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PÉTER CSIGÓ

THE FIFTH ESTATE:  
MEDIA EXPERTS AND THE MEDIATIZATION OF POLITICS

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## 1. The aim of the dissertation

My dissertation seeks to reassess the well-known process in which democratic politics has been integrated into the late capitalist system of media/cultural production in the last two or three decades. The above process of integration has generally been described as the „mediatization”, „marketization”, or „professionalization” of politics. These concepts have suggested that political actors, in the quest of popular success, have adapted their activities to the commercialized system of popular media. As it has been widely documented in scholarly and expertly discourse, today's politicians carefully polish their media image, strive to control the media agenda, use popular languages, monitor the wishes and reactions of their media-consuming audience and factor this intelligence into their policy making strategies.

The key point of my dissertation is that the above integration of politics into late capitalist cultural markets has been shaped from the beginnings by the structural ambivalences of today's „reflexive” capitalism. By the „reflexivity” of late capitalism I refer to a highly unstable condition that embodies a deep paradox inherent in the marketization of late modern societies. The paradox stems from the fact that the quick marketization of various social fields has made social actors puzzled about how to behave in their freshly marketized environment. Thus, the marketization of late modern societies has inevitably brought with itself the emergence of market interpreting apparatuses entitled to explain how markets work: professional organizations specialized in marketing, economic modeling, consumer behaviour analysis, polling, accountancy, market consultancy and PR. The „reflexive apparatuses” of market interpretation have accumulated such a symbolic capital that allowed them to monopolize the allocation of all market intelligence and to effectively veil the systematic distortions built into their interpretive activity. Market interpreting apparatuses have nourished self-reifying, circular discourses which could easily appropriate even the most discrepant empirical evidence about consumers' expectations or market trends.

The above paradoxes of today's „reflexive” capitalism have greatly shaped the recent mediatization and marketization of politics. Political actors, witless about how to behave at popular media markets, have hired professional experts whom they expected to engineer their popular success, by monitoring, understanding, modeling, gratifying, targeting their media-consuming constituencies. However, the apparatuses of media/market interpretation have sought to legitimate their own interpretive practice at the first place, and put their own institutional interests before those of public actors. Experts have promised to effectively handle the menacing complexity of popular media markets, and actors have believed to this promise. They have allocated large resources to polling, marketing and consultancy, and the more they did so, the more they exposed themselves to these apparatuses' stereotyped myths about popular media markets.

The following dissertation argues that media interpreting apparatuses have coalesced, in the past decades, into an autonomous sphere which has differentiated itself from the realm of media production and distribution. The above interpretive sphere consists of taken for granted discourses and well-established institutions (mainly marketing, PR, consultancy and polling, but also the TV punditry, the journalists and bloggers reflecting on media, and, last but not least, academic media studies) that today are entitled to inform media and political actors about the systemic „logic” of popular media markets. The differentiation of this media interpreting 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 manoeuvre 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 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 sphere of professional media interpretation will be theorised 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 markets. So far, scholarly references to „the fifth estate” have been rather sporadic – but all of them have connected the term to segments of reflexive (semi-)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), or the related field of civil media watchdogs (Hayes 2008). 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 commercialized media system in late capitalist societies.

### Media interpretation: a neglected „sphere”

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. In late modern societies, both the political and the media system have been profoundly restructured.

The structural transformation of politics may well be described as a process of transition in which the system of representative democracy gives way to that of populist (or plebiscitarian) democracy (see Ankersmit 2002, Mair 2002, Crouch 2004). In the past age of high modernity, the system of representative democracy has maintained mass parties with a pyramidal infrastructure that allowed for a dense two-way information flow between the party center and local electorates. The party itself worked, to say so, as a representative and interactive survey machine that allocated the will of the popular electorate and channelled it to the party center. This allocation process worked indirectly, through the filters of elected party representatives placed hierarchically at the intermediate levels of the party administration. As mass parties have collapsed in the late modern age, the above allocation mechanism could not be sustained. New players have emerged and claimed to reveal people's needs and expectations more sensitively than old-style party officials did in their heydays. These new players – pollsters, marketers, political consultants – have promised to efficiently allocate information about the demand side of the political market, and they have been gradually elevated into the very heart of the political process. The representative infrastructure of the mass party has given way to the late modern configuration of populist democracy, in which the task of monitoring and serving the popular will is increasingly outsourced from representative institutions to external agencies. These agencies have promised to give access to the very needs and wants of politicians' illoyal, elusive, media consuming constituencies.

