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In this article, I will grasp the mediatisation of politics as a process of systematic maladaptation. In contrast to the mainstream suggestion that politics has been „professionally” adapted to the popular media system, the proposed idea of maladaptation reveals the inner distortions and hidden biases that have been encoded into the mediatisation process from the beginnings. My thesis of maladaptation addresses the possibility that the process of mediatisation – the integration of politics into the late capitalist system of media/cultural production – has been heavily compromised by actors' systematic misunderstanding of late capitalist media and cultural markets. Thus, instead of grasping the mediatisation of politics as a seamless process, I will address in this article the mental burdens, stereotypes, simplifications and biases diverting the „adaptation” of public actors to the media system.

As I will argue in this paper, the common-sensical misunderstandings of late capitalist media have grown into structural forces on their own that have led astray the entire process of mediatisation. The above misunderstandings have been produced by media interpreting apparatuses (like PR, marketing, polling, political consultancy, academic media research, but also the fields of journalism, TV punditry or blogging) that have depicted the systemic „logic” of media for public actors, and in their depictions, followed their particular – by far not „objective” – discursive codes. The above institutions could (mis)drive the mediatisation of politics so efficiently because, in the last two or three decades, they have coalesced into a self-maintaining, self-sanctifying, social „sphere”. In the last decades, this “media interpreting sphere” has been entitled to produce the legitimate representations of the popular media system. Central actors of the field have been paid for coaching and guiding public actors, others have taken the more distant position of the critical observer.

The above professional sphere deploying the “new rules” of late modern media will be theorised in the followings as “the fifth estate” of democratic politics. Paraphrasing the common reference to (factual) media as “the fourth estate” that would inform citizens about

their complex social and political environment, the term “fifth estate” attributes a similar role to media interpreters, whose prime task has been to guide their clients in the labyrinthine universe of late modern media. So far, scholarly references to „the fifth estate” have been rather sporadic – but all of them have connected the term to segments of reflexive professionals whose mission is to interpret or handle the late modern media environment. Accordingly, the term „fifth estate” has been meant so far to denote either the TV pundits commenting on politicians' media-tailored strategies (Sabato 1981), or the PR agents who manage the image of politicians in a hostile media environment (McNair 2004), or the regiment of self-made media-critics in the blogosphere (Cooper 2006). In the followings, I will suggest a more inclusive definition that grasps the „fifth estate” as the totality of media interpreting apparatuses, skilled or semi-skilled professionals, who work on making sense of and controlling the popular media system in late modern societies.

Scholars have grasped media interpreting experts as efficient agents of late capitalist cultural economies, as professionals who help public actors to succeed in popular media markets and to „connect” (attract, engage, gratify etc.) the popular audience. Critics and sympathizers of late capitalist culture have all agreed that political marketing and PR, for good or bad, work as “a well-established industry, with a host of technical resources ... to serve commercial . . . and political strategists in finding the right audience at the right price” (Gandy 1998, 8; ref. by: Blumler–Kavanagh 1999, 221) But who tells whether or not the „right” audience has indeed been „found”, whether the price has been „right”, and what it means to „find” an audience at all, if not the same above industry that orchestrates the strategies of „finding”? Unfortunately, the possibility of this hardly evitable, circular feedback loop – clearly a potential source of serious distortions – has mostly been neglected in mainstream media research.

### **From systemic adaptation to systematic maladaptation**

It is a widely shared wisdom that in the last two or three decades, politics has become increasingly „mediatized” and „marketized”, in a word, integrated into the realm of popular media markets. Politics, the common view suggests, has been „adapted” to the logic of today's post-broadcast, commercialized media system. In the words of Peter Dahlgren, „the structures, organization and strategies of politics are increasingly adapting themselves to the

media. This shift is manifested in everything from the strategic targeting of messages for specific audience niches to the rhetoric of press conferences and to the conscious adaptation of public discourse to soundbites of suitable length and visuals with dramatic impact”(2001, 84). The above „adaptation” has commonly been understood as a systemic necessity: less a process of passive self-submission than one in which politics is a proactive agent, creatively „adapting”, appropriating, interiorizing the systemic rules of mediatized competition (Axford–Huggins 2001; Mazzoleni–Schultz 1999; Blumler–Kavanagh 1999; Negrine et al. 2006). The above rules have commonly been thought to coalesce into a relatively coherent, systemic „media logic” (Altheide–Snow 1979), a set of objective imperatives that define how popular audiences can be attracted and gratified in a commercialized, cluttered, competitive media system.

The systemic „logic” of late modern media has been commonly associated with cultural populism (McGuigan 1992). Media logic has been understood as a populist principle urging public actors to adjust themselves, for good or bad, to the existing affinities, languages and wishes of the popular audience and to the corresponding formats of popular media. In short, the above populist logic has been thought to define how public actors need to „connect” (attract, gratify, serve, enchant, engage, manipulate, empower) „the people” in today's media environment. Importantly, the above populist imperative has been associated not only with popular media, but also, at a more general level, with the late capitalist system of cultural production that popular media make integral part of. Seen from such a viewpoint, the „adaptation” of politics to popular media may well be seen as a universal process in which the political system appropriates, to use an old formula, the „cultural logic of late capitalism” (Jameson 1991). Competing scholarly approaches to mediatized politics have found their main mission in assessing the possible dangers and benefits that public actors' adaptation to the logic of popular media and late capitalism may bring to democracy.

