

Media, Communication, and the Relevance of Caragiale's Work Today

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Abstract: Cristian Stamatoiu discusses in his paper "Media, Communication, and the Relevance of Caragiale's Work Today" media structures in the corpus of Romanian writer and thinker Ion Luca Caragiale (1852-1912). Stamatoiu argues that in addition to the artistic sophistication of his work, Caragiale anticipated the impact of new media revolution and its forms as an imitation of "pathological situations" of public discourse and communication per se. Caragiale is, therefore, a writer of surprisingly up-to-date relevance today because, despite his air of the *belle époque*, in his grotesque farces and in his short stories we discover mental structures found in and characteristic of manipulations of and in the world of media in the time of Caragiale as well as today. These texts are also, as Stamatoiu argues, examples of ambitious ignorance which becomes public via journalism. In this study analyzed via examples from nineteenth-century newspapers and Caragiale's framework of thought, Stamatoiu highlights the systemic resemblances within a corrupted structure of media communication animated in contemporary Romanian media. The work of Caragiale has not been translated to date to English.

Cristian STAMATOIU

Media, Communication, and the Relevance of Caragiale's Work Today

While a representative of classic Central European drama of the Romanian version, Ion Luca Caragiale (1852-1912) is, I propose, paradoxically a realist with accents of naturalism. This characteristic of Caragiale's work is based in the evolution of Romanian literature in its European context. Owing to less than favourable circumstances of history, Romanian culture began to flourish after the 1848 revolutions in Europe and thus the founders of Romanian literature asserted themselves by 1870. In a general way, one can say that their works represent a fusion between previously opposing artistic movements in the West and their own Romanian versions and development of a national literature. Consequently, these "classics" were not classics proper, but romanticist texts with classical influences, such as those by the national poet Mihai Eminescu and realist texts such as by Ioan Slavici or Ion Creanga, or realist texts with classical and naturalist influences such as by Caragiale. These examples of four rivals and friends at the same time asserted themselves on their own but within the aesthetic environment created by the spiritual leader Titu Maiorescu around the "Junimea" ("The Youth") literary circle and his journal *Convorbiri literare* (Literary Conversations). Maiorescu preached a Hegel-based aestheticism adapted to Romanian artistic and cultural conditions. According to the principles of *l'art pour l'art*, he also favored the gratuitousness of the artistic act while this did not prevent him from criticizing the production of form when without content from social life. He had the appearance of a liberal, but in practice he was, rather, a mild conservative who was determined to modernize Romania according to the European standards of the nineteenth century. In his vision, this process had to gain shape by means of a systematic assimilation of European values while maintaining the national traditions of Romania. This approach was in contradiction with those of his liberal contemporaries who were convinced that it was enough to formally implement democratic institutions thus to obtain authentic democracy almost automatically. As party leader, minister, prime minister, and political journalist, Maiorescu wanted to draw attention to the malfunction of modern Romanian institutions which in his opinion represented a still flourishing feudalism. As a cultural personality, he managed to gather around him (relatively) young writers and intellectuals who would become the founders of modern Romanian literature. He also impacted with their writing with a sense of anti-urbanism, for example in the case of Creanga and Slavici), social criticism based on romantic notions such as in the case of Eminescu, or cruel ironical realism driven to the absurd such as in the case of Caragiale.

Caragiale was born in 1852 at Haimanale, near the city of Ploiesti, in a family of Macedo-Romanian origin and a family whose paternal line was deeply involved in the emancipation of Romanian theatre. His father, Luca, an actor in his youth, and his uncles Costache and Iorgu, were actors, playwrights, and patrons of theatrical groups and contributed to the development of young Luca towards the world of theatre. Consequently, Caragiale attended rhetorical and miming courses taught by his uncle Costache at the Academy of Music in Bucharest in 1868-1870. Afterwards, he would make his debut as a literary and music critic while making a living among other things as the maître d' of a restaurant which of course provided him with excellent character studies for his later work and that allowed him to observe various social strata of the city involved in the process of modernization. Thanks to his restaurant experience, Caragiale was able to synthesize some of his most prominent protagonists in his work such as that of Mitica: this popular diminutive for Mihai (Michael) would become an exponent for an entire class of good-for-nothing, superficial, and moody characters who added to the picturesque of that Bucharest which many called at the time "Little Paris." A promoter of the satire and founder of *Moftul Român* (The Romanian Caprice), he would become known after delivering lectures on drama and theatre at the "Junimea" literary circle, followed by the premieres of plays on the stage of the National Theatre in Bucharest. Both acclaimed and disputed, his output of dramatic works such as his comedies "O noapte furtunoasa" ("A Stormy Night"), "O scrisoare pierduta" ("A Lost Letter"), "Conul Leonida fata cu reactiunea" ("The Honorable Leonida Faced with Conservative Opposition," "D'ale carnavalului" ("Of the Carni-

