

**A New Episteme: The Analogue Replacing the Digital\***

– Review<sup>1</sup> –

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**Keywords:** Codoban, Aurel, new episteme, communication, analogue, digital

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*For* those familiar with Aurel Codoban's writings, the fact that Gorgias' trilemma occupies a central mark in his thought is not something new. In one way or another, we, his readers, have gotten to understand that stating the fact that "Nothing exists; Even if something exists, nothing can be known about it; Even if something can be known about it, knowledge about it can't be communicated to others; Even if it can be communicated, it cannot be understood." is just a way of saying exactly the opposite. We have therefore come to understand that what Gorgias tells us could not actually happen. Philosophy will answer with affirmations to each negation of the famous trilemma. But, if this it is a sort of evidence that Aurel Codoban places before our eyes, things are a little bit different regarding a second movement (made of two parts), more difficult to notice, which the present trilemma gives a glimpse of. Firstly, strictly regarding Aurel Codoban's thought, the thematization of thematizations, that is the thematization of philosophy under a three stage evolutionary paradigm: from being (object) to knowledge (idea) and to communication (sign);<sup>2</sup> and, secondly, not so much the possibilities of

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\* This paper was made within The Knowledge Based Society Project supported by the Sectorial Operational Programme Human Resources Development (SOP HRD), financed from the European Social Fund and by the Romanian Government under the contract number POSDRU ID 56815.

<sup>1</sup> Aurel Codoban, *Imperiul comunicării: corp, imagine și relaționare* (The Empire of Communication: Body, Image, Relation) (Cluj Napoca, Idea, 2011), 103 p., ISBN: 978-606-8265-04-9

<sup>2</sup> See Aurel Codoban's adnotations from over twenty years ago in *Philosophy as a Literary Genre* (Cluj Napoca, Idea, 2005) – (princeps edition Cluj-Napoca, Dacia, 1992). "Philosophy, (...) is in its third thematization, of communication (...)." Of course, the thematization of communication as the new and latest paradigm of philosophy is clearly explained in *Sign and Interpretation: A Postmodern Introduction to Semiology and Hermeneutics* (Cluj-Napoca, Dacia, 2001) with the title *The New Episteme: The Thematization of Communication*, pp. 5–8. Thus, it is not completely inappropriate to state that the present work is the product of more than ten years of reflection on this subject. But, although Aurel Codoban keeps the thematization of the sign as an integrate element of communication, the emphasis moves to the effects the sign produces. If in *Sign and Interpretation*, the *sign* has the role of the *object* from the thematization of the being, respectively, the role of the *idea* from the thematization of knowledge, we must take note of the fact that in *The Empire of Communication* the entire tension of the book, as well as the main thesis, is between concepts such as the *analogue* and the *digital*.

philosophy to work on the “being”, the “idea” or the “sign”, but the fact that reality (regardless of the way we understand this concept) is evolutionally built as “being”, “idea” and “sign”. These movements are rather evident in *Filosofia ca gen literar* (Philosophy as a Literary Genre) and also in *Sacru și Ontofanie* (Sacred and Ontophany) and *Amurgul Iubirii* (The Dusk of Love). Each book announces the thematization of communication in its own way (or the thematization of reality subscribed to communication) as a dialectic fulfilment where being and knowledge will collapse. Bearing in mind all these elements, the fact that Aurel Codoban’s latest book is titled *The Empire of Communication* is no surprise at all. What was to be expected has happened: the last thematization of philosophy becomes the centre of his analysis.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, reproducing the famous trilemma and keeping Aurel Codoban’s reasoning, we could say that the hidden name of being and of knowledge has always been communication. And if being exists, it can be known and then communicated, knowledge exists and can be known, at least to some extent, and may be communicated, things are more complicated regarding communication (although it is obvious that in the reversed logic of the trilemma communication exists, can be known and can be communicated). This is more complicated because if the first two thematizations of philosophy (being and knowledge) stipulate the existence of something outside communication, communication as such, relegates exclusively to itself. In fact, this is one of the fundamental theses of the book, given out on the first page: “*If at first communication has been compliant to existence and then to knowledge, now it is a communication compliant only to itself, an autonomous communication which only relates.*”<sup>2</sup>

## A New Episteme

The first thing that comes to one’s mind when shutting *The Empire of Communication* is that his analysis imposes a conclusion similar to Foucault’s in *The Order of Things*. Not so much the project of an archaeology of knowledge (which Codoban achieves and which I would call the project of an archaeology of reality), but more the famous sketch of the human figure on the seaside, continually ready to be wiped away by the most feeble wave, or maybe, not wiped away, but swallowed by the waves of a new Dark Age.<sup>3</sup> But beyond the show that such a sketch on the sand may offer to our sight, the change of paradigm inside reality brought by “generalized communication” seems to me more important. In other terms and in accordance with the present situation of

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<sup>1</sup> What we must bear in mind, from the beginning, is that the general perspective described here follows closely the three thematizations of philosophy, although the construction of the book has it in its subsidiary without sufficiently explaining the thematizations in question. Therefore, each chapter, regardless of the subject, has in the background the print of the successive thematizations of philosophy.