However plausible these arguments may sound, there are good reasons to suspect that the above research agenda needs to be thoroughly reconsidered. No doubt, „adaptationists” can argue with reason that they have identified ubiquitous phenomena, emerging universally, in every national context where politics has been ”mediatized” (e.g. spin doctors, permanent campaign, personalized databases used to micro-target voters, politically engaged talk-shows or fake news shows, partisan news channels, grassroots activists campaigning for parties). However, the very fact of adaptation – universal as it may be – does not tell much in itself about its target, the very „thing” that actors adjust their behavior to. Do public actors have an

undistorted, direct vision about the systemic media imperatives they adapt themselves to? Scholars have simply assumed that they do, that the late capitalist systems of media/cultural production set apparent burdens which directly shape actors' adaptive behavior.

In this paper I will argue that the mediatization of politics has not been driven by a directly apprehendable, systemic media logic but by taken for granted discourses defining what media logic is. To grasp these discourses, we need to recognize that social actors do not adapt themselves to systems “as such” but systems as portrayed by a set of available and plausible „social representations” (Moscovici 2001). Accordingly, the „media imperatives” and „media logic” to which public actors have adapted themselves need to be rethought as social representations in action: mythical images produced by specialized professionals, imagined, heuristical signposts that orient professional and lay actors in a contingent cultural environment.

To understand the role of the above representations, it needs to be acknowledged that the discourses producing them are not unbiased and transparent. On the contrary, they follow their own self-maintaining, well-crystallized taxonomic and conceptual „logic” which is relatively autonomous from the empirical phenomena that they are supposed to describe. In popular media research, important studies have drawn attention to the mediating discourses (ranging from press editorials, political commentaries, public opinion research data, consultancy reports, expert advices, academic theories, informally told stories and background concepts) which filter and construct the information that media actors have about their markets. The research of these discourses has clearly shown that the media market is not a transparent space but forms, as Anand and Peterson (2000, 272) have put it following Fligstein's hint, a „murky world”, the inhabitants of which are „constantly forced to construct an essentially political account of their world that makes sense of the murk and provides basis for agentive action”.

Previous research of mediated politics has disregarded the above structural opacity of media markets, and the key role of the „essentially political accounts” which orient actors' strategies in this blurred environment. By taking the above orienting accounts into consideration, we can acknowledge that the mediatization of politics has less been an organic fulfillment of an objective „media logic” than the result of actors' stereotypical understanding of the popular media system. However, if this is the case, should not we talk about a „systematic *maladaptation*”, instead of „systemic adaptation”? Unfortunately, critical media theory has omitted to reckon the above systematic misrepresentation and maladaptation

among the central „structural roots” of today’s „crisis of public communication” (Blumler–Gurevich 1995, 221).

### **Adaptation theory versus the „fifth estate”**

To reveal the structural forces driving the above maladaptation, we need to focus our gaze to the „fifth estate” of democratic politics, this relatively autonomous sphere of professional media interpretation that has differentiated itself from the established spheres of media production/distribution, journalism and politics. The emergence of this interpretive sphere has primarily been fuelled and financed by public actors who, in the last two decades, have been hopelessly unable to grasp on their own what margins of maneuver they have been left with in the emerging media system. In their efforts to get along in this uncertain environment they have utterly relied on expert discourses – polls, marketing and PR cookbooks, political consultancy, editorials, intellectuals’ essays and academic theories – that have produced convincing accounts about today’s „popular” media and „popular” audiences. Public actors’ knowledge about how to behave under the rules of late modern media has become increasingly dependent on the above interpretive apparatuses that have widely been trusted to properly deploy the systemic „logic” of media to their clients.

The rise of media interpretation as a distinct sphere – its very differentiation from the public sphere, the media sphere, the political sphere and the civil sphere – can be traced back to the emergence of late capitalism and late modernity. New information technologies, deregulatory efforts, the marketization of media systems, and the process of globalization, together, have triggered an unrestricted multiplication of media outlets, which process has irrevocably undermined the informational role of mass media in social life. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, mass media have been relatively simple institutions, with a clean-cut task of allocating information about the complex system of modern society. By contrast, media today seem less to reduce but to further increase the complexity of society. In late modernity, media have grown into a labyrinthine universe that requires constant interpretation itself. The bemusing complexity of late modern media has triggered a massive need for professional guidance, especially among public actors who use media as a communicative platform. This widespread hunger for media expertise has allowed a bundle of interpretive apparatuses to emerge and coalesce into a distinct, autonomous, self-maintaining social sphere. There are

good reasons to grasp the birth of professional media interpretation by analogy to the historic process in which, in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, the growing complexity of modern society incited the rise of the mass media system, a distinct sphere expected to professionally report about the world. If the challenge of growing social complexity has incited mass media to crystallize themselves into an autonomous subsystem, the „fourth estate” of democratic politics, the growing media complexity in late modernity may well be argued to have triggered the rise of a „fifth estate”, a relatively autonomous sphere which is entitled to inform public actors and their publics about the late modern media system.

The sphere of mass media and that of media interpretation emerged in response to a similar systemic challenge: the growing complexity of modern society in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century and of late modern media hundred years later. These common roots have incited highly similar self-legitimizing strategies in the two sphere's professional communities. The two spheres' claims for recognition have been impersonated by their main emblematic figures: the professional journalist in the sphere of media, and the professional media expert (PR strategist, marketer, consultant, pollster and „pundit”) in the sphere of media interpretation. The two types of professionals have justified their importance and privileges in highly similar ways: both have claimed to make „objective”, reliable accounts about the spheres they interpreted. Media producers have claimed to open a reliable „window to the world”, media interpreters have claimed to serve as a transparent „window to the media”.

