

**THE EMERGENCE OF THE GOTHIC-GROTESQUE BODY AS
SPECTACLE IN ROMANIAN MASS MEDIA:
THE CASE OF THE 5 O’CLOCK NEWS**

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*Submitted to
Central European University
Department of Gender Studies*

In partial fulfillment for the degree of Master of Arts in Gender Studies

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Budapest, Hungary
2008

Abstract

This thesis attempts to explore a recent phenomenon in Romanian mass media, the representation of Gothic-grotesque bodies as spectacle, by looking at a sample of news coverage on *The 5 O'clock News*, a highly popular program that introduced this particular media genre to the Romanian mass media market. The main concerns of this study are the ways in which the Gothic-grotesque bodies are framed as such through certain patterns of representation, as well as the possible impact that their spectacle has on the audience.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis I will focus on a phenomenon that has appeared recently in Romanian mass media, namely the representation of Gothic-grotesque bodies. My main concern is to provide a theoretical framework for exploring the dimensions of the bodies that appear in this genre of ‘tabloid media’; and to discuss how their representation intersects with the audience, as spectacle. My research is based primarily on media analysis, more specifically on the analysis of a limited sample of a program centered around, I argue, the representation of the Gothic-grotesque body.

In the first part of my thesis, I provide the theoretical framework for my approach and working definitions of the key concepts on which my paper builds: the grotesque body, the Gothic body, and how they intersect in this program as well as the spectacle that they offer. I then propose an overview of mass media development in Romania in the aftermath of communism, in order to prepare the discussion of the emergence of the Gothic-grotesque bodies as a pattern of representation. Next, I will proceed to a close reading of the selected sample of reports which I consider illustrative of my theoretical framework, using discourse analysis in order to identify the typologies of Gothic-grotesque bodies. Finally, I will discuss how the program is received by the audience, of the functions and meanings that it bears as spectacle. My analysis will take place on two levels: first, I am concerned with the representation of the Gothic-grotesque body in the logic of the analyzed program itself; then, I am interested in how this is received at the level of the audience. Since this is not a quantitative study based on empirical data (not having conducted a survey among the audience), the last part of the paper will be largely speculative in nature.

One of the main reasons for choosing this topic is that despite being a recent, widespread and extremely popular phenomenon, this particular aspect of the media remains largely under-researched. It is a pervasive aspect of contemporary Romanian mass media – television in particular – and it is avidly consumed, which means that its content holds something that speaks to the audience.

My reason for choosing *The 5 O'clock News* on Pro TV as the basis for my analysis is that it is the first of its kind on Romanian television, and by now has become a trendsetter for other television stations. In addition, it consistently secures the highest audience ratings since it was introduced. Thus this show is consumed regularly by a considerable section of the Romanian public.

The present study will attempt to place the emergence of the Gothic-grotesque body in Romanian mass media in a certain cultural and historical context. I am interested in the context in which this body has emerged, as well as the consequences for its emergence, but within the confines of this thesis, only insofar as these two issues help elucidate the main question raised by my case study: can *The 5 O'clock News* be coherently interpreted based on the notion of the Gothic-grotesque body and its functions?

CHAPTER 1: THE GOTHIC-GROTESQUE BODY – THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this chapter I focus on the theoretical framework that will support my analysis of the Gothic-grotesque bodies of *The 5 O'clock News*. My discussion is divided into three subsections: 1.1. *Different grotesques*; 1.2. *The Gothic-grotesque body*; and 1.3. *The socialist body*. In the first section I discuss two paradigms of the grotesque, the comic grotesque and the uncanny grotesque. The next subsection will discuss these two paradigms as they intersect and will set the grounds (and the first element) for contrasting two types of bodies present in Romanian society before and after the change of system in 1989. The second element is presented in the final subsection, where I briefly examine some basic features of the socialist body.

Before moving on to discuss the Gothic-grotesque body, clarification is necessary as to what I mean by ‘body’ in itself. In various contexts, ‘body’ can suggest a reified object of analysis. However, I move away from such an understanding of the body and adopt the concept of embodiment (Grosz 1990; Turner 1996) which more adequately captures the notions of making and doing the work of bodies, of becoming a body in social space. I will therefore be talking about bodies not in terms of an *a priori* essence or as natural objects, but about bodies in the course of acting, of performing, that do not preexist cultural representation. My understanding of the ‘body’ throughout this paper is informed by Grosz’s reading of Foucault, according to which power functions directly on bodies by means of disciplinary practices and “through modes of social supervision and discipline as well as self-regulation. The bodies and behaviours of individuals are targets for the deployment of power, and they are also the means by which power functions and proliferates.” (Grosz 1990: 64)

1.1.Different grotesques

In discussing the emergence of the Gothic-grotesque body in Romanian mass media, both terms require explanation. The concept of the grotesque has a long tradition and has been assigned various meanings throughout time. The etymology dictionary gives the term's definition as:

grotesque – 1561, originally a noun, from M.Fr. *crotesque*, from It. *grottesco*, lit. “of a cave,” from *grotta*. Used first of paintings found on the walls of basements of Roman ruins (It. *pittura grottesca*). Originally “fanciful, fantastic,” sense became pejorative after mid-18c.¹

I will first attempt to trace a genealogy of the term, and then explain the way I perceive it as a characteristic of the bodies that populate *The 5 O'clock News*.

In art, the category of the grotesque initially emerged to encompass all “unnatural, frivolous and irrational connections” (Russo 1995: 3) – connections that had been carefully kept separate by nature as well as by classical art. Consequently, the grotesque can be said to have originated as a deviation from a given norm. Along the lines of the grotesque in Western culture there are two paradigmatic but not opposite traditions of the grotesque: the carnival and the uncanny (see Russo 1995). My understanding of the grotesque as a bodily category is a synthesis of both. An overview of the carnival and of the uncanny grotesque is in order prior to turning my attention to the bodies of *The 5 O'clock News*.

The carnival, or the comic grotesque, is mostly associated with Bakhtin and his work *Rabelais and His World*. This type of grotesque is understood as belonging to a particular

¹ source: <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=grotesque>

historical context, locatable in a particular space, and marked by material events and exteriority (Russo 1995: 7). The body that it is connected to is a social body; as Bakhtin writes, “the material body principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed.” (1984: 19) The grotesque body is held by Bakhtin to be “coarse, hawking, farting, yawning, spitting, hiccupping, noisily nose-blowing, endlessly chewing and drinking.” (1981: 177). It is a body associated with degradation, filth, rebirth, death; but it is also productive, life-affirming, celebratory. With its openings, protrusions, irregularities and fluidity, the carnivalesque grotesque body is identified with non-official low culture and social transformation.

This grotesque body is contrasted to the classical body, modeled, Bakhtin argues, on Greek statues. “The classical statue,” as Stallybrass and White note, “has no openings or orifices whereas grotesque costumes and masks emphasize the gaping mouth, the protuberant belly and buttocks, the feet and the genitals.” (1986: 22). By contrast to the classical body, in the grotesque body:

the stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or convexities, on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. (Bakhtin 1984: 26)

Orifices and protuberances are sites where the boundaries between the body and the world are blurred; bodily substances are spilt out, matter from the world taken in. Moreover, insofar as the grotesque is “a jumbling”, a “dismantling and a re-presentation” of the

conventional order of the body (Susan Stewart, quoted in Young 1993: 114), the body becomes, in Bakhtin's conception, a *body of parts*. With its life-affirming principle, cheeky laughter, and the inability to be distinguished from the surrounding world, Bakhtin's model of the grotesque body is utopian and deeply nostalgic for a pre-modern condition.