Not less profound have been the structural changes transforming the media system. New information technologies, deregulation and marketization, 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. The dominant rules and practices of allocation have been relatively simple – apparent for actors, and easily theorisable for academic media researchers. However, as the late modern age of „media plenty” (Ellis 2000) and „media torrent” (Gitlin 2001) has emerged, media themselves have become an overwhelmingly and perplexingly complex universe. The simplistic image of media as transparent information provider has become untenable and media emerged as an opaque and potentially menacing system in public imagination. It is enough to evoke the figure of today's politician to recognize that media today are not reducing but further increasing the complexity of late modern society. Indeed, today's politicians can hardly

handle social problems without preemptively dealing with how this handling will appear in media, or even shaping their policy measures themselves in a way that presumably secures to them a positive media image.

In contrast to the broadcast age when media were trustfully regarded as simple and transparent institutions which reliably interpret the outside world, media in late modernity 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 both among public actors who use media as a communicative platform, and among media audiences who are well aware that they cannot understand public actors without considering how their actual performances have been tailored to the media stage. 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 media interpretation by analogy to the historic process in which, in the 19th 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.

Although both media and media interpretation have emerged in response to existing systemic challenges, the way in which they have been crystallized into solid social spheres has been shaped by the self-legitimizing efforts of their professional communities struggling for recognition and resources. 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, „pundit”, blogger, scholar) 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 interpret. Journalists, in the „high modern” era, claimed to provide their audiences with a direct, undistorted access to the objective systemic challenges and structural conflicts that affect their lives. Media interpreters, in late modernity, have asserted to draw a precise picture about the emerging „popular media landscape” in which their clients need to get along. Journalists and media interpreters have both positioned themselves as „transparent mediators” who are able to see through systems that lay observers would find bemusingly complex. The journalist has claimed to open a transparent „window to the world”, the media market interpreter has promised to open a transparent „window to the media”.

In spite of the apparent parallels between the two „estates”, scholarly research has proved alarmingly unable to address the sphere of media interpretation in the same critical spirit in which the sphere of media had been addressed in earlier research. While journalists' traditional claims to objectively report about the outside world has met widespread scholarly resistance, media interpreters could present themselves undisturbedly as faithful “heralds” of today's systemic media rules. Professional media interpreters have self-evidently been attributed with a high expertise in the complex, commercialized, technologically developing, ever-expanding universe of late modern media. Media interpreters have been generally depicted as competent professionals who efficiently assist public actors in adapting themselves to the popular media system.

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” and praised as self-reflexive “enablers” of democratic communication and will-formation. 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”. Scholars have commonly believed that the above, „growing army of specialists” have a direct, undistorted access to the systemic, structural conditions of popular media: the challenges of market competition, the imprinted

preferences of the audience, the hurdles of multimedia complexity that need to be “managed”, and so on.

Scholarly critics and sympathizers of late capitalist culture have agreed that the key fifth estate apparatuses like political marketing and PR work, in the words of a leading scholar, 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” 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 scholarly research.

By acknowledging that public actors necessarily rely on mediating discourses informing them about media and political markets it becomes possible to address the inner distortions and hidden biases that have been encoded into the mediatization of politics from the beginnings. Accordingly, my dissertation will deploy the mental burdens, stereotypes, simplifications and biases diverting the „adaptation” of public actors to popular media markets. Far from enabling public actors to seamlessly adapt themselves to popular media, I will argue, fifth estate experts have disoriented public actors and pushed them into inadequate, systematically distorted “adaptive” strategies. Along these lines, the mediatization of politics may well be rethought as a process of systematic maladaptation. The above proposed vision fosters that 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.