Media researchers has never questioned the above professional image, and depicted media interpreters as competent professionals who efficiently assist public actors in getting along in the menacingly complex, commercialized environment of late modern media (Negrine et al. 2006; Mancini–Swanson 1996; etc.). Of course, the above role of PR agents, pollsters, political marketers and consultants has been judged on a wide normative scale: they have been criticized as “invisible persuaders” (Michie 1998; Morris–Goldsworthy 2008; Sabato 1981; Blumler–Kavanagh 1995) and praised as self-reflexive “enablers” of democratic communication and will-formation (Scammell 1999; 2003; Lilleker–Lees-Marshment 2005). However, behind these normative disputes, there has been a general agreement that professional media experts, for good or bad, have „clearly improved both the pace and the extent to which [political actors] can adopt to changes in their external environments” (Negrine et al. 2006, 39). Accordingly, scholars have commonly believed that the above, „growing army of specialists” (Stanyer 2007) is fit to the basic task that it has been entrusted with: adjusting politics to the popular media rules and figuring out how to enchant, engage

and gratify the media-consuming popular audience.

Scholars have assisted media interpreters in presenting themselves as reflexive experts, faithful “heralds” or efficient “agents” of late capitalist media. The above scholarly complicity with the „fifth estate” has clearly been a failure – especially in the light of the heritage of previous scholarly generations that have always regarded the „fourth estate” with high suspicion. While the self-projected image of journalists as objective reporters has met widespread scholarly resistance, media interpreters could undisturbedly promote themselves as “transparent mediators” of market rules, audience demands, or media imperatives.

The above failure has resulted from the fact that media researchers, although well aware of the increasing role of professional media interpreters, have been unable to theorize media interpretation as a differentiated, self-sustaining sphere of late modern society. Grasping media interpretation as a distinct sphere would have required, above all, recognizing that media interpretive practices are shaped and driven by sphere-specific, mandatory professional codes. It is exactly in the above sense that previous scholarly generations have been able to theorize the „fourth estate”, that is, journalistic media production, as a distinct sphere. For decades, media scholars have clearly known that journalists' self-projected professional image as „transparent mediators” has been grounded in the discursive code of „objective newsmaking” which has been maintained and sanctified by the media system. Scholarly awareness of journalism as a discursive code has enabled the criticism of journalism as an ideological practice. By contrast, in spite of the apparent parallels between the fourth and the fifth „estates”, scholarly research has proved alarmingly unable to grasp professional media interpretation as a distinct sphere governed by autonomous and arbitrary discursive codes. Media scholars have omitted to grasp the epistemic rules of media interpretation as arbitrary cultural artifacts. Neglecting the self-legitimizing discursive codes that drive media interpretation, scholarly media research has failed to grasp it as a differentiated sphere which distinguishes itself from media production and reports about media according to its own arbitrary discursive logic. Thus, scholarly research has doomed itself to an intimate complicity with „the fifth estate” – which, in fact, it has made integral part of – and truncated its own potentials for efficient critique.

## **Cultural theories of late capitalism versus „reflexive bubbles”**

So far I have suggested that media interpreting apparatuses, far from giving unbiased and self-reflexive accounts, produced inherently biased representations about media, imposed these images on public actors and directly oriented their adaptation to the late modern media system. Instead of enabling public actors to seamlessly adapt themselves to new conditions, media interpreting apparatuses have triggered a chronic maladaptation at the field of politics. Reflexive apparatuses, with their unquestioned symbolic power to define the „logic” of popular media, have been a constant source of instability, derailed and destabilized the systemic processes – the „marketization” and „mediatization” of politics – that they have been supposed to seamlessly assist and advocate.

The above disorientation may best be understood by analogy to the self-inflating, self-absorbed “bubbles” that have so painfully characterized the recent operation of financial markets (Soros 2009; Shiller 2005; Stiglitz 2010). The stock market may well be regarded as the archetype of all the reflexive institutions that aim to represent complex market processes in a simple and manageable form. For centuries, the stock index has widely been seen as a reflexive tool that aggregates all available information about the company issuing the stock. Actors and observers have known well that bubbles may blow and burst at the stock market, and bursts have been thought of as self-healing mechanisms that devalue the overpriced stock index and set the right price. However, in late modernity, “bubbles” seem to have grown too large: financial markets have been systematically mispricing the value of stocks, far beyond the scope where they could be healed by “normal” market corrections. Unfortunately, the “reflexive” actors and observers of the late modern stock market have kept believing in the now defunct self-healing mechanism, and commonly turned a deaf ear to all empirical evidence backing the “impure”, mythically contaminated idea that absurd rates may persist for long periods (Shiller 2005) and that inefficient pricing may be destructive to real-world economy (Soros, 2009).