The other type of grotesque, the uncanny, is associated with the horror genre and with Freud's essay *On the Uncanny* (see Russo 1995). Unlike the comic grotesque, marked by exteriority, and which has a social location, the uncanny grotesque is located within an individual inner space of "fantasy and introspection" (Russo 1995: 7). In Romantic literature this mode of the grotesque is connected with the experience of the 'strange' and the 'criminal'. Here the grotesque as a bodily category is the projection of an inner state, and the body associated with it is doubled, monstrous, deformed, excessive and abject. It is a body that produces revulsion and disgust. While Bakhtin's model of the grotesque body is pre-modern, in close connection with the earth and the cosmos, the uncanny grotesque designates a modern, profoundly alienated body, a product of Western capitalism and of industrialization. As such, the uncanny grotesque body overlaps with the notion of the 'Gothic' body of the *fin-de-siècle* (see Hurley 1996).

1.2. The Gothic-Grotesque Body

The bodies that populate the realm of *The 5 O'clock News* display characteristics of both the comic and the uncanny grotesque body. As such, they belong to a bodily category that can be referred to as the Gothic-grotesque. I have chosen the term 'Gothic' to refer to the synthesis between the comic and the uncanny grotesque, for its poetic ability to express the condition of modern subjectivity. The Gothic-grotesque bodies are open, irregular, unfinished – but they are also monstrous and abject, repulsive. They revolve around physiological processes and their

boundaries are blurred, but this does not reflect being part of a cosmic whole, it merely indicates an undesirable, unfinished state. Hurley relates the Gothic body to social Darwinism, criminal anthropology and degeneration theory (1996). The Gothic body is the result of the loss of a stable and unified human identity, and of the emergence of a chaotic and transformative “abhuman” identity in its place. It is a “not-quite-human” body, characterized by “morphic variability, continually in danger of becoming not-itself” (Hurley 1996: 3-4). The Gothic-grotesque body then is the open, incomplete body centred around the lower bodily strata, but lacking the life-affirming principle, the collective celebratory spirit, as well as the Bakhtinian nostalgia for the pre-modern condition. It is associated with the criminal, with the degenerate, and thus it becomes abject and repulsive. The Gothic-grotesque body is leaky, trapped in its corporeality, and associated with bodily pleasures and pain; its life revolves around the “acts of the bodily drama” (Bakhtin 1984: 317), but these verge on the horrific. Moreover, the Gothic-grotesque body is no longer part of the “reciprocal democracy” of the carnival, where the audience and the performers are interchangeable. The spectacle of the Gothic-grotesque body is alienating, since “the ‘normal’ human subject [is figured] as liable to contamination, affective, moral, and physical, by the gothicized subject.” (Hurley 1996: 13)

My intention is to explore the Gothic-grotesque body as a cultural representation that belongs to the spectacle in popular entertainment, advertising and media. From this perspective, the Gothic-grotesque overlaps with the ‘freak’, which as a bodily category is strongly associated with the notion of the spectacle, the ‘freak show’ having had a long tradition in Western culture.

In *The Female Grotesque*, in a discussion of the overlapping between the grotesque body and the ‘physiological’ freak, Mary Russo states that Bakhtin’s model of carnival did not really account for modern popular entertainment, and by that he “provides...a very useful model of contrast for considering freaks in the nineteenth and twentieth century as grotesque spectacles.”

She continues:

The question is...whether, on the one hand, there is still a model of community available to them [the modern grotesques] which internally produced that 'reciprocal democracy' imagined by Bakhtin, or, on the other hand, whether that spectacularity embodied by the freak can be reworked or counterproduced as distinctly twentieth century grotesque representations...available as a means of connection to existing social groups and to new socialities. (1995: 85)

This thesis echoes Russo's second question to some extent, by arguing that a new type of a grotesque body has emerged as a cultural representation: the spectacular Gothic-grotesque body that I locate in post-communist Romanian mass media.

1.3. The Socialist Body

Before moving on to the actual analysis of the Gothic-grotesque body in *The 5 O'clock News*, I will place it in contrast with the socialist body². I suggest that the spectacle of the Gothic-grotesque body is constructed in opposition with the disciplined, industrialized body that was the leitmotif of Romanian mass media under state socialism. I consider the juxtaposition of the two is a necessary step since I suggest that the rise of the spectacular Gothic-grotesque body takes place also in the context of the media trying to create a rupture with the socialist legacy.

In post-communist Romania the mass media serves several important roles in the process

2 I take the socialist body to be representative of what Bakhtin referred to as the 'new bodily canon' (1984: 320): an entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body, which is shown from the outside as something individual. All orifices of the body are closed. The body is tidily confined within its border .

of democratization and liberalization, one of the most important of which has been to endorse the rupture from the communist legacy and to legitimize political change. The break with the communist past is not only endorsed at the level of political consent, but in terms of lifestyle and body. From this perspective, the Gothic-grotesque body emerging in the mass media can be seen as set and constructed in contrast to the socialist body, used throughout communist propaganda and mass media to be the epitome and endorser of communist ideology.

Here I will concentrate on the main characteristics of the socialist body, which serves as one backdrop against which the representations of Gothic-grotesque acquires meaning. The spectacle of the Gothic-grotesque body can be understood by contrast to the disciplined body of the ‘new socialist man’, which is by definition a disciplined body, a docile body inasmuch as it can be “subjected, used, transformed and improved.” (Foucault 1979: 136) The ‘new socialist man’ is morally and physically healthy, and placed in relation to the production process, laboring and struggling for the greater good of the collective. He is the worker, a social being intimately connected to and defined by his labor. The socialist (disciplined) body is historically embedded, and engaged in a linear time “whose moments [are] integrated, one upon another, and which [is] oriented towards a terminal, stable point [...]” (Foucault, 1979: 160), which was the completion of the building of socialism.

The socialist body is a bound, closed body. It is a cog in the great machine of communism, striving for the good of the community. Furthermore, it lacks gender – though this is on the surface only, since it contains an “embedded masculinity” (Fodor 2002). These masculine features are present in both men and women and serve to embody the ‘new socialist man’. The ‘new socialist man’ is dominated by spiritual and moral aspirations. His corporeality is minimal, usually appearing in situations where it is instrumental to the production process. There are no physiological processes. When the body perspires, it does so in heroic proletarian actions,

or in dignified labor. The body is asexual; it does not display sexuality or sexual attraction, and the children borne by the body are reproduced for the continuity of the labor force.

Throughout the communist regime, this was the body that was most presented in the official media. It was set up as the model to be emulated. The ‘new socialist man’ was presented working in the factories, in the fields, in schools, constantly laboring away towards the greater good of the proletariat and of socialism. It was disciplined and disciplining.

From this disciplined, industrialized body that was the leitmotif of Romanian mass media under state socialism, there has been a shift towards the spectacularly Gothic-grotesque body of commercial sensationalist mass media. The Gothic-grotesque body also represents the rupture with the socialist body that was the vessel of socialist ideology. By breaking away from the socialist body, the move is made symbolically towards a new political and economical environment that sets itself up as democracy, and hence freedom (to consume).

The bodies that populate *The 5 O’clock News* are undisciplined bodies. They do not aspire towards the abstract ideals of the general good of the community, or towards moral perfection; they are unproductive, and outside relations of labor. These bodies are not engaged in a linear time, but are involved in a circular, idiosyncratic narrative which serves as the pattern of representation within the framework of the show.

In the next chapter, I will provide an overview of the development of Romanian mass media after communism, in order to contextualize the emergence and the consumption of Gothic-grotesque bodies as spectacle.

CHAPTER 2: MASS MEDIA IN ROMANIA

Following the fall of the communist regime, Romania has been going through a crisis commonly referred to as the ‘transition’ to a free-market economy. Along with major economical and political changes, this crisis has been characterized at a national level by the struggle for the country’s redefinition of its cultural identity in the aftermath of the totalitarian regime. Since the media’s role is central to perpetuating existing social relations and practices, as

well as legitimizing them and producing a sense of normality through discourse, it plays a central function in this process of national reinvention. Given that my analysis is that of the Gothic-grotesque bodies as they have emerged in the Romanian mass media (on television, more precisely) in recent years, it is important first of all to look at the particular role that the media plays in Romanian society before launching into an in-depth discussion of the spectacle of these bodies.

