insistently expressed vulnerability (wound, pain); and "they presented the events disrespectfully and without any kind of empathy towards the sufferings of those involved" (2015). Unverified information has been published and various valuable judgments have been made.

The National Audiovisual Council, the Audiovisual Control Forum in Romania, has applied a series of sanctions to several media channels for skidding while covering the event. Thus, Romania TV received a fine of 30,000 lei and a public summons; Antena 3 and B1TV received a fine of 5000 lei and a

public notice, and Realitatea TV a public notice.


*adevarul.ro*

adevarul.ro is a quality online channel with the biggest number of unique visitors per day, around 300.000. It is a national publication but has newsrooms and / or correspondents across the country. Between October 31, 2015 and November 30, 2015, around 2000 articles were published on the topic we analyzed. Other thousands of entries refer to images, blogs, videos. We have selected and analyzed 250 materials and we have tried to present what we call narrative rituals, resulted by creating a textual world in which the reader was challenged to spend as much time as possible. The materials are ample, with multiple angles of approach.

Starting October 30 the site was powered by dozens of materials on that subject. The materials were made according to journalistic norms, but, quite soon, there was given an equal status also to the materials borrowed from blogs, causing a large affluence of subjective texts. Therefore, in addition to the materials based on journalistic means, many others texts were brought from the blogosphere, from the social media, not only quotations, but even whole materials.

The publication has developed a sort of rhetoric of panic and of fear that sustained the unique direction of signification offered by the journalists. Formally, texts are predominantly descriptive. Descriptive pictures are supported by many quotes, many statements - statements made directly by journalists, but also statements from the social media, from personal letters etc. Hence, a powerful dramatization effect brings these materials closer to the spectacular text. We have identified, as a writing attitude, a pure mimicry close to the theatrical writing. The journalists didn't intend to render an epic; they just

seem to have calked the drama of the perceived world. Besides these articles, there are the journalists' opinion texts, intensely confessional and emotional.

The narration of events, namely the representation of actions and events, in the classical definition, is presented by journalists through meta-references such as "film" or "tragedy", respectively "the film of the tragedy". The "family air" (Wittgenstein, 2001) created on the site has been irradiated in a world built on the figures of excess – the sublime and the grotesque. On many occasions, real-world was decoded through the lyrics of a hip-hop band, or those of the dead rockers, but also through biblical motifs, in a constant effort to engage affection in the experience. An aesthetic reality is emerging, and its resorts are both sensory and moral.

We noticed the concern of journalists to create "narrative identity" (P. Ricoeur, 1985) as a place to solve the gap between fiction and history (P. Ricoeur, 1990). The textual world is divided into antagonist structures, by a polarization of the actants: the church vs. rock music, the church vs. civil society, politicians vs. civil society; also, we have found a macro structural dichotomy between heroes and aggressors; in each, the heroes are: physicians, young, civil society; and the aggressors are: the system, the church, politicians.

The culprits are not identified as a result of an analysis or research, but they are indicated and condemned by lexical interventions such as "parliamentary ineptitudes" (Zachmann, 2015) "hallucinatory theories" (Zachmann, 2015), "the heads of the system have just begun to fall" (Spridon, 2015). Businessmen and politicians are the actors on the corruption scenes, the expression of the scandalous rush for money and power. The victims of this battle are the young people, seen as the captive victims in an "involuntary sacrifice" (Ciuhu, 2015). The victims are pulled out (or not) of the "claws of death" (Stănilă, 2015) and of the "avalanche of wounded" (Spridon, 2015), they

were sacrificed and not forgiven (an anti-phrase that brings the public consensus on the absence of forgiveness without a sin and the consensus on the guilty people in the political class).

*Information. Warning. Panic*

The journalistic papers followed this route: disclaimer - development - result. The narration of an event was directly related to the original image and imposed an immediate result. So, each article imperatively required a result.