Similarly to the stock market, the apparatuses of the “fifth estate” are reflexive, interpretive institutions that allocate information about “real” economic markets – and chronically misinterpret them. The case of the “fifth estate” reveals that the above long-standing, naturalized misinterpretations – mispricing bubbles – emerge regularly in late capitalist societies and affect far broader spheres than that of financial or housing markets. “Bubbles” are to be seen as reflexive loopholes that may appear at every “marketized” social

field where actors feel it necessary to lean on professional market interpreting apparatuses (marketers, consultancies, accountancies) in their efforts to adjust themselves to their new, market-driven environment. All this represents a fundamental structural deficiency in our societies, namely that the reflexive apparatuses of “market interpretation” cannot guarantee to unravel the real tendencies of late capitalist economy in an unbiased way. To put it more precisely, what interpretive apparatuses cannot guarantee is that their eventual biases (e.g. the “mispricing” of shares at stock markets or the “misrepresentation” of audience demands at the field of mediatized politics) are random: short-term and not systematic. Since no such guarantees exist, “reflexive bubbles” represent an insurmountable paradox of late capitalism which aims to marketize everything, however, cannot guarantee that the reflexive apparatuses allocating market information will draw a correct picture about the marketized social fields. This hardly repairable malfunctioning is much typical to what I call the “reflexive condition” of late capitalism, this chaotic, “disorganized” system (Offe 1985), which aims to form everything to the image of the market, but loses the clues to this very image along the road.

But how is it possible, one might ask with reason, that the “fifth estate” has destabilized the mediatization of politics, instead of promoting it? Why to treat the fifth estate as a sovereign sphere, in an age when, as we all know, global/neoliberal capitalism forms everything to its own image with an overwhelming force, and leaves no place for truly independent cultural production? How could market interpreting apparatuses derail or “hijack” today's triumphant capitalism that, as we have learnt, has been colonializing social life in its full strength? No doubt, the intellectual *Zeitgeist* of late modernity makes these questions hard to answer. Since Fredric Jameson's classic study, it has become common knowledge that the „prodigious new expansion of multinational capital ends up penetrating and colonizing” the „enclaves of pre-capitalist organization it had hitherto tolerated” (Jameson 1991, 36-49). Since Jameson and Stuart Hall, fathers of postmodern cultural theory, the idea of culture as an „enclave” that sustains itself on its own, independently from its systemic context, has been generally dismissed as implausible and irrelevant (Hall 1998, 445-8, 451-2).

Dominant cultural theories of late capitalism veil the fact that the marketization of various social fields did, in fact, actively produce reflexive „enclaves”: sovereign interpretive apparatuses that have been entitled to explain the logic of the market to actors who have got embarrassed by the marketization of their field. Professional interpreters could form an “enclave” in late capitalist economy because, while reporting about this economy, they have

never been directly submitted to its constraints. For example, the “products” of media interpreting apparatuses (reports, analysis, campaign strategies) have been expected to unravel the alchemy of popular success, and not, obviously, to achieve popular success in any direct way. Indeed, the worth of these “products” can only be assessed by indirect evidence – the number of votes given to parties, or eventual changes in public actors' popularity. However, this kind of feedback is by far too indirect, it depends on too many factors at the same time, to directly indicate whether a given interpretive product has been adequate or not. Since the worth of their products could not be evaluated by any direct and apparent measure, media interpreters have had a lot of space to explain away even their worst mistakes, and save the burdens of their non-marketized “enclave”. Media interpreters have formed, in Bourdieu's terms, a “restricted field of symbolic production” (1993) that has been exempt from the pressures of the market.

### **Social constructionist theories versus „intersubjective disorder”**

The above distortions of market interpretation – the complex phenomena commonly referred to as „bubbles” – represent a new type of structural constraint in late modern societies: the emergence of long-lasting, systematically reproduced and widely neglected divergences between „marketized” social fields and the accounts that reflexive apparatuses produce about these fields for their actors. As much as the above malfunctioning is inevitable, since it is fed by the efficient self-sanctifying strategies of reflexive apparatuses, it is also highly dangerous, for it disorients political and economic actors, whose understanding of their systemic environment (economic „fundamentals”, „media logic”, „consumer demand”, „market trends” or „political base”) depends fully from the above interpretive institutions.

I have argued so far that the mediatization of politics has not been driven by the “objective” systemic logic of late capitalist media, but by arbitrary representations produced by self-justifying, “enclave-like” reflexive institutions. But how this claim stands in the light of the social constructionist dictum that “objective” social reality is itself a naturalized set of arbitrary representations? When arguing that the representations produced by the fifth estate do not reflect systemic realities, social constructionists might ask, am I not stuck to an old-fashioned concept that grasps representations as (distorted) mirrors of an outside reality, instead of seeing them as the very building bricks of this reality? Has not the constructionist

turn in social science replaced the idea of objective reality with that of intersubjectively established conventions that define for social actors what counts to be “objective” social reality? Is not, then, the logic of a system equivalent with the imagined logic that its actors commonly and intersubjectively attribute to it?<sup>1</sup>

To put it more concretely, if spin doctors work on “packaging” politics to well-consumable “snippets”, does it really matter if, by doing so, they adapt politics to an objective media logic or to what they and their clients commonly believe to be the logic of media? If political marketers commonly work for unraveling and gratifying the demands of the citizen-consumer, do not they intersubjectively elaborate and establish a commercialized “media logic” that will define the relationship between party and voter in terms of supply and demand? If the PR industry – from the high profile corporation to the self-made PR agent of a civil movement – thinks in common terms about how to achieve visibility, how to set the “agenda”, how to control the “news cycle” or trigger “momentum”, if no one acts in the name of alternative rules, what is the point in arguing that the play is not fixed and its rules have been misconceived?