In what follows, I will examine the role that the media played under communism, given that the current trends that the media displays make sense in a given historical and cultural, as well as economic, context. Then I will provide an overview of media developments in the post-communist years, and in that context I will concentrate on the phenomenon of *The 5 O'clock News*, which constitutes the focus of my interest inasmuch as it is the main 'stage' for the representation and spectacle of Gothic-grotesque bodies. However I will start with an overview of the general role of the media in society before moving on to the Romanian case.

2.1. The Media and Society

Influenced by Foucault, I read society as a contested field of multiple discourses, which means that in this sense society as a whole cannot exist as a homogeneous meaning producer. Building on van Zoonen's approach, the media can be and is to some extent representative of the ways values, meanings, norms and stereotypes are articulated, negotiated, challenged, deconstructed and reconstructed in society. Power, as Foucault argued (1990), is embedded in any process of meaning production, which is in turn inherently discursive. In this regard the special position of media in the distribution of power in society is crucial for the understanding of it functioning as a major means of social control. This does not mean that media has absolute

power to define the rules according to which society functions; however, one has to account for its privileged position in this process. Through its ability to reach a wide audience, the media holds a unique capacity to transform any discourse into a dominant one, sometimes by simply engaging in it. And as van Zoonen puts it:

Dominant discourse is not monolithic and impervious, but produces its own opposition and is open to negotiation. On the other hand, discourse itself is a form of power, since both the discourse (the symbolic interactions) and the product of the discourse (a particular set of meanings and narratives) limit the possibilities of interpretation and privilege certain meanings above others. (1999: 39)

On the other hand, some analysts study media content as a measure of social trends: norms and values according to which society functions (see Croteau & Hoynes 1997). In the conceptual framework of this paper, the media is much more than a simple mirror of social processes that take place in a given community. In my understanding, they both reflect and induce dominant narratives. As van Zoonen argues, the media has a ‘bardic’ role in society, or in other words, from fragmented social events they construct a cultural reality which functions as a basis for a mythical feeling of ‘shared’ experience: “Mass media produce and reproduce collective memories, desires, hopes and fears, and thus perform a similar function as myths in previous centuries.” (van Zoonen 1994: 37) However, van Zoonen continues to argue that this way of addressing the media may result in a failure to account for the power relations that function in society, since the sense that media makes out of the events it reflects is not accidental but comes into existence as a result of the specific interactions between social dominance and oppression.

2.2. *Mass Media in Romania*

Understanding the role that Romanian mass media performs nowadays requires a look back to how it functioned under communism. Since a discussion of the overall media (print and broadcast) would be very complex, and since this thesis deals with certain representations on television, in my overview I will dwell mainly on broadcast media – television in particular.

During the communist regime, all ideology (by which I mean the body of doctrine with reference to the social and political plan of communism) on which was effectively filtered through the press and television, but it was through television that the Romanian state “managed to create a fantastical image of reality.” (Berry 1998: 18) There were only two television channels, TVR1 and TVR2 (the latter broadcasting only in the capital and reaching only 13 percent of the population³), both of them state-controlled and subject to strict censorship. The two channels would broadcast for two hours a day during weekdays (Monday to Saturday), and up to eight hours on Sundays⁴. The bulk of the transmissions were made up of so-called ‘news’ programs which were tedious, propagandistic descriptions of the most recent socialist breakthroughs in the fields of world peace, economy, and science⁵. The overall tone was that of forced enthusiasm, of a common joke that everybody was in on, without bothering to even question the truth of what was being said. Berry refers to television and its content during these times as “pure theatre”, the ideology behind it being to:

beautify the process of socialization and to elevate the position of Ceausescu; to embody nature

³ see Gross, P. *Mass Media in Revolution and National Development: The Romanian Laboratory*, Iowa State University Press, 1996

⁴ cf. Gross, P. *ibid.*

⁵ for a more detailed discussion of communist mass media in Romania, see Berry, D. 1998

and all that is good and essential to it; [television] was also an attempt to project a curious image of modernization counter-posed to Westernization and in the image of the '*new man*'...(1998: 20, emphasis mine)

As mentioned earlier, in the debates of media's role in society there are voices that advocate that the media reflect or represent reality. However, under the communist regime this was not the case. The media constructed an ideal version of reality, something that Jakubowicz called "imagined socialism" (2004), which provided people with an illusory version of what society was or should be like. In fact, the way he put it was that the communist model of the media "produced society-wide cognitive dissonance, giving rise to an impaired sense of dignity[...]." Gross describes the same phenomenon when he says that:

Romanians reached a point in the late 1980s when the need for any other information other than that which was disseminated by the controlled and controlling Romanian media became important to their emotional and psychological survival. (1996: 8)

In the years after the revolution of December 1989, Romanian mass media and its role changed dramatically. Television has come to occupy an important social space in Romania, being the preferred and the most easily accessible medium, serving both as leisure 'activity' and as a trusted source of information. Even though the system change affected the entire range of mass media, the real media revolution took place in the form of the development of an extensive television broadcasting network (see Berry 1998).

'Post-communism' is an umbrella term that can be applied to many countries and that lacks appropriate nuances to provide meaningful insight into each country's particular condition.

According to Holmes (1997), post-communism is “a phase of development without clearly defined objectives, but ultimately a ‘rejection’ of former communist regimes.” In line with this statement, in his discussion of the development of mass media in post-communist Romania, Berry (1998) argues that the media has a central, if schizophrenic role in the process of cultural reinvention: on the one hand, it struggles to break away from the socialist past by (re)inventing ‘real’ Romanianness and tracking down ‘genuine’ traditions, while on the other hand not entailing a definitive or irrevocable break with the past.

Subsequently, any analysis of post-communist media needs to take into account that the media does not form a homogeneous entity, but is a collection of disparate elements mediating a multiplicity of ideological discourses. In Romania, since 1989 the media (and television in particular) has been engaging in the production of cultural reinvention, primarily through “the production and manufacturing of a commercialized popular culture” (Berry 1998: 183), and it can be argued that it has managed to introduce new forms of social interaction and relations.

Contemporary Romanian society is in a crisis as it is struggling to define itself and reinvent its cultural identity, and quite clearly the media is central to constructing an image. The media is a powerful force in mediating and naturalizing life through representation. Television in particular is an influential medium for enacting change in everyday social organization.

I will now turn to the development of the television infrastructure in the years after the fall of the communist regime. First of all, state-controlled television channels disappeared with the collapse of the regime in 1989, and in its place, a variety of new television channels emerged. Public television stations going by the same name as before the revolution, TVR with channels TVR1 and TVR2 reappeared, along with privately-run television stations such as Pro TV, Antena1 and PrimaTV. Among these, Pro TV is the largest, was launched in 1995 and

owned by American investor Central European Media Enterprises (CME)⁶, and is the largest commercial television station with a market share of 29.55% (see Berry, 1998). This station was meant to be molded in imitation of the highly sensationalist American model of commercial television, banking on ‘infotainment’ and ‘non-event’ news. It was Pro TV who introduced to the media market the phenomenon known as *The 5 O’clock News*.