The retrospective shows the journalists' insistence on the three stages of catastrophe production: warning, confrontation or impact, and the post-impact (Lazarus, p. 148) in the configuration of the referential world. During the period we analyzed, journalists looked for various reasons for warning, proposed different situations of confrontation, revealed multiple areas of impact that they sought to extend also at the level of disability.

The series of warnings:

- Identifying places with similar disaster potential throughout the country, and repeatedly publishing them;

- Dangers of exhaustion of blood transfusions;

- The medical system's inability to cope with the problems caused by the accident.

The journalists have built a series of confrontations:

- With politicians;

- With authors of some public statements that did not enter into the area of acceptability of the context (politicians, public figures);

- With the Orthodox Church.

The journalists have described the event impact by:

- Asserting and demonstrating a national scale impact through systematically reminding the chronology of the event;

-        Transforming reports into mortuary ads – quite quickly, the articles became a count of the dead, of an equal expressive intensity, paroxysmal, with the essential impact; then a count of the protest days.

An important role in maintaining the tension and the emotional effect had the expectations (Lazarus, p. 148). Thus, journalists sought and speculated links with previous actions of protagonists (which they have presented as premonitions), and they also published articles about what might happen elsewhere, and the imminence of similar events. The narrative world was rapidly populated by threatening spectra, by dangers meant to be indefinitely repeated.

Another way to feed the irritability, the emotionality, was to remember other situations with similar magnitude, but with the warning that even then the effects hadn't materialized at the level of administration. Nothing has changed in the system. In this frame, the disgust and the compassion are the emotions that journalists explicitly and systematically invoke. A space of resonance, a space of contextualization of the recipient into the text, respectively into the world of the text is created through disgust and compassion.

The empathy, the astonishment, the panic, and the expectations describe the milestones of a road through which the journalists have led the public to anger.

*Anger architecture*

Anger - vengeance - suffering are the emotional landmarks that every article experiences. Anger is built and maintained in the text by informing about the imminent but avoidable dangers, and only the ignoring of public safety by the administration led to this catastrophe. The theme of reflection is, as shown above, the feeling of an offense.

Another step in creating narrative identities was the building of characters that cannot be challenged: the idealization and intangibility of the victims. Victims are invoked as in a ritual: young people, children, angels, and desperate parents looking for their children. It shows how the important values and beliefs (we adhere to) have been violated - honor, integrity and morality of the world in which we live (Lerner, 1970, 1980) - and which have been integrated into the identity of the ego (Lazarus, p. 293). This journalistic rage is designed to generate an attack; because the guilty ones must be punished.

So, on the other side, there would be what we identified as emotions-result. Since Aristotle, the blame and the anger have been interconnected (Lazarus, p. 234). The guilt is in relation to the transgression of a moral imperative, and the shame is seen as the inability to rise to the Ideal of Ego.

Journalists give the direction of reading and meaning. They were looking to endorse one meaning, a unique significance of the event. By releasing emotions, through expressive blocks, they no longer tell the truth, but they show it. They do not want to be credible, they're photographing, describing what they see, looking for the absolute image, suited to render the real life – so they say. Expressions and evaluation such as political inertia, hallucinating theories, disaster, "the inferno broke" (Tatu, 2015), "they ran like rats" (Ardelean, 2015) etc. are the little but very relevant meaning directions for the journalists attitude. They are the ones who offer the knowledge, information, but also the evaluation of the event, of the meaning. Emotion is precisely the result of such an assessment (Lazarus, p. 233) because "emotion is a response to a certain type of significance" (Lazarus, p. 233).

Authorities are guilty of failing to control the situation. Moreover, journalists assert that the primordial mistake, *amartia*, is not the result of an accident, it is a willful action, an action in contempt, the ignorance of the other.

Guilt requires the atonement and the need for punishment, especially when the injury is severe and unjustified (Lazarus, p. 324). The oppositional pledge of guilt is shame, namely the tendency of the self to hide its deeds (Lazarus, p. 324). In our interpretation, if the culprits are quickly identified in politicians, this hurry and insistence also hide the protection of the public, a disguise of a collective guilt, materialized in ignoring generally accepted states of things. The shame and the argumentation of a system fault propel compassion, disgust, anger, revolt.