The ultimate question, upon which our whole case depends, is whether or not the logic of today's media (cultural, economic) system can be held equivalent with the imagined logic that its actors intersubjectively attribute to it. My ultimate conviction is that it cannot and should not. In my view, the emergence of self-propelled reflexive apparatuses and “bubbles” has undermined the constructionist notion of “intersubjective order”, and with it the key idea that social actors' collectively held representations play a constitutive role in the formation of social order. Arguably, ours is an age of reflexive “bubbles”, self-absorbed interpretive discourses that, paradoxically, undermine the social reality that they aim to represent. In a similar way as the systematic over-pricing of stocks can damage the issuing company, the excessive race among public actors for exploiting the “new rules” of mediatized politics results – as I will argue in a moment – in a chaotic environment where the same alleged rules do not apply. Creating rulelessness by their rule-following strategies, public actors have navigated their field into a state of “intersubjective disorder”. These chaotic tendencies have resulted from the structural disharmony between the systemic media environment and the intersubjective representation of this environment. Critical media theory cannot avoid addressing the above, chronic discrepancy between system and representation – even if this requires rewriting our mainstream vocabularies.

## **The “bubble” of the fifth estate and the rise of “latent events”**

In contrast to the social constructionist mainstreams, I will argue that the reflexive discourses of late capitalist economies are undermining, and not “constructing”, the social reality that they aim to represent. In this section, I will outline how this corrosive process has played out at the field of mediatized politics, one of the most prominent places where the above structural dysfunction of reflexive apparatuses has manifested itself.

My argument will have to be very sketchy here (and I have to appeal to the reader's benevolence until I develop it in later publications). First I would like to address the arbitrary, self-absorbed discursive codes that in my view have driven the industrial interpretation of popular media and politics. The industries of marketing and PR have focused on today's and tomorrow's media world, its „newness”, its unprecedented complexity, its difference from yesterday's era of broadcast media. They have been primarily interested, so to say, in the changing rules of „popular connection and control”. They have been convinced that today's media consuming citizens can hardly be connected/controlled by old-fashioned techniques which have lost their adequacy with the rise of today's media environment. In the PR, marketing and polling industries, the “new” media and political landscape has commonly been characterized with the mythical notion of “activity” that would distinguish today's media world from the more “passive” settings of the past. This commonly shared narrative has suggested that the relatively passive mass audience of broadcast television and the class-based, loyal constituency of the mass party have been transformed into a more selective, disloyal, attraction-seeking and elusive media consumership. The above transformations have been thought to mirror structural changes in media: the rise of a new systemic environment (competitive, media-rich, spectacular, interactive, complex and turbulent) which has dethroned the old, broadcast landscape (marked by a repetitive, unidirectional “flow” of moderate, balanced and familiar programs at a few privileged channels).

The key promise that media interpreters have made to public actors was that today's media markets, in spite of all their complex, turbulent and volatile tendencies, form a rule-governed and intelligible space that can be efficiently handled. Media interpreters have promised that today's increasingly active, selective and elusive audience can still be connected and controlled, that the “new rules” of connection and control can be professionally unraveled and creatively exploited. „What are the new rules of connecting/controlling the active audience?” - this obligate question has become the main concern of public actors and their

strategists: the ultimate starting point and end point of all professional speculations about popular media and political markets. Can we still connect and control today's active audience, experts have asked countless times, or they themselves will control whom they would like to connect with? Can we control them in a way that allows them to control themselves? Instead of us connecting them, can we urge them to connect us by their own will? This type of questioning has been very productive and resulted in an abundance of new concepts and techniques, new visions about “connecting” the popular audience.

However, the above, populist preoccupation with connecting, with “getting close”, with creating resonant and relevant experiences has concealed the self-contradictory nature of connection in a hyper-competitive context. Professional media interpreters, by inciting public actors to „connect” with the audience, have obscured the fact that in today's opaque and competitive media environment, connecting people does not simply mean establishing a resonant harmony with them, but, first and foremost, successfully outshining other actors in a popularity contest, the terms of which (the basic question of what “people really want”) are never self-evident. Of course, at a general level, there is not much to debate about the fact that popular audiences broadly tend to respond to impulses which are simple, attractive, familiar, personally relevant or moralizing. However, these “imperatives” lose much of their relevance once they are applied in concrete contexts where actors compete for popular support. In today's mediatized “arms race”, where performers do not content themselves with being “simple”, but constantly strive to be “simpler” than their competitors, in an environment where performers rarely see their performances as spectacular and personal enough to certainly outshine others, the so-called “imperatives” of popular connection need to be rewritten day by day. To be acknowledged as a particularly catchy performance, any “connecting” attempt has to distinguish itself from competitors' more conventional connecting strategies, to position itself as a unique voice, as an interruptive instance. Public actors need to relentlessly outbid not only others', but also their own past connecting strategies that they feel to be continuously outdated. In the above contest of mutual outbidding, public actors cannot content themselves with enacting a populist harmony with people, for they have to permanently reformulate this “familiar” harmony in new and “unfamiliar” forms.

In today's media space, all attempts to “connect” are encumbered with the above potential of interruption: they aim to create populist harmony and they are positioned as exceptional instances that suspend the routine ways of harmony making. This explains the frequent scholarly finding that in the last two decades, interruption has become routine, that

“formula-breaking” programming has become the rule (Jancovich–Lyons 2003; Caldwell 2004), that “derailment and disruption” have taken the place of the familiar, harmonious media flow of broadcast television (Dayan 2010), that media today „socialize us ... to a norm of interruption rather than schedule” (Katz-Liebes 2007, 158) In today's sharp competition for the applause of the popular audience, every connecting attempt is positioned as an extraordinary event, confusing both actors' and audiences' judgements regarding which mediated occurrence (policy announcement, scandal, speech) counts to be ordinary or extraordinary. With the fading of such anchor points, ordinary media flow permanently fuses with the events that interrupt it, rule-governed „normality” and rule-breaking „abnormality” mix and mingle.