val" and his tragedy "Napasta" ("The Misfortune"), became texts of the Romanian canon. His satirical short stories "Momente" ("Moments") together with his speculative/fantastic texts inspired by the Balkan picturesque come to complete and give new nuances to an artistic universe which is still perceived very up-to-date after over a century.

During Caragiale's time in Bucharest his outspokenness and criticisms brought about a series of enmities that ultimately drove him to resign from the direction of the National Theatre and he was embroiled in a lengthy and tiresome trial. However, after this period of tribulations Caragiale came into an inheritance that secured him financially and allowed him to voluntarily exile himself to Berlin. There he wrote mainly political texts and attempted to write a sequel to his "O noapte furtunoasa" ("A Stormy Night") with the title "Titirca Sotirescu & Comp" ("Titirca Sotirescu and Company"), of which he only accomplished a draft and some scenes. Residing in Berlin, he refused to participate in any celebrating event held in his honor in Bucharest because he did not want the people who had harassed him before to become benefit from events initiated by the few friends who really appreciated him. Surrounded by his family, Caragiale died in Berlin in 1912 where, according to his wishes, he was buried. Caragiale left behind a problematic cultural legacy which exercises a hypnotic -- if not uncomfortable -- attraction on his readers today. For instance, there is the anecdotal story told by the former director of the National Theater in Bucharest, Ion Cojar, during a TV interview that after a successful performance of his "O scrisoare pierduta" ("A Lost Letter") in Japan in the 1990s a local journalist who had never heard of Caragiale asked during the Romanian actors' press conference to be given the playwright's e-mail address in order to inquire about the sources which had enabled him -- Caragiale -- to learn, before everybody else did, the details of a political-erotic scandal which made the headlines.... This rather outlandish example suggests what I am indicating with title of my paper, namely the contemporaneity of his work. I propose that many Caragiale-type situations and characters occur in contemporary reality and that this frequency can hardly be explained by mere coincidences. The basis of my argumentation rests on the understanding that anthropological constants of social communication are at work behind the mechanisms and processes of a literary world (for more detail, see my *I.L. Caragiale si patologiile mass-media* [I.L. Caragiale and the Pathologies of Mass Media]). The core tension in the work of Caragiale is, generally speaking, the problematic of an apparently free circulation of matters in either private or public media documents. In his "O noapte furtunoasa" ("A Stormy Night"), for example, we find a funny pseudo-analysis of a pretended political article, an exchange of love letters, and the confusion between number 9 and number 6. Or, his "O scrisoare pierduta" ("A Lost Letter"), as the title itself suggests, is a comedy centered on the chaotic itinerary of another lost love letter on whose publication depended the results of the local elections, which would be won by an outsider, Agamemnon Dandanache (the name is a comical antithesis between the first name of the Greek hero and the noun meaning hubbub) sent "from the centre" consequent to a similar blackmail, but at the highest level. And his "Conul Leonida fata cu reactiunea" ("The Honorable Leonida Faced with Conservative Opposition") highlights the dependence of the individual on the media to such an extent that she looks for information about a so-called "rivolution" (as Leonida calls it) currently going on in yesterday's paper. The farce "D'ale carnavalului" ("Of the Carnival") reveals a kitschy atmosphere which is the stage for a burlesque carnival seen as a frenetic space open to mean erotic intrigues. Moreover, in the short stories of *Tema si variatiuni* ("Moments and Sketches") the world of Mitica/Mache/Lache/Tache witnesses dazzlingly absurd situations linked to the menial existence of lewd journalists, pitiful employees, or assorted parasites. Even the tragedy "Napasta" ("The Misfortune") begins with a scene in which the reading of a newspaper article anticipates, without anyone realizing it, the tragedy of a transcendental justice.

