

PATTERNS OF LIVING WITH AND THROUGH TECHNOLOGY IN AMERICA THE ROMANIAN DIASPORA

Anca-Teodora ȘERBAN OPRESCU¹

Abstract

Inscribed within the larger theorization of displacement and politics of re-location, the experience of the Romanian emigrant in America is not only original in terms of identity transformation and transition description, but also in terms of reality perception and society critique of the New World as perceived by the diasporan. The present paper is concerned with the ways in which technology under globalization auspices impacts and transforms the American psyche and society behavior as perceived by the emigrant agency. Building on the theoretical entries into globalization, communication and computer technologies, compression of time and space via virtual organizations and communities and on actual Romanian diasporic writings on the topic (Codrescu, Golopenția, Roznoveanu, Manea etc.), the study reveals a most original critique of the American realities and demonstrates that the Romanian intellectuals/writers are not outcasts, at the periphery of social stage, afraid to unsettle the order of things in the New World; quite on the contrary, they acquire a strong voice, get involved in the society they are now part of. As such, the Romanian diaspora gains the contour of a transnational community, maintaining the ties with the point of origin and actively getting involved in American issues.

Keywords: globalization, contemporary technologies, American society, Romanian diaspora.

The present work is a study concerned with the ways in which technology under globalization impacts and transforms

the American psyche and society behavior, as perceived by the Romanian emigrant agency. Based on theoretical points of entry into communication and technology, mediated computerized connection and ripple effects of globalization into society structure/perception and subsequent illustrations of the former into Romanian diasporic writings, the paper reveals a new critique of American social realities and makes a strong point for highlighting the loud voice that Romanian intellectuals/writers possess in discussing and analyzing American society and their assertive insertion in the American social fabric.

In an effort to overcome the speed and pressure of living in a society where efficiency, sufficiency and fitness are keystones in designing achievement, technology stepped in ever stronger in the 21st century to compensate and help people multi-task in the glass and steel office buildings of the American city.

Communication networks and organizational forms in the 21st century are undergoing dramatic changes (Fulk and DeSanctis 1999) and before our very eyes computer and communication technology are driven by discoveries and improvements on the backdrop of the collective economic, political, social, cultural and communicative process also known as globalization (Robertson

1992, Stohl 2001).

In the « global postmodern culture » (Hall 1990), Appadurai's « scapes » (2003) move through global networks, enabling material, capital, labor, message and symbol to circulate via suppliers, consumers, strategic lobbyists and governmental agencies on the basis of a dynamic set of relations that alters perceptions of space and time.

Technology and globalization have changed the perception of space and time leading to what Harvey called in 1989 « space-time compression » where « time and space collapse on each other as instantaneous communication obliterates the time it takes for messages to traverse space » (Monge and Noshir, 2003: 4). Building upon the same space-time altering, Scholte (2005) discusses an essential change in the social geography emergent when people inhabit supra-territorial spaces which transcend specific loci. This alters the way the world is experienced, for

all messages of all kinds become enclosed in the medium, because the medium has become so comprehensive, so diversified, so malleable, that it absorbs in the same multimedia text the whole of human experience, past, present, and future. (Castells, cited in Monge and Noshir, 2003: 5)

If before people and organizations were inextricably relegated to place, nowadays technology enables people to communicate at distance and events are organized by time. In the context of all these realities in full display at global level, Romanians are transplanted in a society where technology and mediated communication are the common denominators of a world permeated with the impudent ring of the mobile phones, voice pre-recorded replies in private conversation and public services, silicone and implants, or standardized schedules, in a society where even « the devil has no power over the mobiles, computers, cable TV, satellite communications and microwave » (Codrescu, 2006c : 11). In *Wakefield*, Codrescu names an American city where his main hero has to go Typical, while the representation of the American business environment is succinctly referred to under the generic the « Company ».