Before moving on to a discussion of *The 5 O’clock News*, given the name of the program, it is relevant to introduce the issue of the news media and what ‘news’ means in Romania after communism. Gross (2002) notes that in Romania, the reshaping of the news media as an institution was to take place at the same time as the remaking of political culture, the development of civil society, politics and the market economy. The news media is expected to serve as “catalysts, models, facilitators and vehicles” for societal changes in its central role in “resocialization and modernization by teaching a new way of participating in politics and socioeconomic life and by encouraging new individual and national aspirations.” (Gross 2002: 90) In practical terms, news media are supposed to be informative, to “set the agenda, and help shape public opinion on all matters related to democratization in a direction consonant with that process.” (Gross 2002: 91) Furthermore, the news media has the task to fulfill these roles “in a mode different from the highly politicized, partisan, propagandistic, mobilizational mode of the now-defunct Communist media, using a journalistic approach [...]” (Gross 2002: 91)

However, these expectations for the news media, while reasonable, are difficult to live up to. What has happened is in fact a large-scale commercialization of the media, also referred to as “tabloidization” (Gross 2002), which has had a great impact on what is considered ‘news’ and

6 Information obtained from the Corporate News website at <http://www.corporatenews.ro/articol/Old-Media/6390/Pro-TV-ramane-in-topul-audientelor-TV.html>

the way ‘news’ is reported. Even though this is a phenomenon that can be observed on a global scale, it has been argued that in Romania the tabloidization of the media has taken greater proportions (Gross 2002; Berry 1998) due to the fact that Romania did not have underground media during the authoritarian communist regime (unlike Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland, for instance) which meant that immediately after the revolution, the media’s most urgent task was to seek legitimacy. Gross comments:

They [the media] were granted it [legitimacy] quickly by virtue of their ‘newness’ and their role as vehicles both for venting anti-Communism, giving audiences a chance to vicariously participate in a ‘revolution’, and for individual and national catharsis.
(Gross 2002: 35)

This search for legitimacy, combined with a market-oriented approach, has led to the sensationalism, trivialization and tabloidization of the media in an attempt to increase profits by enlarging audiences (Gross 2002). In the end, this has the potential to diminish the informational value of what the media conveys. In addition, it is important to see this process in the context of a massive rise in consumerism characteristic of post-communist societies, in which news and media output are in and of themselves consumer products.

In light of this direction of development that the mass media in Romania has gone through, some questions arise as to what kind of cultural representations have emerged in the media, as well as what their impact is on the audience. Consequently, my intention in this thesis is to explore a particular cultural representation that the media is rife with – that I refer to as the ‘Gothic-grotesque body’ – both at the level of how it is framed in particular contexts, as well as at the level of its intersection with the audience. In order to do so, I explore the representation,

the *spectacle* of these bodies in *The 5 O'clock News* on Pro TV.

2.3. The 5 O'clock News

The 5 O'clock News on Pro TV is, I argue, the perfect example of this process of the tabloidization of the media experienced in recent years in Romania, and insofar as news media is supposed to be informative, to “set the agenda, and help shape public opinion on all matters related to democratization in a direction consonant with that process.” (Gross 2002: 91) Thus, it is not actual news.

For most television stations in Romania, the most important newscast of the day is usually presented in the evening broadcast time ranging from 6.30 p.m. to 8.00 p.m. Pro TV does adhere to this standard, and it presents the major international and national political and economical news at 7.30 p.m. every night. But in addition to that it has introduced a 5 p.m. news program, which, according to the mission statement posted on the station's website, is nothing less than:

[...] a tour de force throughout Romania, through the most exciting and spectacular news. Reality in all its forms will be flowing on the Pro TV frequency; explosive cover stories and the testimonies of people caught in the middle of events will be unraveled under the magic wand of Monica Dascalu [the anchor]. Destinies abruptly touched by extreme mishaps will provide the stuff of harsh yet exciting and objectively reported stories. Monica Dascalu will be putting together fragments from the spectacle of life from all over the country. She will be getting in touch with local stations in order to capture the pulse of the

country, as well as to bring you real stories of incredible events and characters⁷.

This is then a self-proclaimed newsreel that covers only national events of a very particular nature. In fact, the events that are featured prominently in this show are all of a socially ‘deviant’ nature. By this I refer to the fact that the broadcast is centered around criminal acts of various gravity, or acts framed as criminal. While a regular newscast may include accounts of crimes, the bulk of them will not be limited to this aspect. Moreover, the crimes presented are consistently perpetrated by members of marginalized and disadvantaged social groups or ethnic minorities. The stories and the actors flow and fit into a well-defined pattern which has turned out to be a successful recipe securing the highest audience ratings for this program over the past eight years.⁸ The protagonists and antagonists of these events portrayed as news are almost always from rural areas, and they belong either to the Roma ethnic minority, or to the most impoverished rural inhabitants (and usually both). The crimes in question range from very petty ones (minor theft, poaching of animals, etc.) to extremely serious (rape, incest, murder).

While these events are reported as pieces of objective information that serve as news, I suggest that this is in fact a sensationalist program that is closer to a reality television show (or ‘infotainment’), with an ultimate goal to cash in on the tabloid potential of various situations. Furthermore, I would like to advance the notion that this show constructs a certain subjectivity for the viewer in relationship with the bodies presented on screen, who are ‘othered’ on many levels. I also suggest that at the center of this program lies the Gothic-grotesque body, governed

⁷ source: <http://www.protv.ro/stiri-protv/stirile-pro-tv-de-la-ora-17-00>, translation mine.

⁸ According to <http://www.corporatenews.ro/>

by physiological processes and unindividuated.

In the following chapter, I will proceed to analyze the representation of the Gothic-grotesque bodies in a sample of five reports from *The 5 O'clock News*.

CHAPTER 3: THE GOTHIC-GROTESQUE BODIES IN *THE 5 O'CLOCK NEWS*

For the analysis of the Gothic-grotesque bodies as they emerge in contemporary Romanian mass media, I have chosen to focus on the program called *The 5 O'clock News*, broadcast by private television station Pro TV every weekday between 17.00-17.45. The reasons why I have chosen this particular television program and this particular television station include the fact that Pro TV is the largest commercial television station with a market share of 29.55% (see Berry 1998), and that *The 5 O'clock News* has held the highest audience ratings on a national level since 1999, the year it was introduced.⁹ Given its massive success, this type of program has since been imitated by other television stations, but despite the fact that Pro TV has had to share its 'fan base' with other networks, this program still maintains its top audience ratings. Furthermore, since all other shows are fashioned according to *The 5 O'clock News*, I take it to be the prototype of this type of news, with typical representations and concerns. Each program consists of short reports between two and five minutes long, and one commercial break. One report covers one 'story'. Since one program may contain up to 15 such reports, I have decided to take one report as a unit of analysis.

Since my research does not attempt to be statistically representative, the sampling has been conducted with a view to gaining a 'window' on particular patterns of representation of the people who are the object of the program. Accordingly, I have proceeded to do 'typical case'

⁹ According to <http://www.corporatenews.ro/>

sampling – first by choosing the program in itself, which I consider prototypical, and later when choosing the actual reports that I base my analysis on. Moreover, the aim of this paper is not to prove the existence of this type of bodily representation on television in Romania, but to explore and analyze the forms in which it appears.

For the purpose of my analysis, I have selected a sample of five reports spread over a period of three months (March-May 2008), in order to ensure a variety of topics (sometimes the same item will be covered repeatedly during a given period of time due to follow-ups or developments of the case). The five reports that I have selected are listed below; I include the date and headline as they appear on Pro TV's website. The translation into English is mine¹⁰: March 18th : *Born out of incest*; March 20th: *Born in the outhouse*; April 11th: *Insane love*; April 18th: *From the ball to the hospital*; May 20th: *Dirt-road wars*.

For the purpose of my analysis of the Gothic-grotesque bodies, I will employ qualitative research, which can provide useful tools when dealing with “the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency.” (Denzin & Lincoln 2000: 8) According to Cassell & Symon (quoted in Denzin & Lincoln 2000: 4), qualitative research is “less likely to impose restrictive a priori classifications on the collection of data,” and thus research is “less driven by very specific hypotheses and categorical frameworks and more concerned with emergent themes and idiographic descriptions.”