We may talk here about the collapse of what Victor Turner has called the “dialectic” of structure and anti-structure, of long periods of normality and short moments of upheaval (Turner 1991, 138). But how to assess the relevance of the above collapse and the resulting, ubiquitous presence of interruptive events in late modern media? Addressing the increasing “eventization” of media, political economists have stressed out that media events, due to their potential to sweep across the increasingly fragmenting media sphere, assume a key role in late modern media economies (Caldwell 2004; Hesmondhalgh 2002; Roscoe 2004). Cultural critics, by contrast, have diagnosed the “death of events” (Baudrillard 1994), the very impossibility of “liminal” moments (Larson–Wagner-Pacifici 2002), and the increasing power of “extended interruptions” to „usurp the place of ceremonial events” (Katz–Liebes 2007, 160) In this view, the ordinary machineries of media spectacle cannot be suspended by any central event (can only be “locally” resisted by audiences), because the events that today are regularly promoted as exceptional do not interrupt but embody and condense into themselves the spectacular logic of popular media industries (Kellner 2003; Couldry 2003, 69). The two above scholarly approaches are, obviously, closely related to each other. They are right to suggest that the popular media system in the last two decades has transformed the media event from a distinct televisual genre (Dayan–Katz 1992) to a fundamental, ubiquitous principle of media production. However, this explanation severely undervalues the very relevance of interruptive energies, and falsely presents today's media as an ordered, intelligible, rule-governed system. Indeed, the above scholarly understanding is intimately related to marketing and PR discourses that have defined the “new rules” of connection in terms of interruption and exceptionality (innovation, rule breaking, outstanding experience, high aesthetic quality, and so on).

In my view, the above fusion of ordinary and extraordinary realms represents a far more fundamental change than the rise of a new, eventized or spectacular, “media logic”. In the last two decades, the space of popular media has got saturated with “eventized” performances of popular connection so radically and overwhelmingly that the very identity of both media and events has been redefined in this process. What we possibly need to deal with is the metamorphosis of the event: the emergence of a new, late modern „événementalité” (the concept of high modern événementalité has been developed by Nora [1974]), a new „mode of existence” of media events. This new modality of media events manifests itself in those instances when the spectacular media routine of producing interruptive events is itself interrupted. In my view, non-ordinary events have not disappeared in late modernity: they exist in new forms that wait to be discovered. This is what the collapse of the above Turnerian dialectic really means: the fact that that the so-called “liminoid” instances (the “heightenings” of emotions, “breaking news”, outstanding “scandals”, “social dramas” and so on) have lost their interruptive potential, which has been transferred to new types of occurrences. This “metamorphosis” of media events makes the bed for a new dialectic of (spectacular) routine and interruption.

In the cluttered context of late modern “media spectacle”, the “interruptive function” of media events has increasingly been taken over by contourless instances that our conventional conceptual radars would not necessarily detect as events. The above contourless, hard-to-grasp and hard-to-see instances may be theorized as “latent events”, a newly emerging phenomena of late modern media. “Latent events” may best be defined as “mass reinterpretations”. They are instances when large-scale audiences enthusiastically engage themselves with a mediated performance that they interpret in a way that systematically deviates from the performer's strategic intentions. The possibility of such “mass misunderstandings” is present practically at any point when a connecting attempt is made, due to the fact that actors regularly enact their connecting performances in innovative, uncommon ways. As I have argued above, in a media environment characterized by a race of mutual outbidding, public actors have to dress even their most basic political conflicts in newer and newer clothes – which practice veils the contours of the conflict and the actor's original identity. Today, the key antagonisms of political life are constantly re- and re-performed in unfamiliar and unexpected ways, so audiences themselves have to reinvent these tensions for themselves. In some cases, audiences in large numbers construct a specifically framed vision about the key antagonisms of political spectacle. In such cases, audiences “fall hostage” of a

temporarily emerging “aesthetic forcefield”, of a “latent event”, that imposes a binding aesthetic logic along which the dominant political antagonism is temporarily reinterpreted.

The above “mass reinterpretations” happen in the central realm of mediatized politics – and differ greatly from the local decodings and reinterpretations favored by poststructuralist cultural and critical theories. “Latent events” are transient situations in which audience members reinterpret a performance in concert: not each “in her own way” but in very similar terms and in large numbers. In such cases of “mass reinterpretation”, the intended message does not fail because it would disintegrate while “trickling down” to local interpretive communities – a better metaphor would be that of a mass audience gathering in a virtual stadium where, for some reason, the transmitted performance falsely rings and drives mass enthusiasm to unexpected directions. In such a case, the public performance misformulates the socio-political antagonism that it has been supposed to represent, without audiences or actors being aware of this misshaping. The above distortion does not diminish the mobilizing power of the individual performance, but “derails” this power. Accordingly, the “derailed” performance will still be able to powerfully represent an antagonism, to engage and polarize the audience – but not exactly along the lines that performers would have expected. On the whole, an interruptive media event today forms a transient space of derailed mobilization which reconfigures a foundational antagonism of political spectacle.