Both « Typical » and « Company » are intentionally left as general units in order to symbolize a standardized lifestyle, which leaves no room for imagination as every convention, conversation, communication is geared around mass produced service and human interaction :

today no matter where you go, you have no way of escaping conventions. Even small towns build huge conference centers for the professional meetings taking place at ever faster speed. (Codrescu, 2006c : 47)

In an age where discovery is present « as it happens », Codrescu mocks the speed with which experts and think tanks are being created for almost every

essentially meaningless event (the Breast Pump Convention – *ibid*, p. 47), growing in numbers and proliferating the society where everything tends to be mass produced. For the Typical town and typical Company, there is also the statue of the « Typical American Family » planted in the center of the town : a woman breastfeeding a child, a second child – a girl right next to the two, all of them naked and no father. The town newspaper rages the next day

a family of naked women with an absent father may be typical for the rest of America, but not for Typical! We should get rid of this insult immediately, or request the sculptor to add a man and dress decently the women! (Codrescu, *ibid*, p. 52 -53)

The subtle mockery is characteristic to Codrescu's writing and fit for the « frivolity and gravity which intertwine in the high-tech world » (*ibid.*, p. 78).

The Typical town described by Codrescu with its propensity for technicality and for « soft projections for everything else after successfully re-projecting everyone » (p. 49) working for American companies in general, is but a step away from the edge cities or technoburbs, described by Sanda Golopenția in *America America*. These satellite towns are settlements resulted from the migration of high-tech corporations together with their extra-qualified personnel within twenty to thirty kilometers away from the original American town. What sets them apart from the current affluent suburbs emergent after the Second World War once with the lowering cost of cars and the appearance of a multitude of highways, is the fact that these technoburbs are not limited to a strict residential function, but, in a very autarkical manner administer own industrial parks, commercial zones, schools and own stadiums (Golopenția, 1996: 137). Plano is real and is to be located twenty kilometers away from Dallas, Texas. Plano did not suddenly appear, it appeared as a natural development of post-war town de-centralization and it started with some 35 000 inhabitants. In 1980, Plano already has 80 000 inhabitants and figures among the wealthy American suburbs while, the marked transition to the status of technoburb starts when Ross Perot, the billionaire counter candidate of Bill Clinton and George Bush buys two thousand acres in the north-western part of Plano and builds the industrial park « Legacy» for Electronic Data Systems :

the population of Plano grew to 150 000. The ones that are part of this population are what American psychologists call « type A personalities », resolute to succeed and make visible their exceptional lifestyle. Houses are built high with lots of marble. Parents rent helicopters to take their children to the traditional balls that mark high school graduation. The schools of Plano are among the best possible in the United States in matters of quality of the teaching staff and educational resources. The spare time of the children is greedily pre-planned in advance and they – boys or girls – go through simultaneously, or in order, formative stages of karate, gymnastics, ballet or football, which will prepare them for the harsh competitive world their parents know so well. (Golopenția, 1996: 138) (my transl.)

Interwoven with technology, the American desire for achievement and the « need to be special by all means » (Codrescu, *ibid.*, p. 56) has led to the appearance of such utopian societies where

*the houses in Plano are bunkers surrounded by three meter high fences. Nothing of family life leaks outside. Neighbor relations are non-existent. All, from young to grown-up are involved in the ambitious occupation of filling out free time according to a strict individualized planning of perfection. Children do not play in the front yard of their house and, obviously, not on the streets, but in playgrounds where one enters with a ticket and where they can be supervised. The sign « Stranger Danger » is carefully analyzed in schools, while local newspapers signal the unknown car license plates circulating on the streets. (Golopenția, *ibid.*, p.139) (my transl.)*