However, this typology of communication presented with events and processes of/in media is not a positive one: for Caragiale it covers aberrant messages emerging from a world of forms deprived of content and of persons deprived of personality (see Stamatoiu, *I.L. Caragiale* 13-28). Therefore, the typology becomes a pathology, which in Caragiale's terms translates by transforming the physiognomy into a "fixonomy," as it is called by two of his uncultivated characters in the short story "Justitie" ("Justice"), namely Leanca Vduva (Leanca the Widow) and Iancu Zugravu

(Iancu the House Painter). The protagonists approach this neologism by means of a hilarious popular etymology, by a dabbling explanation of "face expression" in terms of a "mask" (fixed physiognomy). And this "fixonomy" will constitute the symbol of an entire anthropological and cultural system corrupted up to the level of the alteration of the communication channels and of the media actors. In this way, Saussure's chain of communication is present in all its elements, with the remark that here it is about a chain of linguistic errors and horrors. By means of these factors, Caragiale's text acquires a high degree of literality and its texture, whose complexity leads to confusion and reflects reality. But what does one identify with within this dynamic and preponderous media-related "fixonomy"? First, there are the half-learned transmitters with their ridiculous -- although of course not according to them -- claims of omniscience. They play invariably the part of the intellectual who acts for public well-being by sharing their wisdom as journalists and/or lawyers. Within this category one may find the rumor makers, or the simple newsmongers and, of course, the sharks of the free press. They manipulate an already aberrant reality according to their pseudo-intellectual limitations and according to their own interest, thus contributing to an increasing general confusion. Well indoctrinated by a formal and theatrical democracy, public opinion does not emerge in Caragiale's texts in the space of the Agora. The activities of his journalists are influenced by political moguls, economic "kaid," the cliques of the press or, most often, by their own mercantile stupidity. It must be mentioned that most often there is a fusion between several of these situations, the result being embodied in prototypes such as Catavencu in "O scrisoare pierduta" ("A Lost Letter") and Rica Venturiano in "O noapte furtunoasa" ("A Stormy Night"). They perform under the sign of Zaharia Karkaleki, considered by Caragiale to be their spiritual patron because he is the first court journalist mentioned in Romanian mid-nineteenth-century documents. The typical situation for this category is represented by Mr. Caracudi, the journalist at the fictive publication of "Revolta nationala" ("The National Revolt") mentioned in the short story "Reportaj" ("Reportage") (107). He used to invent sensational news while drinking a cup of coffee in the Cismigiu Park just like one of his modern successors, the US-American journalist Jason Blair who was exposed as a humbug, for several dozens of his 700 articles published in the prestigious *New York Times* journal were invented!

Once established, the transmitter will interrogate the referent element and he will conceive and issue a Message, while taking into account his point of view and the nature of the communication channels which he will make use of. Our transmitter will follow this algorithm in an empirical and accurate manner, his intention being that of dominating as many individuals as possible, although he is nothing but a man without qualities, similar to all the others. To accomplish this purpose, he will naturally use the art of oratory -- even when it is not the necessary -- and written documents, especially printed ones, which account for the multitude of media elements in the decisive scenes of Caragiale's work. War in the modern world with its heavy reliance and impact in matters information implies the same pre-logical structure which is attempted by Caragiale's characters, because in the postmodernist era realities are less important than their media image. The only difference between the two historical times lies at a technological level: "The horse-driven tramway was replaced a long time ago by the bus, and the hackney coach with its cabman by the automobile, but you always come to find Miticas, or Maches, or Laches" ("Autobuzul a inlocuit, de mult, tramcarul, iar automobilul, trasura cu muscal, dar pe Mitica ori pe Mache si Lache continuam sa-I intalnim" (Vartic 17; all subsequent translations from the Romanian are mine). In the same context, one may notice that the Gutenberg galaxy was replaced by the Marconi galaxy and in today's world by the visual turn while nothing has changed at the level of mentalities and that have remained almost untouched. Caragiale identified the vitiated structures of a mostly media-related type of communication and immersed them in accessible narratives and thus his merit is all the more so important as he was able to analyze solely the psycho-linguistic phenomena developed in nineteenth-century newspapers. In turn, this does not prevent his matrices from being equally functional in the case of the electronic media. Caragiale does not describe the surface of the process, but he transfigures artistically its core in such a way that today, when the mystic attraction of the screen and of the loudspeaker replaces the kingdom of the letters, his typologies are more common than before. The similarities between Caragiale's pathologic matrices and those of the