Interruptive events may “derail” polarizing performances by various patterns. A possible script could be called “mispriming”. Originally, the concept of “priming” has referred to instances when an issue grabs audience attention and, by this agenda-setting force, induces political engagement along an existing ideological axis. “Mispriming”, by contrast, would refer to attention-grabbing performances that do have a strong agenda-setting force and do trigger mass-scale engagements, but along a different ideological axis than what performers or casual observers would take for granted. Mispriming happens, for example, when an intendedly harmonious, positive, middle-of-the-road populist performance that represents the “whole” of the nation draws an overwhelming audience attention, sidelines all other issues, but ends up in further sharpening the antagonism that it has sought to veil. (Csigó 2010) A different pattern of latent event formation might be called “audience partitioning”. In this case, the mainstream mass audience is “partitioned” to two crowds – two mass-scale, vague, ephemeral audience segments – that temporarily develop incongruent visions about the same central ideological antagonism. For example, in 2002 in Hungary, all relevant actors and observers took for granted that the dominant axis of political controversy opposed “right-wing

conservative” and “left-liberal” parties and constituencies. The above polarizing axis did exist and did propel the identity formation of citizens, but only in the group of voters interested in conventional party politics. By contrast, audiences with a “biopolitical” interest polarized themselves along a “right-liberal” versus “left-conservative” axis – which mis-polarization, and its destabilizing consequences, have remained entirely unnoticed and unreflected by Hungarian politicians and experts.

The above destabilizing episodes mark the rise of temporary aesthetic forcefields, self-absorbed situations, “latent events”, in which centrally placed, spectacular performances mobilize mass audiences in “derailed” ways. The above instances of today's late modern “*événementalité*” manifest well how the forces of interruption have saturated and gradually dissolved the seemingly transparent and rule-governed realm of “normal” media operation. Unfortunately, public actors and interpreters have seemed to be unaware of the above, newly emerging dialectic, in which the routine production of spectacular events is regularly interrupted by spontaneously emerging latent events.

### **Conclusion – the mythicization of media and politics in reflexive modernity**

There is an old truism in advertising that expresses well the uncertainties of the industry: “I know that half of my advertising budget is wasted, but I'm not sure which half”. Today's public actors and media interpreters might paraphrase the above bonmot like this: “Half of my connecting attempts take place in abnormal situations where the supposed rules of connection do not work, but I don't know about this at all.”

In this paper, I have argued that today's “normal” media space is ripped apart by latent events: transient situations which suspend the commonly known rules of popular connection, and which, however, cannot be immediately apprehended, only retrospectively reconstructed. The key structural problem that the above process represents, I have suggested, is not that public actors or media experts would totally misunderstand the “new rules” of popular connection. The very problem is that they are not able to recognize the limits between the realm of “normality” where these rules are valid and those “abnormal” situations when the same rules do not apply and connecting strategies become counterproductive. In sharp contrast to the broadcast media age, when the frontiers between ordinary TV flow and interruptive media events was self-evident, today it is entirely impossible for public actors to

see whether they actually work in “normal” or in “abnormal” conditions.

Due to the above, structural latency of interruptive events, public actors and media experts have been unaware even of the fact that such interruptive events do exist, that they suspend the populist rules of connection making, and represent a source of instability. Of course, politicians and experts have known well that they work in a menacingly turbulent, complex, hardly controllable media environment. However, they have been convinced that with their populist connecting strategies, they can get along efficiently, more or less, in the above clutter. The possibility that their “connecting” strategies could themselves suspend the rules of popular connection, and thus, actively destabilize the media space, has escaped their attention. Being aware of the instability of their environment, but unaware of its structural causes, public actors and their advisors have tried to manage uncertainty by pouring more and more resources into the same connecting machineries that have led them astray.

This suggestion evokes Baudrillard's thoughts about the radical uncertainty of postmodern times. “What is constant is an immense uncertainty”, he argues. „We are not ready to accept this. Paradoxically, however, we attempt to escape from uncertainty by relying even more on information and communications systems, so merely aggravating the uncertainty itself.” (1993, 43) The above image of radical uncertainty originates in Baudrillard's famous postmodern diagnosis that today, the abundantly flowing media representations coalesce into a virtual world of simulacra which entirely consumes the represented reality and renders it irrelevant to actors' lives. However, such an extreme move, in my view, hampers both the effective analysis and critique of postmodern uncertainties. Baudrillard's above insight, no doubt, applies well to the destabilizing work of reflexive apparatuses which, with their ever flowing discourse, have indeed outshouted the reality of the media system that they represented. But the consequence of this imbalance is not that the above systemic reality could not act upon actors independently of its expertly representations. In this article, I have pointed to “realities” – the arbitrary discourse of the fifth estate and the latent events interrupting media spectacle – that have greatly affected actors' lives on their own, however widely unrecognized or misconceived they may have been so far. The existing power of the fifth estate and of latent events make it clear that the systemic reality of late modern media cannot be reduced to the intersubjectively held representations of this reality. Accordingly, the problem we need to address is not that, under the level its intersubjective understandings, systemic media “reality does not exist” (as some constructionists might put it, following Baudrillard). The very problem is that this existing reality does not *matter*.<sup>ii</sup>