## **2. The structure of the dissertation and the methods applied**

Part 1 analyzes the emergence of the „fifth estate” as a culturally autonomous interpretive sphere which imposes its self-absorbed and arbitrary discursive codes on social actors. Part 1 addresses the fifth estate's dominant discourse, and its mythical suggestion that today's active and elusive consumers-citizens can more selectively vindicate their preferences than the broadcast audience and thus need to be “connected” - engaged, enchanted, gratified – in new and innovative ways.

Method: qualitative content analysis of the media interpreting discourse at the fields of academic media research, commercial marketing, political marketing and PR

Part 2 presents evidence that the above mythical narrative drives public actors into strategies which are chronically inconsistent with the complexities of the late modern media. Part 2 argues that since the „fifth estate” (and the „reflexive media system” it makes part of) was imported to Hungary, fifth estate experts have pushed Hungarian politicians into self-defeating populist strategies.

Method: quantitative content analysis of the media agenda in the time of the 2002 campaign, survey research analysis of voters' political attitudes and opinions in 2002

The main goal of Part 3 will be to theorise the consequences of public actors' above, inconsistent and myth-propelled behaviour. Part 3 inquires upon the interruptive forces which are inscribed into media populism and which, in spite of the danger that they represent, are systematically underestimated by the fifth estate's discourse. In this Part I will theorize the main empirical finding of Part 2, namely that populist performances may forcefully undermine the popular harmony that they seek to establish.

Method: reconstruction of the historic process of media transformation in the last decades based on previous scholarly research, theory building.

### 3. The findings of the dissertation

#### Part 1: The mechanisms of media mythicization in a reflexive media system

##### 1. The reflexive condition of our age calls for a cultural sociological approach that can supplement existing theories of late modernity/capitalism

Today, chronic and hardly reconcilable discrepancies that exist between late modern media and their expertly representations. The above divergence between the late modern media system and its expertly interpretation that has enclosed itself into a reflexive „bubble” can hardly be grasped with the means that today's culturally informed social theories offer to us. For most theoretical approaches, nothing could be more disturbing than the very idea of the bubble, which suggests that actors' culturally shaped coping strategies (interpretations, performances, actions) may systematically and persistently deviate from the broader horizons of their social and economic existence. I will shortly review three competing theoretical approaches (theories of reflexivity, indoctrination and performativity) which commonly – although in sharply different ways – presume a basic harmony to exist between social systems and actors' interpretations. The inadequacy of these approaches calls for a fourth theoretical position from which „reflexive bubbles” can be properly theorised. This fourth, cultural sociological (Alexander-Smith 2003) position asserts the relative autonomy of cultural forms from „material” structures. Cultural sociology is a newly emerging field of cultural research that interprets culture as a sovereign “structure” that binds and constrains social actors with a similar force as the “material” structures that we are familiar with from social research. Cultural sociology, as I will argue, has a critical potential to grasp the “cultural autonomy” of media and market interpreting apparatuses, to “deconstruct” the mythical code that drives them and to unravel the consequences of their self-propelled, unrestricted operation.

##### 2. The „fifth estate” has cultivated a self-reifying, self-enclosed discourse by which experts have hoped to appropriate the rules of market-driven media