contemporary world are so numerous that it suffices to emphasize only the Homeric cases of coincidence in the field of the referent and of the communication channel. Consequent to this approach, we notice how Caragiale dismantled the myth of scientific objectivity and of the objective journalist simply by watching reality through the media.

In the first case, he speaks in his "Statistica" ("Statistics") of the "illustrious statistician Bob Schmecker," whose family name means "taster" in German while it could also be a made-up version of the Romanian word "smecher," which means slyboots. In his genial stupidity, Schmecker holds that "In every revolution or uprising one may find the same public as in memorial services, parades and fires, that is, men, women, and children of both sexes" ("La orice revolutie sau turburare, ia parte acelas public care ia parte la luminatie, la parade, la foc, si adica: barbati, femei si copii de ambele sexuri") (*Tema si variatiuni* [Theme and Variations] 89). After absurd rather than erudite considerations on the revolutionaries' age, reasons, and convictions, he goes on with the problem of the "broken heads," of which in a hundred cases, we have "Not guilty... 75, Unconsciously guilty... 24, Consciously guilty... 1, With respect to the results of a popular uprising, per one million, we obtain the following: How many make direct use... 100, How many make indirect use... 100, The rest up to one million show a deficit!" ("Nevinovate... 75, Vinovate inconstient... 24, Vinovate constient... 1, În privinta rezultatelor unei miscari populare, calculate pe un milion de suflete, avem: Câti folosesc direct... 100, Câti folosesc indirect... 100, Restul pâna la un milion pagubesc. În adevar statistica e plina de învataminte!") (*Tema si variatiuni* 90) which is actually fully confirmed by the events shaking Central and East Europe in 1989, including post-Caragiale Romania. The second case is a reference to the short story "Atmosfera incarcata" ("Charged Atmosphere") where, according to the official newspaper of the opposition, "6000 citizens" ("6000 de cetateni") participated in a meeting, while the governmental newspaper speaks of "300 profligates, tramps, and derelicts" ("300 de destrabalati, derbedei si haimanale") (*Tema si variatiuni* 185). The reality of the facts must therefore be deduced following the author's line of reasoning: "Then, this is what I think: about 3000 people of all categories took part in that meeting" ("Atunci, zic eu, au fost la acea întrunire 3000 si ceva de oameni, fel de fel, si mai asa, si mai asa") (*Tema si variatiuni* 185). If the mechanisms of correction do not function, the only possible result is a preconceived message, obtained/drawn from an auto-parasitic way of thinking. And the most paradoxical result is that the stage is reached when the manipulator feels so comfortable about himself that, in his turn, he allows himself to be naturally mystified as a receiver. In this way, a state of general complicity is achieved where the manipulators become victims and the other way round, in a whirl of irresponsible gaiety.

Reflected in Caragiale's mirror, the "fixonomy" is a reversed image of the stylistic physiognomy of any message. One may encounter here the figures of divergent mentalities represented by popular etymology, the anacoluthon, paronymy, and antonymy envisaged not as figures of speech, but as structural forms of thinking of the message. Next come the figures of the convergent mentalities, represented by homonymy and synonymy. Theoretically opposed, the two mental categories are presented here as meaningfully interrelated. They work together on a mutual basis with the purpose of obtaining the effect of approximation, which is the only element capable of bringing about confusion, indispensable for the proliferation of Caragiale's tragicomedy and of the postmodern imbroglío. Of the numerous convergences between Caragiale's mental structures and those of our modern world, we shall select the most representative one. Bearing in mind that Caragiale's world is originally that of the Romanian Francophile bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century, it is only natural that the discourse of Caragiale's characters, made of anthological mistakes, should be inspired by French. And our modern trend towards Anglicisms does not change a thing. We have witnessed the famous scene of pseudo-hermeneutics in "O noapte furtunoasa" ("A Stormy Night") in an article that appeared in a journal pompously called *Vocea patriotului national* (The Voice of the National Patriot) under the signature of the ambitious Rica Venturiano. He makes use of originally French socio-political barbarisms, which leads to an even more inaccurate interpretation from the part of his half-learned readers, such as Jupân Dumitrache and his political friend, Nae Ipiștatul, the constable. By applying fabulous popular etymologies of culinary