*Information and Catharsis*

Journalists have achieved the effect of catharsis, we could say in the letter and the spirit of Aristotle's definition: "Tragedy is an imitation of an action that through mercy and fear produces the purification of such emotions". Journalists have selected and replayed (imitated, according to Aristotle's word) events and elements that generate emotions (passions): mercy and fear.

Very interesting were the predictability of writing and, implicitly, the attitude of journalists. Not the novelty was important in selecting the subjects, but imposing the guilty ones by presenting the same types of information:

- the description of the fallen victims ("burned flowing skin") (Răduţă, 2015);

- despair (and heroism) of physicians who are insufficiently endowed with logistics;

- human qualities of cleverness (intelligent, talented, young);

- administrative chaos;

- inadequate responses of politicians.

These meaning sequences were well repeated throughout the month we analyzed.

This repetition made us think of E.R. Dodds' (1998) considerations about the aesthetic attitude of the Greeks and then we noticed more similarities. The auctorial intentionality has something of the telestic or ritually madness, whose protector is Dionysus (1998, p. 65). As Dodds points out, the social implications of the Dionysian rituals were cathartic. Dionysian rituals had a tension release function (1998, p.74). Paroxysmal suffering in the text, contemplating the burning images from the text, the receiver identifies a valve to release the frustration, the anger in the face of danger. The effect is that the recipient experiences an aesthetic solution to the problem: attacking the text means attacking the system.

Thus, the camouflaged collective guilt, as we have shown above, is translated into the terms of Dodds, by *hybris*, that anxiety of guilt, the sin whose price is death (1998, p. 37). Resignation to *moira*, to the fate, is the ancestral fault of the Romanians, is the crime to be punished for. In this annoyance of guilt, we identified the mobile of the media, "that's the tradition with us", a commentator complains in his text (Nicolescu, 2015). The feeling is also to be found in the message of the mother of a victim, rated as "emotional" by journalists: "You suffered atrocious torments to give us time to understand and accept the fatality" (Răduţă, 2015).

The concern of journalists to polarize the discourse and to channel the negative energies towards politicians covers this feeling of collective guilt. We say this because in Romania these "on our own responsibility" approvals represent a general acceptance of a bureaucratic formalism.

The shame mechanism and the camouflage of guilt made articles on the idea of citizens' vulnerability. The Greeks, in Dodds' observations, had the feeling of an overwhelming Power and Wisdom (which) "oppress Man, preventing him from rising above his status" (1998, p. 35-36). In our

interpretation, this is the Establishment against which journalists write. Almost every journalist has this Nemesis's affection, inhabited by a "right indignation" (1998, p. 37) not to the resignation and inaction of the citizens, but to the system.

**Conclusions**

The rethinking of the classic features of journalistic discourse can be an explanation for the structural, stylistic mutations we notice in the new journalistic writing. The expression and the emotion no longer relate only to the area of sensationalist journalism, but it extends to the journalism of political debate, to the social journalism, to the narration of facts. Facts are sacred - emotions are necessary, we can say today. "Dramatization of information amplifies the dramatization of events" said D. Wolton (1997, p. 255) in his analysis of communication, which would lead, according to the same researcher, to a "communication crisis" (p. 255).

From our point of view, we can no longer discuss about journalism as about a type of discourse that can exclude expressivity and emotion (R1). These have become immanent to journalistic language, which must be controlled by the editing rules, and the rituals of translating reality into the text.

Through victimization there is cultivated empathy or emotional response of the public to what they receive (R2). We consider this empathy as an aesthetic media experience. If the simple reception can now include the recipients in the blended feelings, so that they can declare a trauma; it means that empathy no longer refers only to an outsourcing of the attitude towards the object of reception, but also to an internalization of the emotionally content, to a personalized processing. This process is a classical aesthetic experience, as it has been defined from Aristotle up to the present times.

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