The dominant discourse of media interpretation has been greatly shaped by the mythical tropes of modernist thinking. Scholarly media studies – the academic subfield of the fifth estate – form a fertile field of knowledge production where the modernist discourse of media interpretation can be grasped in its most sophisticated forms. Embodying the collective enterprise of generations of media scholars, the above “modernist discourse” represents a taxonomic system and a well-established interpretive practice which reconciles this system with any kind of newly emerging media phenomena. The modernist interpretive discourse revolves around the key issues of connection and control. “Who controls whom in modern media systems” - this is the eternal question that modernist interpreters have sought to answer. Most efforts to answer this question have been shaped by three mythical tropes. The first common trope has asserted that media are “popular”, and as such, have a prominent power to “connect” – to enchant, gratify, attract, engage – the audience. This mythical trope has focused interpreters' attention to apparent, immediately visible instances when public actors and audiences „connect”. These popular „connections” have been seen as the prime sites where the manipulative or empowering potentials of popular media reveal themselves. The second mythical trope of the modernist discourse has suggested that the above subordinating or liberating potentials are not unleashed randomly. Popular media set objective, systemic rules that define how, throughout their regular “connections”, media can control people's lives and people can control their own lives via media. This trope constructs popular media as a rule-governed, “normal” environment. In short, the first two mythical tropes suggest that popular media engage people and people engage with popular media – and these apparent instances of

“popular connection” embody the dominating and liberating potentials of the media system that feeds and shapes the circles of connection and control.

The prime modernist strategy to make sense of the instances and rules of „popular connection” has been to weave them into a complex taxonomic system built from privileged conceptual binaries (subordination vs emancipation, central vs local, effects vs usages, activity vs. passivity, information vs. entertainment, public vs. private emotions vs. arguments, and so on). Media interpreters could not work without these inherited modernist binaries, however, they also clearly felt that their binary concepts are too rigid to grasp the complexity of various „connections” between people and media. Thus, media interpreters have incessantly redefined, rearranged and recombined these binaries in their expertly narratives. By recombining binary concepts that originally seemed to be incompatible, media experts in late modernity have created hybrid narratives. Fifth estate experts, and academic media scholars among them, have hoped that by flexibly rearranging their binary concepts, they can understand today's media world without leaving the mythical, familiar confines of their inherited, „modernist” taxonomies. The above practice of „domesticating” rigid binary concepts, the mythical work of neutralizing their incongruence with the complexity of the world, will be called „flexible binarizing”. It represents the third mythical trope of modernist media interpretation. Enmeshed in the practice of “flexible binarizing”, academic researchers have tended to believe that however complex the media world, their familiar binary concepts will allow them to meaningfully arrange it from a privileged interpretive viewpoint, without running into irresolvable contradictions.

3. The modernist discourse of media interpretation has shaped expertly knowledge across all the academic and business-oriented branches of the fifth estate

The mythical tropes of modernist discourse - “popular connections”, “systemic connection rules” and “flexible binarizing” - have driven media experts across the whole sphere of professional media interpretation. The industrial branches of the fifth estate (like commercial marketing, political PR and political marketing) have asserted that the late modern media and political environment transforms the relatively passive mass audience of broadcast television, and the class-based, loyal constituency of the mass party into a more selective, illoyal and elusive media consumership which evades conventional mechanisms of social control and relates to politics in consumerly ways. This would urge media and political actors to connect and control their empowered audiences/constituencies in more efficient, more sensitive and more innovative ways. Following the logic of “flexible binarizing”, media interpreters have recombined two concepts that earlier seemed to be antagonistic, and suggested that today's “active audience” does not necessarily evade “media control”, but, on the contrary, can actively affirm being “controlled”. The obligate modernist question of „how to connect/control the active audience” has become the sole concern of public actors and their strategists, the ultimate starting point of expertly speculations about late modern popular media and political markets.

Part 2: The mediatization of politics in Hungary

4. Media transition in Hungary should be reconceived as the import of a “reflexive media system”: institutions of media production and discourses/institutions of media interpretation

To properly understand recent media and political transformations in Hungary, I will propose a cultural sociological model of media transition. I will argue that the “commercialized” media system that has been globally transferred from central to more peripheral regions is to be seen, above all, as a reflexive system, in which media interpretation is autonomous from media production and distribution. Accordingly, media transition in a (semi-)peripheral country like Hungary needs to be rethought as the import of a reflexive, self-monitoring media system: a simultaneous transfer of institutional settings and of an interpretive sphere which prepares local

actors to the „logic” of the freshly imported media institutions. This double transfer has made difficult for local observers to make sense of the “imported” media system in any organic way, without heavily relying on the interpretive sphere. There are good reasons to suspect that the modernist interpretive tropes transferred from the West have heavily prestructured the expertly, political, and scholarly understandings of market-driven media in peripheral nations, and directly drove local actors' adaptive strategies.