inspiration they get to conclude that the barbarism "sufragiu" is linked to another Romanian adaptation of French inspiration: "sufragerie," that is, "living room," while the real term was the French "suffrage" ("elections"). Similarly, the word "manca" is interpreted as deriving from the verb "manger" ("to eat") instead of "manquer" ("miss") the elections! The characters from the electronic media act according to the same mental structures. For instance, when a French TV station announced a "burr" ("bavure") of the NATO air forces during the 1999 war in Kosovo, the news was broadcasted by an editor at a Romanian private TV station as a new "bravura" ("bravery") of the NATO air forces. Similarly, by becoming ecstatic when hearing a work of the Polish composer Ignacy Paderewsky, Madame Georgescu, a character from "Tren de placere" ("Train of Pleasure"), proves her musical culture accomplished by listening to fanfares in public parks and confesses more than she was willing to on the immoral nature of her flirting with the young lieutenant Misu. Just like Monsieur Jordain, Molières's bourgeois gentilhomme, she uses subconsciously vowel mutation, paronymy, and popular etymology by exclaiming: "Oh! mommy! Pederaski's minuet ... I'm mad about it!" ("Ah! mamito! Menuetul lui Pederaski ... ma-nnebunesc!" (*Tema si variatiuni* 182)). Following the same pattern, a Romanian national television broadcaster whose task was to present a concert with the work of Saint-Saëns used a form adapted by and according to her intelligence by saying: "Sans-Sense" (Non-Sense). This anti-system is perfectly functional in the modern context characterized by an incredible affluence of Anglo-Saxon terms in Francophone or Francophile spaces in Europe. For instance, at the beginning of October 2003, on the occasion of US-American actor Anthony Hopkins receiving a star on the "Walk of Fame," another naive Romanian TV broadcaster informed us that the famous star earned his well-deserved place on the "Walk of Shame" [*sic*].

While the form of may sometimes be impeccable from a stylistic and grammatical point of view; still, this does not imply an absence of the mistakes. They emerge directly from the transmitter's mental position, which produces contradictions in terms. A good example is attorney Farfuridi's tirade in "O scrisoare pierduta" ("A Lost Letter") regarding the revision of the Romanian Constitution, when he says "Here is what I think ... Of two things we'll have to make one choice, allow me: that it should be revised, I agree! But nothing should be changed; or that it shouldn't be revised, so be it! But in that case, it should be changed here and there, that is ... in its essential points. This is a dilemma one cannot escape ... I said it!" ("iata dar opinia mea ... Din doua, una, dati-mi voie: ori sa se revizuiasca, primesc! Dar sa nu se schimbe nimica; ori sa nu se revizuiasca, primesc! Dar atunci sa se schimbe pe ici pe colo, si anume în punctele ... esentiale ... Din aceasta dilema nu puteti iesi ... Am zis!" (*Teatru* [Theatre] 141)). This tirade finds a good parallel in media speeches held over a century later in the same Romania that faced the same event in 2003. For example, in the most popular TV talk-show -- that of Marius Tuca -- a well-known poet and participant in the 1989 revolution expressed his agreement with Romania joining the European Union, but he protested against voting for the new Romanian Constitution because of its West European inspiration. And there are numerous further examples to illustrate this spirit of contradiction: in a TV report covering the issue of the great solar eclipse on 12 August 1999 it was stated that the tourists on the beaches of Mangalia, at the Black Sea, had given up sunbathing during the eclipse (!) in order to go to the seafront to get a better view of the phenomenon. Another exemplification is that of the Dracula Park saga, whose location was changed by the media on a daily basis, according to some politicians' moods. The same contradiction in terms is reflected in particular examples at a metatextual level. A television investigation broadcast one year after the tragic events of 11 September 2001 highlighted some serious discrepancies between official declarations and reality. On the background of official declarations about strong security measures taken by the Romanian authorities at airports in Romania, a television reportage showed two reporters disguised as workers and equipped with a hidden camera who could walk about without any restriction or checks at the Bucharest Otopeni International Airport and the same type of reportage broadcast in the UK in 2002 and in France in 2006 about airport "security" at Heathrow and Lyon.