On close reading of the above fragments, the themes that recurrently feed the Romanian diasporic writing about America are : the American society desire for achievement, exacerbate individualism leading to isolation and fear of stranger, lack of community life, the feeling of permanent surveillance. All of these motifs are to be read in close relation to the « accomplishments » of an affluent society who relies too much on the instant gratifications of technology. The same technology that allows people to turn their homes into protected castles, monitoring every movement from the inside, permits them to live in almost total isolation by alluring them to dwell in their computers' « second life», gives them the chance to meet new mediated friends online, rendering superfluous a physical handshake or real conversation. Closely following another aspect of globalization, namely *reflexivity*, a « deepening of the self», provides opportunities for new forms of personal relations and participation in new types of social interactions (Lash and Urry, 1999: 31). These identity altering experiences sustain the American sense of *individuation* whereby people begin to rely less on common values and more on their own do-it-yourself, self-help knowledge of things (Giddens, 1991, Lash and Urry, 1999). With isolation and individuation, there come also the common anxieties of the modern man in America, where the « civilization has reached a peak in power, fear of nature and waste » (Roznoveanu, 1997: 43), where « In New York circulated a lot of such stories about lonely people » (*ibid.*, p. 23) and Fred has Angela check on him when he sleeps because « he was so afraid » (*ibid.*, p. 23).

Under the guiding line of the technical, in *Road Scholar*, Codrescu heads towards West and discovers that here cowboys have their own business. Long gone are the days in which Indians were shot by colonists and cowboys made their living from raising a few cattle, and participating at rodeos in their free time. Nowadays, « the United States is leading edge in artificial insemination. There is an entire culture of the perfect cow, with advertising, contests, publicity and trade – they even have the Universal Sperm Fair. [...] cows have stalls with

air conditioning, running water and more residential facilities than the majority of the inhabitants of Detroit » (Codrescu, 2008: 127), as « high-tech sperm, gentleness towards the horses and lonely cowboys are the New West » (*ibid.*, p.128).

In the world of high-tech, the computer reigns supreme. In the Romanian writings about America, the laptop, or the computer are devices mentioned everywhere. In Mirela Roznoveanu's novel, *Life on the Run* (my transl.), Angela makes her last discoveries when investigating the murder of a dear friend, Marque, with the help of the computer (1997: 280-281). The processes of using hypertext, diskettes, « write over » functions of the computer, different servers and logins are described in detail, allowing the user to utilize virtual reality to compress distance and permitting Angela to instantly access servers in France, Italy, Tibet, then return to the United States in a matter of minutes. Subtly linking the wonders of technology with the huge leaps of globalization, one of the hypertexts on the computer diskette is named « Experiencing ubiquity »,

it was an essay about the metaphysical implications of the capacity to be at the same time in different places and living this state in cyberspace. Ubiquity is a dimension that man offered himself to taste a bit of eternity ... What else could Internet be? (Roznoveanu, 1997: 280) (my transl.)

At first, using computers out of need and transmitting a feeling of superficiality induced by these machines (Roznoveanu, 1997: 261), Angela learns her way into putting to use the cold machine and helping her in the somewhat detective endeavor. On the other hand, Manea depicts the computer as a sort of religious object of the 21st century:

The Sect of the Holy Computer! To prayer, in front of the magic screen. The new Internet - Generation born inside an electronic circuit, not inside a woman's belly. (Manea, 2009 : 152).

In *Letters from New Orleans*, a collection of tablets reflecting aspects of American life, Codrescu dedicates an entire set of such writings chastising the over indulgence in the apparent simplified and easy tech life of the American society. Inspired by the facts of today's tech world and scared by the presence in everyday life of « something even more abject, lazier and more soulless than the 'sympathy e-mail' » (Codrescu, 2006 a: 86), Codrescu imagines a brave future world where the latest discoveries of genetics and the speed of technology compound an apocalyptic reality:

While Hollywood will move to Alaska, other regions from the United States will use other genetic combinations: people with wings will live in the mountains to better fly down, above fields. Luminescent people will gather in New York and other busy, traversed by tunnels metropolitan areas. Wolf mutants will live in the more forest rich areas in the

*North. Those with insect clamps will roam through Seattle and will multiply in cyberspace. (Codrescu, *ibid.*, p.90) (my transl.)*

In this tech reality, dogs start wearing chips in their necks to be easily recognized if lost, computers personalized named Bob, translate into hyper-reality the words of actual persons (p.91), mobile phones ring in the middle of a poetry evening and people shout exasperated « turn it off! » (p. 97), books are available only in their electronic form – « you can transfer it into your computer, but you cannot buy it from the bookstore » and « readers now can feel good about themselves with the new reading style, flickering their displays in coffee shops », while « cyber-distributors, Softlock.com, Amazon.com and Chapters Online launch the e-book, a portable terminal, in style and very en vogue, half incunabulum, half silicone » (p. 87).