What we need to understand is why systemic market realities have ceased to matter to the reflexive apparatuses that monitor and model it. How is it possible that reflexive apparatuses have lost sight of the reality that they aimed to represent? How is it possible that the structural differentiation of the fifth estate as a social sphere and an arbitrary discourse has entirely escaped the attention of experts? Why has no one inspected upon the very plausible hint that the “new rules” of popular connection – or “media logic”, if you wish – may be suspended in certain extraordinary situations? Why this common blindness to the new, late modern dialectic of spectacular routine and its interruption? In my view, apparatuses of the fifth estate have been unable to recognize the above limits of “connection rules”, and the limits of their own discourse about these rules, because they have been conditioned, from the beginnings, to believe that the “new rules” that they discover are essentially contingent, unstable and in flux. Experts have been well prepared to the fact that connecting strategies can easily fail, and grasped this instability as part of ordinary business. They have conceived of the “new rules” of popular connection as universally valid, but essentially contingent and vulnerable. The above idea of cultural contingency has seemed all natural for PR and marketing industries that have entirely coopted the language of late modern social and cultural research. The experts of the fifth estate have never been reluctant on asserting that old certainties have disappeared, old loyalties weakened, identities liquified, new chaotic tendencies emerged – for, it is exactly on these fuzzy grounds that they could commonly present themselves as priests of the “new rules” of “New Times” (Hall–Jacques 1989).

However, it is exactly their above conceptual and methodological openness that has caused the structural deficiency of late modern reflexive apparatuses. By asserting that the late modern rules of “connection making” are universally valid but inherently contingent, reflexive institutions have blinded themselves to those situations in which the above rules do not apply at all. Since the “new rules” of popular connection have been seen as deeply vulnerable, their validity has not been questioned even in those situations when politicians acting in their name have failed. Indeed, in the world of mediatized politics, no connecting attempt could be inefficient, evaded or resisted enough to urge media interpreters to inspect on whether the “new rules” of popular connection did really apply in the given situation.

The above reflexive loop has necessarily resulted from the self-propagated mission of the fifth estate, which has been to flexibly unravel the changing and contingent rules of a chaotic media and cultural environment. Their effort of keeping themselves as flexible as possible has led to the very ambiguous consequence that PR and marketing discourses (just

like the most popular cultural theories in academia that have inspired them) could too easily appropriate any new evidence about the chaotic tendencies of late modern markets. They have become too flexible to be disproved or substantially modified in the light of incoming information. Reflexive discourses could flexibly appropriate, without really transforming themselves, any unanticipated or heterodox feedback arriving from their systemic environment. In consequence, they have pumped themselves up into unfalsifiable, mythical universes, virtual worlds of make-believe, all-encompassing “bubbles”.

The fifth estate has been enmeshed in the same above myth-making enterprise. In order to critically engage the “bubble blowing” practice of media interpreters, future research will need to start with addressing the discursive, mythical construction of popular media as a prime site of “popular connection”. Who has invented, how, and with what consequences, the idea that “popular media” have a prominent power to “connect” the “popular audience”, and that this prodigious power is the key to mobilize and engage the late modern voter? To answer this question, the vocabulary of intersubjective “construction” needs to be supplanted by a vocabulary of intersubjective “mythicization”. The first, and so far the most systematic, step on this road has been Nick Couldry's “mythical deconstruction” (2003, 48) in which he revealed the mythicizing processes that radiate an aura of greatness and power around popular media, representing them as higher-than-life (2003, 107), quasi-sacred institutions (Couldry 2000; 2003). The above mythical „media frame”, Couldry has argued (2000, 52), naturalizes a „symbolic hierarchy” between an allegedly intense, powerful and inevitable media universe and the more lame and inconsequential practices that would take place in other social fields. In my view, it is exactly the above mythicizing process that has driven the mediatization of politics. Indeed, popular media have been symbolically constructed as „obligatory passing points” (Couldry 2000, 48) for public actors to “connect” citizens. By contrast, the conventional virtues of democratic politics (like the balancing of ideological values with systemic constraints, the search of the common good and well-grounded policy making) have been downgraded as impotent, lacking „connecting” power, waiting to be reframed according to the “new rules” of popular media.

If the above mythicizing enterprise has grown into a structural factor on its own, as I have argued it has, it is our vital interest to discover the arbitrary discursive codes that govern this “culturally autonomous”, self-propelled, self-absorbed meaning making machine. Such a “cultural sociological” (Alexander–Smith 2003) revision of reflexive apparatuses could reveal the limits of their myths and to discover ways to falsify their commonly held theories about

popular connection and its “new rules”. It is only by specifying the conditions in which the above popular media rules are *not* valid that we, experts in- and outside academia, can stop the production of our familiar, unfalsifiable, all-consuming myths about mediatized politics.

Chances for such a revision are no too high. The “fifth estate”, “reflexive bubbles” and “intersubjective disorders” have become deeply embedded, structural components of late modern society. They represent a widely misunderstood and undertheorised aspect of late modern reflexivity: namely that the reflexive apparatuses, instead of (self-)critically monitoring their systemic environment (as presumed in Beck, Giddens and Lash 1994; or Thrift 1998), tend to grow themselves into self-totalizing, self-sanctifying discourses that systematically filter out any incongruous information. Today's reflexive apparatuses tend to pump themselves into unfalsifiable, mythical universes, and, in the name of unraveling the “new rules” of late modernity, they inadvertently produce a ruleless, chaotic environment. Today's self-inflating “reflexive bubbles”, these chaotic and self-undermining outcomes of reflexive modernization, represent the paradoxical fulfillment of the historic, dialectical process in which, as Adorno and Horkheimer (1992) have so forcefully forecasted, enlightened reason continuously expands itself and regresses into myth.

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