Coming back to Caragiale's world, we notice that once arrived at its ill-advised addressee, the message is assimilated with all its redundancy and thus the circuit is completed, the receiver

will act according to this new (mis)information amplifying the already existent existential chaos. The new reality thus conceived will be received by the same individuals of the media who, in turn, will send a new message even more distorted than the first one to a more disoriented receiver, etc. This process takes on the shape of a descendant spiral which finally turns into a plunge towards media apocalypse. Nowadays, when the nineteenth century is outdone by technological developments, Caragiale would comply with the demands of the new epoch. But his survival resides in the practically unlimited potential energy in and of his texts. The deep significances of his universe would not be altered by any technological achievement of the modern world, stupidly triumphing over nature (even over human nature, sometimes); even though his universe may be outdated as far as information technology is concerned. During his epoch there was no radio, television, or internet, which by no means prevents the inexorable functioning of Caragiale's mechanisms. I argue this is the case because these mass-media were not conceived from a technological point of view, but from the perspective of the individual's relationship with publicly transmitted information. That this relationship was relatively primitive at the end of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century is neither an advantage nor a drawback for our understanding of Caragiale. He managed, in an uninhibited manner, to overcome the technological limitation of his epoch to an extent that accomplished the creation of a range of characters so viable in time that it earned him the attribute of universality. Today, in the age of the visual turn, Caragiale's characters would perhaps feel even more comfortable, since the difference between their innate ignorance and the cultural inconsistencies and contradictions of the mostly audio-visual media is negligible. The fact that Caragiale conceived his artistic universe as a media show by now turned into a circus allows his texts to be applied to future generations as if they were contemporaries of his own: "But how can such a theatre function? With stage sets! A lot of stage sets! With glamorous stage sets and with the big drum! You make the eyes blind, you make the ears deaf [with the video and audio media; my comment] so as to leave no space for any claims to understanding" ("Dar cum poate merge un asa teatru? Cu decor! cu mult decor! cu stralucit decor si cu toba mare! Orbesti ochii, asurzesti urechile, ca sa nu mai încapa pretentii de inteles") ("Scrieri politice" [Political Works"] 426).

Once the communicational chain has been affected, the tyranny of chaos may be reigning supreme, either under the East European form of multilaterally developed societies and democracy or under that of its Western parallels, namely the society of postmodern consumerism. Thus, a secondary universe becomes the most viable manifestation of modern gregariousness where the yesmen are cowards who celebrate tyrants or hypnotically submit to Hollywood: "In such a splendid high-class theatre neither the weakest sign of disapproval nor the faintest shade of baffling addressed to some stern and dignified actor is allowed: the mob, well organized, would applaud in no time, slapping the cheeks of the daring intruder" ("Într-un asa splendid teatru de lux nu e permisa nici cea mai slaba reflexiune de dezaprobare, nici cătusi de palida gluma asupra vreunui grav si demn istrion: claca, bine organizata, imediat ar aplauda, pleoscaind pe obrazii îndraznetului turburator") ("Scrieri politice" [Political Works"] 426). Except that in a Caragiale-like approach, this receiver starts a counterattack and whose baseness can barely stand up to generalized infamy. Realizing the worthlessness of his sacrifice in the eyes of a distorted society, he is not content with being a contemplative and self-secluded victim. If the community cannot be rescued, so the cynical philosopher in Caragiale's "Paradoxal" ("Paradox"), he has "a social duty to encourage vices" (384) in a world of form without content and he asks, "Do you want to sit aside and at least calmly enjoy the ridicule of the splendid performance? -- you have to applaud enthusiastically ... Let's applaud, then!" ("Vrei sa stai in pace si macar sa te bucuri cuminte de ridiculul splendidei exhibitii? -- trebuie sa aplauzi cu entuzias ... Sa apalaudam dar !") ("Scrieri politice" [Political Works"] 426). And here we must ask like the Zen philosopher who was wondering how one can applaud with one hand....

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