In the course of my study I take each individual report as a text, which I then intend to analyze by way of discourse analysis. This method will serve to identify themes and patterns of

10 In translating these headlines I tried to use the style typical of English-language tabloids in order to capture their sensationalism. Since the style of Romanian tabloid headlines is not very different from colloquial language, some changes in syntax and tense were necessary for the translation into English.

representation both in the language and in the visual images used. The chosen samples will be loosely analyzed according to qualitative content analysis principles that involve first of all summarizing of the material in such a way as to preserve the content, and then a structuring of the material into certain patterns.

To begin with, I would like to point out the structure of the news reports, since they all follow the same model. The story opens with a striking sentence or formula – usually a pun, or a headline that contains the words ‘shocking’ or ‘unbelievable’ followed by exclamation marks. This is then developed by the anchor – always female – and then passed on to the field reporter who interviews the participants or the witnesses. The story is then given its official version by a representative of the authorities – in most cases either a policeman/woman, or a medical doctor. Following this, the anchor then wraps up the story. This pattern is important to note, since its fixed structure supports and helps the framing of these events and the participants to the events in an easily-digested format.

During the course of my research, having watched a considerable number of entire shows, certain generalizations can be made as to what constitutes the large majority of the reports. In terms of setting, the stories covered by *The 5 O'clock News* always take place in poor, rural areas. Almost all the events include violence of some sort, usually fueled by alcohol, and almost all constitute crimes. In what follows, I will briefly summarize the five selected reports, and will then proceed to analyze the Gothic-grotesque bodies that they revolve around.

3.1. Five Samples

In *Born out of incest*¹¹, the ‘news’ is that in an unnamed village, a 21-year-old mentally disabled woman gave birth as a result of being raped by her own father. The reporter interviews the outraged neighbors, the incestuous father (strangely enough, still at large despite having admitted his crime), as well as his wife. From the interviews it appears that the man in question is (or used to be) a highly respected member of the community, in spite of being prone to excessive alcohol consumption. The reactions gathered range from indignation to disbelief to consternation. The man calmly admits to raping his daughter because he had ‘had one too many to drink’ and expresses some regret – but emphasizes that he is by no means certain that his daughter’s baby is his.

The plot revolves around “the acts of the bodily drama.” (Bakhtin 1984: 317) The main events are rape and incest, which represent horrific aspects of sexuality, typical of the Gothic genre. The interviews revolve around the (physical) relationship between father and daughter, and in so doing their bodies become the center of attention. The pregnant body of the daughter pertains to the Gothic-grotesque framework: it is a double body, with blurred boundaries and in the process of transformation. The fact that she is mentally disabled echoes Hurley’s connection of the Gothic body to degeneration theory (1996: 13), in addition to the fact that the sexuality associated with her pregnancy is ‘deviant’, abject, and doubly criminal. The father (or the criminal) is old, shaky and intoxicated with alcohol. His demeanor is almost a parody of a concerned father, because he expresses some regret for having inflicted such an act on his daughter, while making sure to state that he was probably not the father of the baby – in this way attempting, one can guess, to cast the shadow of a doubt on his daughter’s innocence in the

11 Pro TV, March 18th, “Nascuta din incest”, 17:04

matter, and to exonerate himself.

The next newscast I wish to consider is from March 20th 2008, with the headline *Born in the outhouse*.¹² The plot of the newscast is that a 17-year-old woman in a village gave birth to a baby in the outhouse. The baby fell inside, and had to be rescued by her mother's parents who, incidentally, were unaware of their daughter's pregnancy. The fact that the baby survived the fall into the pit is considered a miracle. The police are also investigating whether the young mother had harbored any murderous intentions towards her newborn baby, but there isn't so much suspicion hanging over her head. The report ends on a positive note: both mother and baby are in good health, recovering in the hospital, and the teenage mother's parents are going to help her raise the baby, despite not knowing who the father is.

The bodies in this story are Gothic-grotesque. Both the mother and the baby are not complete, finished bodies. The pregnant body in itself is a multiple body that creates another body, it is a body in constant transformation whose boundaries cannot be identified clearly. Also, the processes of the body are presented in a fused matter – the birth of the baby and the bodily function of excreting become indistinguishable in the physiological drama that is unfolding on the screen. Birth, death and excretion become intermingled within the same body, within the same event. The baby survives the profoundly unfortunate and unhygienic circumstances of its birth – but at no point is her name mentioned. These bodies are not presented as individuals. In fact, the entire report is conducted through generic statements: “a 17-year-old woman”, “a baby” and so on. This can be done to protect their anonymity, but since that is not always the case, I suggest that these generalizations serve the purpose of creating types, of depersonalizing the characters in the story, and of producing these abject Gothic-grotesque bodies that are at the

12 Pro TV, March 20th, “S-a nascut in hazna”, 17:03

center of this program.

In the next report, with the headline *Insane love*¹³, the plot is that a 73-year-old woman, in a fit of jealousy after having seen her common-law spouse chat with a ‘younger’ neighbor, hit him on the head with an axe while he was sleeping. The story in itself is quite typical of the ‘news’ presented on this show. What is also typical is the way the news is framed and the way the woman – the main character of this rural drama – is demonized and ridiculed throughout by the reporter as well as by the anchor (both of them women themselves). First off, the woman is admonished for being passionate about her partner at such a ripe old age, and moreover, because he is 13 years her junior. This is done by speaking of her actions and their relationship of 20 years using the vocabulary of teenage relationships – the woman was jealous because her ‘boyfriend’ was ‘flirting’ with a ‘hotter’ younger woman (herself in her sixties). Interviews with the neighbors bring to light the fact that she is very concerned about her appearance, and very much in love with her life partner. However, this is framed as something negative, bordering the insane – an element also present in the headline in the form of a pun. In Romanian, the headline can be read as either ‘Crazy in love’ (positive connotation – obviously reserved for young people), or ‘Insane love’ (negative connotation that holds in this particular context). The entire newscast relies on the tacit assumption that amorous inclinations in an old woman are unnatural and monstrous – and all the comments and double entendres are made to that effect, while it is never explicitly stated. As a result, the way she is represented belongs to the sphere of the Gothic-grotesque body.

In *From the ball to the hospital*¹⁴, the focus of the report is an incident of food poisoning

13 Pro TV, ‘Iubire nebuna, gelozie si razbunare sangeroasa’, April 11th, 2008, 17:16

14 Pro TV, April 18th “De la bal la spital!”, 17:07

that occurred during a wedding feast. Some of the guests at the wedding had to be rushed to the emergency room with severe nausea and diarrhoea which was caused by food poisoning. A few of them are interviewed as they lie in hospital beds with puffy faces, still in formal dress, suffering from convulsions and appearing to be going through severe pain and discomfort. The reporters try to obtain interviews with the catering staff, but they refuse to comment. In the meantime, the wedding continues with those who have not fallen sick.

The Gothic-grotesque quality of the bodies in this report lies in the continuity between the the hospital and the wedding party, between pain and celebration. In the first circumstance, there are the bodies isolated in their suffering, and in the other, the bodies are enjoying a civic celebration together. This notion of continuity is maintained throughout the entire newscast, since the report is made up of parallel shots of the people who have remained at the party and are having a good time, and shots of the unfortunate ones who are lying in hospital beds, tormented by violent fits of vomiting and diarrhoea. While this is not a pleasant situation, the way it is framed lacks any sympathy for the people in medical care, and the numerous puns inserted in the course of the reporting make it look funny. The rhyme in the title is the first clue that this is not going to be the report of a tragedy. The bodies of the sick are puffy, and their eyes are sad – but the tone of the report is tongue-in-cheek. The victims of food poisoning are constantly referred to as ‘the revelers’, and the reporter mercilessly interviews them while they are obviously incapacitated and going through a lot of pain. Meanwhile, the wedding party continues, with people making cheerful comments regarding their less fortunate fellow revelers. The sick bodies in this report are Gothic-grotesque in that they are leaky, caught in spasms of violent, abnormal physiological processes. Their image does not create a reciprocal laughter; it is a one-sided enjoyment of the situation, shared by the fortunate wedding guests who were spared the food poisoning, as well as by the spectator, safe at home in front of the television set.