<sup>2</sup> Aurel Codoban, *The Empire of Communication*, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Moreover, *The Empire of Communication* opens with the *author’s note* where he warns us “if there is any apprehension here (in this book) is that of returning to a new Dark Age in the context of generalized communication”. It seems to me that this note makes things more difficult. Such a note probably has an unwanted effect, to guide the reading, to make the reader search for the ambiguous fear, distorting the analyses that impose (or not) this kind of almost “apocalyptic” fear.

philosophical thought this can be about a construct that represents precisely this new episteme under the following paradigm: “*ontology of the signifying surface*”. Obviously it is not the first time when Aurel Codoban imposes such idea. In *The Dusk of Love* ontology is represented by an equally interesting construct under the name *transcendence that does not transcend anything* (probably a more precise transformation of the last ideas developed in *Sacred and Ontophany*) imposing the idea that what is left to do today is an *ontology of the detail*. If in *The Dusk of Love*, as the title betrays, it is about a dilution of the traditional forms of love, here, in *The Empire of Communication* things are a bit more complicated. More complicated because they have in sight a universal phenomenon, unanimously known, which is installed inside our own existence, possibly broadcast through mass-media civilization or through an ontology of the signifying surface. The difficulty is not in understanding concepts such as ontology and surface, maybe not even separately, but what is truly difficult is the construction that could support such a description of reality. In other words, enunciating today that the manner in which reality is built is in the shape on a surface ontology should not surprise anyone too much; on the contrary, worse and more resounding would be to state that things are exactly the opposite. But if one such statement (announcement) is on everyone’s lips, and to a certain extent we all understand well what this hints to or refers to, it would be more difficult to formalize it. Outside an ideational constellation, learned from Nietzsche and his followers, which would claim that we have lost concepts such as “depth”, “transcendence”, “object” and so on, in favour of the “surface”, “simulation”, “multiple” and so on, our thoughts would end. But this is just one of the things the present book realizes. It tells us: how, why and to which extent does surface replace depth (or any other traditional concept). But I believe the overturn in discussion is slightly different from the ideational logic of post-modernity. This book is not about constructs betting on the abolition, the dismissal or the nomadization of the subject or of the thinking that the subject realizes, but on the contrary, the abolition, dismissal and nomadization of the subject made by the direct effects of the civilization the subject pertains to. Explicitly, Codoban’s analyses do not aim for the postmodern thinking, but for the postmodern civilization. Thus, I believe it is only within this context that an ontology of the signifying surface installed inside human existence as a direct effect of contemporary civilization may be arguable.

But what are the elements that can argue a new episteme under the name of ontology of signifying surface? As the subtitle obviously shows us, the elements are body, image and communication. But are these elements sufficient? A new episteme cannot be built bearing in mind evidences of common usage. As imperfect as this may sound, we all recognize the imposition of corporeality, image and communication as predominant signs of contemporaneity. The fact that we live in a reality dominated by the abusive use of the body, of the image and of communication framed within the new environments and technologies is not an extraordinary fact, it is evidence. It is for this particular reason that the necessity of a conceptual operation will be automatically imposed. This seems to me to be the centre of the entire book. Aurel Codoban appoints a conceptual device he uses to work on the body, on the image and on communication. The device, or the abstract-theoretical scheme, lies within two operators (the *analogue* and the *digital*) and the relation that is brought between the two.



**Șerban Savu, *The Concrete Cube*, 2009, 94 x 130 cm, oil on canvas**

Thus, there are two axiomatic layers that can be found at the basis of this book, layers that intertwine but are distinct. First, it is about the construction of a new episteme which could be relayed with the formula *the analogue replaces the digital*; secondly, it is about the effects this new paradigm has on human existence. If the first layer answers to a perfectly neutral, and therefore epistemological, analysis, the second is about the changes this new paradigm makes within human existence. The entire book is built on this crossover of the two mentioned layers: on the one hand, an epistemological sequence (which sets out to elucidate those aspects that impose the dominance of the analogue over the digital through concepts such as body, image and communication), on the other hand, a sequence of philosophical anthropology (which sets out to elucidate the effect the analogue has on human existence). In fact, this is the absolute thesis of the present book: we are witnesses to a fundamental anthropological change which may be summed up by a simple inversion: the empire of the analogue (in fact this is where the empire of communication comes from) gathers ground on the digital with the purpose of ruling once more, and maybe forever, the least important factor in this game – the human. In other words, this book imposes the idea that the analogue, as the first and the last sign (that cannot be surpassed) of contemporary reality, deeply modifies the abstract flesh of anthropology.