#### 5. Fifth estate experts and discourses have pushed the actors of the Hungarian party Fidesz into self-defeating populist strategies in 2002

The empirical case study (the electoral campaign in 2002) demonstrates that Hungarian public actors, in their attempts to adapt themselves to the commercial media environment, have irreflexively followed the hints of the modernist interpretive sphere which has falsely suggested them to „connect” with (to enchant and gratify) the popular audience. In my cultural sociological reconstruction present that mediatized politics in Hungary has been entrapped in a vicious circle of misadaptation, a downward spiral in which public actors have adapted themselves to biased representations of late modern media. Due to their reliance on modernist tropes, public actors in Hungary have lacked a proper understanding of how counter-productive their populist “connecting” strategies can be in the contingent environment of late modern media.

My cultural sociological analysis of the 2002 election campaign in Hungary aims to demonstrate how Hungarian public actors, in their populist rush for enchanting/gratifying their audience, have inadvertently destabilized their own mediatized performances, by releasing turbulent and latent processes which they were not even aware of. The example of the 2002 campaign will illustrate that these destabilizing features were not simple fiascos, fallacious attempts to “connect” the audience, that would have resulted from accidental shortcomings or external nuisances. On the contrary: the populist performance of the Government in 2002 was a powerful one that powerfully affected and “connected” the audience, however, it is by the very same “connecting” force that it undermined its own ability to exploit the popular affect that it has triggered. The paradoxical, self-destabilizing force of marketing-based, mediatized mobilization has mostly been overlooked by Hungarian political actors and media interpreters. This shortcoming is not to be explained by local actors' parochialism, but, on the contrary, their overly reliance on the imported interpretive discourse that promised to effectively exploit the popular „logic” of commercialized media.

#### 6. The Fidesz performance of *polgár* Hungary in 2002 failed due to the inner tensions of populist mobilization

The performers of *polgár* Hungary in 2002 enacted a perfect populist campaign. *Fidesz* actors created a new, exceptional, innovative, rule-breaking political narrative that had a potential to efficiently rejuvenate the conventional anticommunist and nationalist political agenda of the Right. In presenting the essence of renewal – the creation of *polgár* Hungary – *Fidesz* actors gave multiple explanations, used various media formats, tried out different slogans and orchestrated various events, all this with the aim of gathering as many people as possible around their political vision. The key aim of *Fidesz* actors was to enact their *polgár* politics in many different, overlapping but not identical forms in popular media. They wanted to make themselves seen as good stewards of many important values at the same time. They portrayed themselves as genuine heirs of traditional, national-conservative values, as courageous and persistent drivers of national recovery, as strong leaders with a strong sense of community, as true representatives of a new generation of active and mobile citizens who can act as self-responsible entrepreneurs like *Fidesz* politicians themselves. All these symbolic layers have been enacted parallelly by *Fidesz* actors, who believed that all these colors will unite in a coherent picture in voters' eyes.

Many voters, however, found the above multifold vision of *polgár* Hungary perplexingly

complex and ambiguous, and built more simple stories about what makes a „*polgár*”. The *Fidesz* performance inadvertently incited distinct simplistic images of *polgár* Hungary to emerge in the public opinion – instead of establishing a common vision that would have been able to represent *polgárness* in all its complexity and thus, allow for various interconnected *polgár* identities to arise in the audience. The very problem was that the *polgár* performance, with all its hardly resistible symbolic force, created three parallel representations of *polgárness*, three distinct antagonisms along which the substance of *polgárness* could be experienced. With its irresistibly strong, moving, unfamiliar and polysemic impulses, the performance successfully mobilized people and urged them to engage with or against the vision of *polgár* Hungary – however, it could not guarantee that it is the same vision of *polgárness* that people will react to. It is highly plausible then to explain the failure of the *polgár* performance with the inherent ambiguity of populist mobilization, which is forceful and energizing, but is also destabilized by its inner tensions.