The next report is *Dirt-road wars*¹⁵. The content of this report is an accusation against some Roma women that they have broken into a house and stolen money in a village. None of these events have been established though, and the entire report reflects this through the use of “allegedly”, “supposedly”, “they are thought to have stolen”, and so forth. As a result of the accusations, the enraged inhabitants of the village have wrecked the van belonging to the Roma women. The women are shown wailing by the side of the road, but they are not interviewed. The side of the story that we get is the perspective of the owner of the house that was allegedly broken into. There are contradictory statements – some villagers say the Roma women were seen hanging around the shop near the “targeted house,” some say they went inside, the owner says he stopped them just as they were about to enter his yard. The local policeman gives the official version, saying that he had to take into custody “a number of eight Gypsies.” The story ends ambiguously with a statement from the anchor that, regardless of the culpability of the Roma women, the villagers who destroyed their van will have to pay for it.

Here the commotion is produced by a group of Roma women who have been attacked by the villagers under suspicion of attempting to break into one of their houses. The report does not ascertain any facts, since they have not been established yet – and consequently, the entire news content is presented in hypothetical terms. Despite this, the story is very much one-sided, since the viewers don’t get to hear the accused women’s version. They are just shown sitting on the side of a dirt road wailing and waving their arms about their destroyed van. The villagers are shown as very agitated and angry at the Roma women, even though their stories as to what happened differ substantially.

The bodies presented here also follow the pattern of the Gothic-grotesque body. The

15 Pro TV, May 20th “Razboi pe ulita”, 17:11

atmosphere surrounding them verges on the carnivalesque, without having any celebratory factor. There is no joy, but a petty circumstance in which you see the bodies agitated, gesticulating, shouting at each other – the shrill voices of the Roma women in the background, and the outraged countenance of the (male) villagers. The account of the policeman is comical, because he is largely incoherent – one can suspect he has been drinking – and he is mixing official jargon with colloquial words and biased statements. The bodies framed here as Gothic-grotesque are those of the Roma women – it is relevant to note that they are not actually given a voice in the matter. They are the center of the story, yet they only figure as bodies, and shown as producing inarticulate sounds (the wailing, crying, shouting). The camera focuses on the traditional Roma dress – long colorful multi-layered skirts, headscarves around long braids. This contributes to their framing as ‘Other’, especially since they are cast in the stereotypical category of the ‘Roma thief’.

These are illustrations to my understanding of the Gothic-grotesque bodies in *The 5 O’clock News*. These bodies shown here are unindividuated, they are connected to the lower bodily stratum. At the same time, their blurred boundaries are not indicative of being in harmony with the universe – but of being in an ‘abhuman’ state associated with being trapped in matter, with a horrific sexuality that provokes revulsion. The Gothic-grotesque bodies are sites where pre-modern mentalities clash with 20th- (and 21st-) century technologies of power. Their dramas are never of high order. In fact, the reports are trivializing, containing tongue-in-cheek comments and puns even when reporting loss of life. The dramas always leave the spectator on the verge of laughter – a laughter that does not contain the cheerfulness of the carnival, but one tainted by an uncanny mixture of disgust and fascination.

3.2. Gender and *The 5 O'clock News*

The next subsection will explore the gendered aspects of the Gothic-grotesque body, which play a crucial role in the spectacle presented by *The 5 O'clock News*. I am interested here in seeing how the Gothic-grotesque bodies are gendered so as to yield monstrous, abnormal femininities and masculinities. I then suggest that these deviant femininities and masculinities that cause horror, disgust – but also curiosity and fascination – are staged as abject types or categories on the verge of psychoanalytic archetypes, such as the monstrous mother.

As previously mentioned, the socialist body is not overtly gendered. It hides its male bias under the guise of neutrality, and the bodily category it is ascribed to by default is that of the worker. Not so with the Gothic-grotesque bodies. On *The 5 O'clock News*, the bodies are gendered, a fact which is heavily exploited in their representation. Characteristic of the sensationalist media, this newscast banks on shock value, political incorrectness, and racy stories or situations.

In post-socialist Romania, as in most countries of the Eastern Bloc, there has been a rediscovery of traditions (sometimes to the point of having to invent them¹⁶) in the attempt to break from the oppressive political past. As such, true 'Romanianness', traditions and folklore have gained great currency and are widely used by sensationalist media and advertising companies to speak to the 'real' people. The Gothic-grotesque body in *The 5 O'clock News* has as its main sources folklore – and it is important to note here that misogyny, racism, and a certain trivialization of human relations are all deeply entrenched in folklore and certain traditions. The result is that the Gothic-grotesque bodies and the way in which they are framed reflect the bias of the dominant culture. This can be clearly seen in the way these bodies are gendered, as well as

16 see Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 1992.

how gender and ethnicity intersect.

Based on the evidence collected from the primary resource – the Pro TV website – I want to argue that the gendered Gothic-grotesque body in the limelight is the repository of deviant masculinities and femininities, and that these abnormal masculinities and femininities are put forth as types. *The 5 O'clock News* usually revolves around acts of violence. It is important to note that violence committed by women is given more attention and is considered much more vile and dangerous. This is typical of patriarchal societies where misogyny is rampant, and is not present only in the low genre of the Gothic-grotesque body at the center of sensationalist media in Romania.

Looking at the reports that revolve around women, one can see certain patterns of representation. The women usually fall into the following categories: monstrous mother (murderous, alcoholic, abusive, etc.), castrating wife (murderous, unfaithful, abusive), victim of rape and/or murder, or conniving prostitute. These categories inflect in different ways when intersecting with ethnicity, for instance. The way the news is reported actually helps produce these types, and the images as well as the captions that appear on screen support them.

For instance, in *Insane love*, the story revolves not so much around the actual crime committed by the woman, but around constructing her image as insane because she is in love with her partner and because she is concerned with her appearance. The bodies in this newscast are presented as abnormal aged bodies whose drama revolves around sex and death. The woman is framed as deviant for crossing the limits that society sets for aged women – that of asexual caretakers. This woman has feelings that are reserved for the young and the beautiful, and her passion is seen as monstrous. She is framed as ‘castrating wife’, she is the embodiment of a deviant femininity – not the submissive wife, asexual now in her old age, resigned to growing old and caring for others. She presents an unusual sexual appetite (which is alluded to by the repeated

and slightly outraged statement that her partner is much younger than her) and initiative for radical action (a woman abusing her male partner is something much more horrifying than the reverse situation in Romania, where domestic violence against women is extremely common across all strata of society¹⁷) that are framed as frightening, abject, and contemptible qualities in a woman.

Consequently, the female Gothic-grotesque body is characterized by crossing the boundaries of her set role as mother, wife, altruistic and loving caretaker, as well as by displaying characteristics that go against the grain of what is deemed acceptable for a woman in Romanian society. The Gothic-grotesque female body is either very young or aged, or disabled in some way. There are few women in their prime that populate the violent landscape of *The 5 O'clock News*. Their bodies are deformed or deviant in some way, and the organs that play the major part in their representation are either their genitals or their gaping mouths. These bodies reflect in fact an obsession of this show with the 'monstrous feminine' (Creed 1994).