Rapidly and insidiously, the computer has penetrated the American society and in the foreseeable future, it will very likely take control over humans:

Americans are especially forgetful these days. We don't remember where we come from, who raised us, when did we fight wars, what happened last year, last month, even last week. The explanation is simple: the computer companies steal human memory and load it up on hard disks. Greyhound has, I think, some kind of contract with IBM to steal the memory of whoever gets into their buses. [...] The computers' thirst for memory is never satisfied. [...] In the end we will all walk around the world with empty eyes, trying to understand who is the person next to whom we are living. After, we will forget our name and address and will wander around pointless trying to remember them. The only visible things will be cables and wires coming out of our behinds, transmitting the remains of memory out of our brains towards The Central Computer situated somewhere in Forgetting, U.S.A. (Codrescu, 2006a : 95) (my transl.)

The illustration of the technical gimmicks that surround and invade American everyday life, becomes most of the time ironic or sarcastic and it is not difficult to discern the criticism brought to the abusive use of technology. If in the beginning computers, the Internet, television, seemed a way to connect more people and expand human contact across neighboring space and across the world in myriad directions, the outcomes seem to reflect the exact opposite: turning inward to own tastes, likes and dislikes that is a more acute than ever, because a simple push of the button changes channel, frequency, image, erases faces one is not comfortable with, increases isolation, as what need is there to connect with the outside when the latter is already inside, flickering from the TV or computer unit? The ever increasing ease with which people have learned to only tune in to what interests them, makes them forget about children because nanny TV takes care of them, culminating with the ease with which people sell their soul on eBay:

A guy from DesMoines, Iowa, sold his soul on eBay, with a starting price of 99 cents. The auction had arrived at 400 dollars when the eBay officials withdrew the offer from the

site. What I liked was the modest price from which our guy started, which is totally fair on a market in which everyone is selling. (Codrescu, 2006a : 107) (my transl.)

In a society where mass consumption encouraged the production of serial merchandise designed to satisfy the American desire to shop and own, one of the adverse effects was the contemporary tendency to always have more than the person next door, or, at least have something different. Denis Tito, the American millionaire who went into space and afterwards landed on every possible talk-show has a message for everyone: we should get used to the idea of spatial/cosmic tourism. Denis Tito is the creation of a tradition. Biosphere 2 from Arizona is a huge project testing just how viable life is in cosmic space. As utopian projects have become a trademark of America (also noticed by Golopenția in *America America* and Codrescu in *Road Scholar*), the founding party of this project is a utopian elitist (Codrescu, 2008 : 101). He thinks that some of us need to leave Earth, or Biosphere One. And within the labs of this project there is everything ready for the creation of a new world: Adams, Eves, seeds, nice insects and a wonderful artificial climate.

The explanation for such advice and such projects is easily found by Codrescu:

In ancient times, rich people built castles at the top of the hill but shortly, the middle classes climbed up there, too. Space is the new top of the hill. Up to the peak, it's a long way to walk and the poorer cannot take it. From space, the Earth seems small. And far enough for one not to see the environmental damage that will render Earth uninhabitable. This environmental damage that forces the rich to leave is the one thing that made them rich in the first place. If you leave the dirt behind, you solve all your problems: you don't have to look back on what you've damaged, you don't have to fix anything and you can start all over again in space. There will always be a new planet you can destroy. (Codrescu, 2008: 101) (my transl.)