### Part 3: From popular media to event media: the consequences of the populist race

7. Due to the influence of the fifth estate, populist strategies of „connecting” have become omnipresent and induced a new dynamics of event formation in the media sphere. The routine creation of exceptional performances has been an extremely ambiguous process, that has created a „twilight zone” between routine and interruption, normality and abnormality.

In late modern media, the logic of „popular connection” is inseparable from that of „event making”. In today's fragmented media field, the only way mainstream actors can grab a mainstream audience is by reaching them through media events, eventized media contents that people find special and outstanding. Media actors in the last two decades have increasingly relied on media events which can achieve widespread visibility by sweeping across the whole fragmented media field. Today, media and public actors today would qualify as exploitable event any occurrence with a potential of „connecting” (engaging, attracting, etc) the audience: the season opener of a TV serial, the final and semi-finals of a reality programme, the actually erupting scandal that floods over all media gates at the same time, the actual upward „momentum” of a party that can incessantly be commented upon, political studio debates that are regularly promoted as „political events” on their own, the sudden popularity loss of a political candidate struggling for re-election, and so on. The intense „eventization” of popular media and the resulting emergence of „event television” have dissolved the media event as a distinct televisual genre and reinstated it as an ubiquitous organizing principle. By the above conversion of the event (from a genre to an overall organizing principle) I mean that late modern media actors today are regularly conferring the status of event to all kinds of occurrences that seem to have a „connecting” potential.

Although the excessive eventization of media discourse has reshaped the media landscape, I will argue, media events have won a pyrrhian victory: their ubiquitous presence has undermined their mobilizing energies. In consequence, a twilight zone of routine, banalized half-events has emerged. This twilight zone represents the space in which today's media actors and politicians have to communicate with people.

8. Politics went through the same above eventization process as popular media in general.

Late modern politics has developed the very same apparatuses of event creation than popular media, and has transformed itself into an event-making machine. In their populist struggle for connecting their constituencies, political actors have routinely experimented with creating exceptional “voter experience”. Political actors have felt that their mainstream position can only be maintained by generating waves of engagement that can reaggregate the fragmented and elusive audience in a

collective fervour. Political actors have equally learned from the media entertainment industry that to ripple such waves, it is not enough to simply “connect” voters, for they need to be re- and re-connected, day by day, with intense and interruptive performances. At the same time, political actors and their consultants have equally been well aware that the intense eventization of public discourse creates a hardly controllable media environment, that is full of half-events with a highly uncertain status. At the same time, public actors and experts regarded themselves as privileged and powerful event creators. Political actors have hoped that in today's menacingly fuzzy media environment, they may be the best-equipped actors to trigger ubiquitous media buzz and cross-media audience engagement, and to exploit the waves of fervour. Thus, political actors have poured immense resources into directly triggering collective fervour with outstanding, innovative, exceptional political performances.

9. Due to the excessive modernist strategies of „connecting” the audience with events, late modern media has become a „theatrical”, event-driven, „postnormal” landscape

The saturation of media with routinely produced events, has redefined both media “normality” and “abnormal” events, and created a highly unstable and opaque media system in which interruptive events are present constantly, but often in a contourless form. In this opaque and highly eventized environment, popular support is rarely won by the „best populist”, the most virtuoso applier of populist connection rules. Instead, the waves of audience enchantment, engagement and gratification are rippled by exceptional, powerful, self-propelled events which are not commonly recognized as such, in spite of their force and significance.