In contrast, the Gothic-grotesque male body, while presented with some major similarities with the female body (being incomplete, unfinished, revolving around birth-death-sex), is gendered masculine to produce deviant masculinities that are not as monstrous as the associated femininities. The men in the news usually fall into the following categories: sexual assaulter (rapist/child molester/incestuous father), alcoholic and abusive (even murderous) husband/father, etc., petty criminal, or victim of a demonic woman. The Gothic-grotesque male body does transgress its own boundaries; it is a body that "fecundates..., devours and is devoured, drinks,

¹⁷ According to a survey conducted by Astra Network (Central and Eastern European Womens Network for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights) in 1999, 29% of the women in Romania have experienced, or experience spousal physical abuse. Source: <http://www.astra.org.pl/violence.htm>

defecates, is sick and dying” (Bakhtin 1984: 319), but its transgression of social norms is not sanctioned as harshly as in the case of women. However, the masculinities presented in *The 5 O’clock News* are marginalized masculinities – they are criminals and sex fiends, often from the Roma community; they are also men whose sexuality is considered abnormal or horrific (zoophiles, pedophiles, rapists – and, indicative of the widespread homophobia in Romanian society, homosexuals).

The gendered Gothic-grotesque bodies are involved in the bodily drama of the lower stratum. The tragedies that are presented are not dignified, or heroic. Their dramas are centered around body fluids (blood, urine, sweat, semen), around bodily processes and around the three major events of the bodily: birth-sex-death. These bodies are presented as deviant, as abject – and the way they are gendered reflects the traditional and culturally embedded gender norms of rural, patriarchal communities. Their emergence in the landscape of Romanian mass media can be said to be in connection with the resurgence of a ‘rural’ nationalism in the wake of post-communism.

CHAPTER 4: THE SPECTACLE OF THE GOTHIC- GROTESQUE BODIES

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the definition of the word *spectacle* is:

I. 1. a. A specially prepared or arranged display of a more or less public nature (esp. one on a large scale), forming an impressive or interesting show or entertainment for those viewing it. or 2. A person or thing exhibited to, or set before, the public gaze as an object either (a) of curiosity or contempt, or (b) of marvel or admiration.¹⁸

The word itself brings up notions of extravagant performance, or, in more negative terms, of violence and atrocity. The definition quoted above includes “curiosity or contempt” and “marvel or admiration.” The concept of spectacle becomes more complex in the context of cinema, television and associated technology, since they provide a mediation between spectacle and spectator. Television broadcasts, for instance, can reach audiences who are not present in one place or time. Thus the spectacle acquires the form of a double mediation: first as an attraction in its own right, and then because of it being televised *as* spectacle.

The complexities of the modern spectacle, with the increase of televised and cinematic mediation, have problematized the relationship between spectator and spectacle. Is the spectator alienated from the spectacle by this mediation? Or does it instead create a new type of wonder

¹⁸ source: <http://dictionary.oed.com>

based on the medium specificity of the image? Roland Barthes wrote about his fascination with the cinema, describing the “cinematographic hypnosis” and pleasure of being “glued to the representation”. The darkness and mirror-like nature of the cinematic screen leaves room for a narcissistic gaze to take place between the subject within the film and the spectator (1989: 348-9). Other theorists have taken a more skeptical approach to spectatorship, by pointing out the fact that the cinematic spectacle is part of a larger ideological framework, causing the spectator to falsely identify with the spectacle onscreen, while remaining ignorant of the processes that have produced the image (Baudry 1999); or by placing the relationship between spectacle and spectatorship within certain structures of power present in society (Mulvey 1989; Debord 1999).

Foucault also problematized spectacle and spectatorship indirectly in *Discipline and Punish* by arguing that the visible spectacle has completely disappeared from the public space. Beginning with the 19th century, he argued, public spectacles of torture and execution which functioned as theatrical representations of pain (Foucault 1979) disappear, and resurface in the form of disciplinary social norms. Understanding the modern spectacle in terms of surveillance, the gaze does not emanate from a particular human agent but from an invisible and normalizing collective. In Foucault’s theory of the panopticon, mass spectatorship inverts itself so that the former spectators become objects of a disciplinary spectacle. But the spectacle *is* also a set of techniques for the management of bodies and the management of attention, and for “assuring the ordering of human multiplicities”; “its object is to fix, it is an anti-nomadic technique”, “it uses procedures of partitioning and cellularity...in which the individual is reduced as a political force.” (Foucault 1979)

Jonathan Crary takes this argument even further claiming that television is a further perfecting of panoptic technology (1989: 105). In the context of television, surveillance and spectacle do not stand in opposition, but collapse into one another as a more effective

disciplinary apparatus.

The modern spectacle takes on the more complex issues of class and control which arise with the emergence of mass consumerism in Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1999). Debord argues that the rise of commercialism produces a singular market consciousness, or what he calls "the society of the spectacle". Debord's spectacle assumes an ideological meaning and thus becomes indicative of a larger capitalist super-structure. He further states that the "spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images." (1999: 2) In a world of mass consumerism of press, advertising, and market products, the spectacle represents the dissemination or mediation of commercial images that lack content. Thus commercialism is the "materialization of ideology, in the form of spectacle." (Debord 1999: 150) Moreover, the relationship between spectator and spectacle becomes a relationship between consumer and commodity.

Addressing Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* in a more modern context, Crary examines the dominance of the television as a spectacular commodity and argues that starting with the mid-1970s, television ceases to be a medium of representation and undergoes a structural change in which television becomes "the heart of another network", a system of mass distribution and regulation (Crary 1984: 284). Creating a sensationalist media landscape, the televised spectacle begins to desensitize rather than evoke affect from the spectator (Crary 1984: 291-2). Instead of a set of disparate images, television becomes the stage for a singular spectacle in which sitcoms, political events, and images of pornography can and do appear alongside each other. Crary, echoing Debord, also argues that the televised spectacle produces a consciousness which operates according to the programming imported through televised media, and its associated socio-economic structures.

For theorists such as Foucault, Crary, Debord, and Baudrillard, the spectacular shifts from

its theatrical origins and is now the repository of class ideology and modern subjectivity. In the context of the modern spectacle, the spectator, confronted by new modes of socio-economic production and technology, ceases to simply be a receiver of affect and becomes the modern or post-modern subject. It is this approach that I take in my discussion of the relationship between the spectacle of the Gothic-grotesque bodies of *The 5 O'clock News* and its audience.

Drawing on the aforementioned theorists, the functions of the spectacle of the Gothic-grotesque bodies on *The 5 O'clock News* orchestrated under the pretext of providing news coverage for the public are multiple. Undoubtedly, the greatest value of the spectacle of the Gothic-grotesque bodies is the commodity potential that they hold. With the rise of consumerism, the media with its sensationalist reports and stories are consumer products in themselves – as is the case with the spectacle of the Gothic-grotesque bodies on *The 5 O'clock News*. By focusing on the shock value of the events and of the images presented, these bodies become commodified and fetishized. For instance, the reports analyzed in chapter four are all framed in general terms that transcend the individual identity of the actual people involved ('a 17-year-old woman', 'a baby', 'some Roma women,' etc.). This is not, as one might think, an attempt to maintain the anonymity of people involved, since their names and location are usually mentioned at some point during the reports. What this amounts to is a strategy that ensures the maximizing of the shock value of the information presented – and thus maximizing the commodity value for the spectator-consumer.

Furthermore, the presentation of these Gothic-grotesque bodies, mediated by the 'normal' reporter and anchor produces and naturalizes the identification of the spectator with the latter. The report is usually framed in tentatively politically correct terms by a field reporter, and in all cases it includes testimonies from people who are involved in the event, who are affiliated with it somehow, or who just happen to be there. These testimonies are invariably devoid of journalistic

or informative value (by which I mean that they do not offer more insight into the stories covered – sometimes the different testimonies are utterly incoherent in terms of grammar or logic, or even contradictory among themselves), yet they play a crucial role in this spectacle of the Gothic-grotesque. What is always quite striking is the difference between the interviewer and the interviewee. This is first and foremost a class difference, rendered visible by way of language use, dress and body. The reporter – always young, attractive, well-groomed and articulate – is the embodiment of the Foucauldian disciplined body. It is a normalized, self-regulated body that is in tune with the dominant standards (myths) of beauty and success. From this perspective, the spectacle of the Gothic-grotesque bodies and the violence they are subjected to – or they themselves subject others to – serve as an instrument of discursive self-regulation for the spectator.