What happens to the body, the image and communication today? How can they be understood together? How installing a new episteme is possible? And finally, what are the visible changes regarding the human existence? – For all the above reasons, these are the questions we should answer through the lens of the analogue and the digital alongside the ideas from *The Empire of Communication*.

## The Evident Signs of a New Episteme

How can we adequately formalize “the game” between the analogue and the digital as guiding pylons that cover the body as much as the image and communication in order to better understand the new episteme?

There is a visual description in the last pages (in fact this idea is repeated throughout the book in various forms) which precisely sums up the entire arsenal of issues. “The old civilizations, efficaciously imperfect, needed the cultural scaffold, the fabric of symbolic figures. They were like a house being built, surrounded by framings, camels, pulleys, ladders and devices which functioned symbolically, in meaning, sustaining the construction. This sustaining symbolic scaffold was simultaneously something different, exterior to life, sustained with effort and learning”.<sup>1</sup> Beyond the success of such a description, we can easily imagine that the present civilization works with the same scaffold: camels, pulleys, and framings, exterior to life but which sustain life itself. But the first thing Codoban gives away is that even though the “new civilization” has a similar fabric, it no longer pertains to culture is no longer symbolically sustained in meaning and it does no longer imply effort and learning. The new camels, pulleys and framings pertain directly to life, they are not exterior and make one body with the civilization within which they are built. Thus, the fabric that sustains life moves from culture within civilization making one body with life itself, or, to use Aurel Codoban’s words, with *the nude life*. In a way it is about the way in which nature, tamed with civilization and culture, paradoxically replaces culture.

But what could lead to such a spectacular mutation and how exactly does this effect take place? Or, more adequately, how do the body, the image and communication become “nude” objects perfectly assimilated (inside life) in contemporary civilization. The answer is not easy at all and is the key to sustaining such an idea through the successive manoeuvre of the analogue and the digital at the level of concepts such as body, image and communication. Thus, the new episteme that Aurel Codoban implies has its stakes exclusively on two operational concepts: the analogue and the digital.

But, to put to “work” the analogue and the digital, in order to understand this episteme, it is not the easiest solution. And it is not easy for at least two reasons: firstly, because Aurel Codoban uses the analogue and the digital not so much as distinct computer programming languages but also as communicational processes (according to the idea taken from Watzlawick: digital communication, analogue communication); secondly, the two concepts are extrapolated as distinct signs that marks the entire assembly of culture. In fact, this is where we find the entire tension of the book: the surgical semiotic model given by the game between the analogue and the digital as a marker of communication aims to operate upon the entire body of culture. Moving from one register to another is not easy to notice and a hasty reading could neglect them. I believe it is important not to neglect them because they are the key to the book.

Aurel Codoban postulates a semiotic vision of culture and civilization where the analogue as much as the digital play different roles depending on the historical piece they carve out. The body, the image and communication, as elements of culture, are regarded diachronically. The imposition of the body and of the image through the new

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<sup>1</sup> Aurel Codoban, *The Empire of Communication*, 102–103.

mediums and technologies of communication, as distinctive elements of contemporaneity, are possible because of the exacerbation, if we may say so, of the analogue element and the suppression of the digital element precisely in their construction. To simplify, in semiotic terms, the imposition of motivation (analogue) in spite of unmotivation (digital). To give a specific example which sums up the entire issue of the analogue and the digital at the level of the three concepts: Aurel Codoban reminds us that the “etymological destiny of the image is between the *imago*, a wax mould of a deceased’s face, and *eikon*, the icon which, as image, renounces the indexicality of the death print in favour of the sacred symbolic”.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the meaning of the image respects motivation (the direct reference to the deceased’s face) as well as unmotivation (the indirect reference to a cultural construction). The two components of the image (the analogue and the digital) play different parts and have different proportions in time. A sort of permanent dialectic is implied, in the sense of enhancing but also suppressing the analogue element as much as the digital element. The beginning of civilization, Aurel Codoban seems to tell us, is integrated in the analogue, in indexicality; later development bets mostly on the suppression of the analogue and the imposition of the digital. But it is precisely when the digital seems to have reached its peak that the analogue replaces it. An example: the capacity that new technologies have to produce images produces in its turn the change of the codes within the image per se; more clearly put, from culturally encoded images to technically encoded images. Thus, the meaning is no longer built, but given. The emphasis is on the elimination of unmotivated, digital encoding in favour of indexicality, motivation, analogue. For this reason we can talk about a new episteme, an episteme where paradoxically, the analogue replaces the digital.