Today's media events may have a strong transformative power, still, many of these events are not commonly recognized as outstanding moments in media and politics. Two types of today's contourless events may be separated: mundane events and latent events. Mundane events are apparent instances of media and political spectacle which, by their unexpected symbolic force to trigger collective enthusiasm, open a new dimension that can overwrite the established frameworks of political antagonism. Mundane events do exist, as I will argue, however, their transformative power is not self-evident for actors and observers, due to the fact that they are enrooted in the ordinary machineries of spectacle making. The second type of events, latent events, are not apparent, and thus, even more uncertain than mundane events (which are visible instances, and “only” their transformative power is questionable). Latent events emerge when a mass audience constructs 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 “virtual theater hall”, that imposes a binding aesthetic logic along which the dominant political antagonism is temporarily reinterpreted.

In the last decades, the space of popular media has been saturated with eventized connecting attempts so radically and overwhelmingly that the very identity of both media and events has been redefined throughout this transformation. What we are possibly dealing with is not simply the industrially driven multiplication of heightened events, but the metamorphosis of the event, and the emergence of a new, late modern „événementalité” (the concept of high modern événementalité has been developed by Nora [1974]), a new, unstable mode of existence for exceptional, powerful, self-propelled, „autonomous” events. This new, opaque, événementalité signals the rise of an inherently unstable media system, in which the ubiquitous presence of spectacular pseudo-events (Boorstin 1964), dramatic mundane events and parasitic latent events obliterates the conventional dialectics of normal and exceptional media time.

In today's theatrical, eventized media environment, ordinary media flow permanently fuses with the events that interrupt it. 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. The excessive production of „media events” results in a system of “event media”, an opaque and menacing landscape which is saturated by destabilizing and hardly recognizable events

that evade and undermine the populist connecting strategies of public actors. In the realm of „event-driven media”, rule-governed „normality” and rule-breaking „abnormality” mix and mingle. “Event media” forms a “post-normal” landscape because its actors have no apparent clues to recognize those extraordinary events which overwrite the general rules of conduct that are valid in ordinary circumstances. The above collapse of rule-governed media “normality” and rule-breaking, interruptive “abnormality” into an uncertain state of “post-normality” has been a key structural consequence of the populist race for “connection” in the realms of media and politics.

10 The fifth estate has neglected the ambiguities of „event-driven” media, although it played a key role in the rise of this unstable system.

In the last decades, the modernist discourse of the fifth estate has driven public actors into excessive strategies of „connection” and „eventization” which have gradually dissolved the transparent, rule-governed realm of “normal” media operation envisioned by the same above interpretive discourse. The above collapse of media “normality”, ironically, has been fostered by fifth estate professionals who have gained their symbolic authority by successfully maintaining the myth of a “normal” media environment that, in spite of all its apparent turbulences, is controllable for those who recognize its basic rules of operation (the logic of market-driven media, or the laws of the market in general). The fifth estate, it seems, has grown influential enough to devour its own foundations. But this story has not been unique. As I will argue in Part 4, popular media and politics are not the only fields in society where the sanctified expertly discourse of market interpretation has accumulated a destructively large symbolic power.

In late modernity, the modernist discourse of media interpretation has grown into a structural force in society that is not able to control its own deficiencies and unintended side-effects, and operates increasingly as a loose cannon. In this situation, academic media researchers need to escape from the illusion that their modernist discursive taxonomies are flexible and recombinable enough to cope with the complexity of media and politics. In fact, the threats of this complexity have only been increased by the modernist discourse, which has grown into an uncontrollable juggernaut due exactly to its very flexibility that enabled its practitioners to flee from reality into a mythical universe of unfalsifiable interpretive narratives. The post-normal condition of late modern media and politics calls for a multiple “amodern” shift in media analysis: a critical awareness of media opacity, that is, of the very hardship to separate the ordinary fluctuations of media spectacle and the large-scale events which have a cultural power independent of media spectacle; a new awareness that that the general logic of the media system may be overwritten by the singular logic of events which saturate it; an analytical shift from the concept of “market-driven” media to that of “event-driven” media; a new awareness of our “post-normal” condition in which it is impossible to separate rule-governed ordinary media time from ruleless exceptional time, objectively existing market pressures from mythically invented ones, and the realities of media markets from their representations.