Americans are afraid to recognize these facts and it is a lot easier to package everything in the economic jargon that is so fashionable nowadays. Instead of referring to it as the century's utopian project, the American (Tito) chooses to name it « spatial tourism», while « idealism» is replaced by «business», and « utopia » becomes « consumer confidence indicator» (*ibid*, p.102). Last, seemingly finding the enlightening explanation, at a certain point, Codrescu finds the best significance for the rapid development of the technical and of cyberspace :

*I think that the reason for the migration of population into cyberspace is that not enough people are dying. The planet requires a solution for over-population, making therefore, real world's citizens disappear into the pixels world. (Codrescu, *ibid*, p. 93)*

Bibliography

1. APPADURAI, Arjun (2003), « Disjuncture and Difference in the Global

- Cultural Economy », *Theorizing Diaspora*, Ed. Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur. Malden, Massachusetts : Blackwell Publishing, p. 25-48
2. CASTLES, Stephen (2001), « Studying Social Transformation », *International Political Science Review* vol.22, no.1, Management of Social Transformations, p. 13-23. Jan.
 3. CODRESCU, Andrei (2005), *Miracol și catastrofă*, Arad: Hartmann
 4. CODRESCU, Andrei (2006 a), *Scrisori din New Orleans*, București: Polirom
 5. CODRESCU, Andrei (2006 b), *Un bar din Brooklin*, București: Ideea Europeană
 6. CODRESCU, Andrei (2006 c), *Wakefield*, București : Polirom
 7. CODRESCU, Andrei (2008), *Prof pe drum*, București : Curtea Veche Publishing
 8. FULK, Janet., DESANCTIS, George (1999), « Articulation of communication technology and organizational form », in G. DeSanctis and J. Fulk (eds.), *Shaping organizational form: Communication, connection, and community*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, p. 5-23
 9. GIDDENS, Anthony (1991), *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Cambridge : Polity Press, 1991
 10. *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration*. Cambridge: Polity
 11. GOLOPENȚIA, Sanda (1996), *America America*, București: Editura Fundației Culturale Române
 12. HALL, Stuart (1990), « Cultural Identity and Diaspora », in Rutherford, Jonathan (ed), *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, London : Lawrence and Wishart, p. 222-237
 13. HALL, Stuart (1997), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, London ; Thousand Oaks, CA : Sage in association with the Open University
 14. LAGUERRE, Michel S. (2006), *Diaspora, Politics, and Globalization*, New York : Palgrave Macmillan
 15. LASH, Scott, URRY, John (1999), *Economies of signs and space*, London : Sage
 16. MANEA, Norman (2009), *Vizuina*, București : Polirom
 17. MONGE, Peter R., NOSHIR, Contractor S. (2003), *Theories of Communication Networks*, New York : Oxford University Press

18. ROBERTSON, Roland (1992), *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture*, London : Sage
19. ROBERTSON, R. T. (2003), *The Three Waves of Globalization: A History of a Developing Global Consciousness*, Nova Scotia; New York : Fernwood Pub.; Zed Books
20. ROZNOVEANU, Mirela (1997), *Viața pe fugă*, București : Sirius
21. SCHOLTE, Jaan Art (2005), *Globalization, a critical introduction*, second edition, London : Palgrave Macmillan
22. STOHL, Cynthia (2001), « Globalizing organizational communication », in F.M. Jablin and L. L. Putnam (eds.), *The new handbook of organizational communication: Advances in theory, research and methods*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, p. 323-375
23. TÂRZIU, Alexandra (1998), *False obiecte prețioase*, București : Editura Fundației Culturale Române
24. TÂRZIU, Alexandra (2002), *America, pantoful Cenușăresei*, Iași : Alfa
25. TSGAROUSIANOU, Roza, TAMBINI, Damian, BRYAN, Cathy (eds.) (1998), *Cyberdemocracy: Technology, cities and civic networks*, New York : Routledge
26. VAN HEAR, Nicholas (1998), *New Diasporas: The Mass Exodus, Dispersal and Regrouping of Migrant Communities (Global Diasporas, No 2)*, Washington, DC : University of Washington Press

Notes

[← 1]

Associate Professor, Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication, ASE
Bucharest