Exclusively with this grid of the dialectic between the analogue and the digital and never losing from sight the successive thematizations of “reality”, we must regard Aurel Codoban’s thesis: from the paradigmatic shift where the body replaces the soul, from communication as relation (in spite of communication as information exchange) to the culture of communication (in spite of the culture of knowledge), from ideology to imagology or ostensive ideology, from textual reality to virtual reality and so on. Of course, the successive passing from one paradigm to another is the exclusive appanage of the installing of new communicational mediums and technologies. In fewer words, the body, the image and communication are analogue, motivated, direct, nude signs. Hence, it is precisely the direct “nude” of the surface, of the visible, of the immediate, therefore of the analogue that replaces the classic paradigm of the depth, of the invisible, of the abstract, of the unmotivated, therefore of the digital. Thus, from a digital culture to an analogue civilization. The sad thesis of the book is that today, in contemporaneity, the body as much as the image and communication only reference the direct, motivated, analogue print of its own “death” print. What is lost is precisely the encoded, unmotivated, cultural part that pertained to these signs in a seemingly more and more distant time.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 33.

Finally, the most important thesis of the book, or at least the most famous,<sup>1</sup> is that communication builds reality (before this, the being and, respectively, knowledge were responsible for this). Two chapters (*Communication as Relating: the Virtualization of Identities*, respectively *From Persuasion to Manipulation and Seduction: the Therapeutic Paradigm of Communication*) impose such an idea. What seems important to me is the fact that in this place as well the only possibility for communication to build reality is given by the same epistemic structure: the analogue replaces the digital.

Relation as an absolute sign of communication (to enter in the relation, in the medium) only respects the structure of consciousness (“at the basis of self consciousness lies not reflection, but relation with another”).<sup>2</sup> The emphasis on relation in spite of content in communication follows the same logic as the case of the body and the image. Analogue language (“which has semantics but not an adequate syntax for the unambiguous definition of relations”) is imposed in favour of the digital language (“which has a very complex and very comfortable logical syntax, but lacks the semantics adequate for relations”)<sup>3</sup> enhanced by the new mediums and technologies, or, as Aurel Codoban puts it, by the ostensive ideology of visual culture.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It is sufficient to remind of the fact that a statement often used by Aurel Codoban, such as “what we do not communicate does not exist”, is a foreboding warning for anyone; casually and easily transformed, it will become the title of a book *Communication Builds Reality*. See Timotei Nădășan, ed., *Comunicarea Construiește Realitatea* (Cluj-Napoca, Idea, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Aurel Codoban, *The Empire of Communication*, 55.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>4</sup> If we ask precisely how the construction of reality is made in/through communication, I think we can find an answer (with a strong stake) in Sandu Frunză’s article *Does Communication Construct Reality? A New Perspective On the Crisis of Religion and the Dialectic of the Sacred* (*Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială* 35 (2011): 180–193). The Transylvanian Professor claims, in an unorthodox lecture, turning Aurel Codoban’s thesis (see chapter 4 – *From Persuasion to Manipulation and Seduction: the Therapeutic Paradigm of Communication*), the idea that the possibility itself to discuss the construction in/through communication of reality is given by the general scheme of the dialectic of the sacred and the profane. I will not reiterate here the entire topic, only the conclusions: Sandu Frunză tells us that we should understand that installing seduction through communication does not follow the principle of a structural given – transfer – as psychoanalysis understands it, but the “nostalgia of the lost paradise” (Sandu Frunză, 189–190). The example he takes from Aurel Codoban, of the ecstatic “yes” in front of advertisements, not the offers themselves, but the reality they describe (a perfect, pure reality, untampered by effort and work) support Sandu Frunză’s thesis. In fact, this idea of the reconfiguration of communication as constructor of reality under the scheme of the dialectic of the sacred and the profane is the only direct interpretation that we know of, of the vehement formula “communication builds reality”. This is how: “Aurel Codoban considers that what is essential in understanding how communication constructs reality is the transition from the hierarchical thinking specific to persuasion systems to the manipulation specific to systems in which individuals become a mass that functions as a collective consciousness, which aims at amorphous masses, at seduction, forming masses that act under the affirmative impulse of the unconscious, but it keeps individualities beyond the sum of the individuals making up the masses” (Sandu Frunză, 189).