The framing of the Gothic-grotesque bodies as ridiculous and repulsive leads to the spectator perceiving them as ‘Others’. In fact, this alienation between the object of the spectacle and spectator contributes to the Gothic quality of the bodies presented. In the Bakhtinian model, the grotesque body of the carnival festivity was not distanced or objectified to an audience. Audiences and performers were “the interchangeable parts of an incomplete but imaginable wholeness” in what Russo calls a “reciprocal democracy” (1995: 85). *The 5 O’clock News* does not allow for a cathartic identification of the spectator with the spectacle; there is no sympathy (or empathy) towards the bodies involved, and the laughter provoked by the situations is not *with*, but *at* the people in the stories.

The spectacle of the Gothic-grotesque bodies also constructs certain categories, such as ‘the Roma thief’, ‘the battered wife’, ‘the alcoholic and/or abusive husband’, ‘the incestuous father’, ‘the cheating spouse’ and so on. These categories confirm and perpetuate existing stereotypes, and construct certain subjectivities and notions of citizenship in relation to them.

Statistics show that the large majority of this show's audience are from urban areas¹⁹. Considering that Pro TV is available only on cable television, this further shows the power relations thus existent between spectator and spectacle. What we have here is an urban, fairly well-to-do population consuming a program that depicts poor people (whose bodies are thus classed and ethnicized) almost exclusively from rural areas. Given this fact and the mass appeal that *The 5 O'clock News* has, it becomes apparent that the program constructs a certain type of subjectivity for the spectator, shaped by power relations infused by class and ethnicity. Similar to Mulvey's locating the power of spectatorship in the male gaze, I argue that the power of spectatorship in this case lies in creating and maintaining social and class privilege, or at least the impression thereof.

The Gothic-grotesque bodies of *The 5 O'clock News*, through their spectacle of 'infotainment', make visible certain marginalized social strata – and thus mainstream them to the audience. However, in this process of mainstreaming the tendency is not to raise awareness of social issues, but rather to locate the social problem outside the spectator. It is the poor rural inhabitants or the ethnic minorities that perpetrate crimes or that display outrageous behavior – the spectacle of the Gothic-grotesque bodies encourages this line of reasoning, without leaving much room for self-reflexivity. A further argument that this show is not concerned with raising awareness or setting an agenda for positive social action is that it never makes a wider social commentary when the possibility to do so arises. As declared in its mission statement, *The 5 O'clock News* aims to bring forth 'the most exciting and spectacular news'²⁰, but the reporting remains within the limited context of the story covered. Despite the events chosen for the

19 According to www.corporatenews.ro

20 For source, see footnote on p.20

program always being crimes or presented as crimes, this is never commented on so as to bring the larger social picture into focus, and the status quo is never questioned. For example, in the reports that I have analyzed in the previous chapter, the events are quite typical instances of what *The 5 O'clock News* is concerned with: (attempted) murder, incest, alcohol abuse, conflicts between different ethnic groups, ignorance about sexuality and consequences thereof, poor customer service, and so on. In each of the cases, the reports could lead to questions as to why these incidents occur so frequently, and how they could be addressed to actually improve things. But the program is not interested in triggering social transformation, or real concern. Its main aim is to sell this news for its spectacular value, and to give the spectator pleasurable voyeuristic experiences while locating responsibility for social problems with various disadvantaged groups of society.

This commercialist attitude which makes *The 5 O'clock News* an ideologically-invested consumer item also contributes to the spectacle of the Gothic-grotesque bodies being a way of obtaining political consent. Through locating the social problem elsewhere, and creating a sense of the spectators' 'normality' in contrast to the Gothic-grotesque bodies, while satisfying their desire for consumption, *The 5 O'clock News* holds the potential of creating a feeling of legitimization of the transition to a market economy – all under the slogan of the relatively recent freedom of information and freedom of consumption, and of the citizens' right of access to information and consumer goods.

The spectacle of the Gothic-grotesque bodies of *The 5 O'clock News* is quite relevant for the Romanian post-communist context. Even though the phenomenon of mass consumption of sensationalist media items is spread worldwide, this does take different forms in different places and at different times. What is very interesting is that this kind of show is present on other television stations, and in more than one form. In fact, most of the other television stations

broadcast this kind of infotainment shows, but they usually cover international stories as well, in which the Gothic-grotesque body is arguably present, but in different contexts, or in different ways. For instance, they would show grossly overweight people and their eating habits, or people exercising obsessively. The representations of these bodies pertain to the domain of the ‘freak show’ as well – but since they belong to a different cultural space, they may not have the same impact as *The 5 O’clock News*, which, as it is clearly set forth in its mission statement, is only interested in stories that take place in Romania. I would speculate that the reason why this show has continued to secure the highest audience ratings consistently over the years, despite its limited areas of concern and despite the competition, is that the subjectivity that it creates for the spectator is very appealing in terms of the cultural context. It speaks to the fact that the audience is not just a passive receiver of the images onscreen, but that it interacts with the spectacle and that the pleasures that it obtains from it are a direct result of one’s socio-economic background as well.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis is to explore the emergence of the spectacular Gothic-grotesque bodies in Romanian sensationalist media as they appear in *The 5 O'clock News*, a television program that I take to be prototypical of this phenomenon. I have defined the Gothic-grotesque body as a synthesis of the comic grotesque body, whose model was theorized by Bakhtin, with the uncanny grotesque body associated with Freud's essay *On the Uncanny* and the horror genre in literature. The term 'Gothic', borrowed from the literature of the end of the 19th century, has been chosen for its ability to poetically encompass the notion of modern subjectivity, with its connotations of alienation and tension with an industrialized, hostile environment typical of Western capitalist societies. I contrasted this Gothic-grotesque body with the socialist body, whose spectacle was the one offered on Romanian television prior to the system change in 1989, and thus argued that its emergence can be seen as a reaction to previous patterns of representation of the body – in the context of the media trying to fulfill the role of breaking away with an oppressive past.

I then provided an overview of the mass media in Romania in order to prepare the analysis of the Gothic-grotesque bodies of *The 5 O'clock News*. I considered it was relevant to place my discussion in the context of a larger debate concerning the role of media in society, after which I proceeded to look at how the form and role of the mass media changed in Romania before and after communism. The resulting discussion ended with the notion that Romanian mass media has undergone a process of 'tabloidization', a process which encompasses the phenomenon of *The 5 O'clock News*.

One of my main aims has been to explore how the Gothic-grotesque bodies are

represented in the program, which I have done by a close reading of five sample reports from *The 5 O'clock News*. The analysis revealed the presence of the Gothic-grotesque bodies at the center of the program, framed by the program itself through certain patterns of representation and through a limited range of contexts in which they appear. I have also looked at the Gothic-grotesque body through the lens of gender, and concluded that certain gendered categories emerge from the typical representations in the show.

Having established the ways in which the Gothic-grotesque bodies are present in the show, the next step was to look at how the spectacle that they offer impacts the audience. My discussion of the relationship between the spectacle and the spectatorship of *The 5 O'clock News* has been influenced by theorists such as Foucault, Debord and Crary. The conclusions reached were that the spectacle of the Gothic-grotesque bodies in the Romanian post-communist context is a commodity in itself, and that it satisfies the consumerist and voyeuristic impulses of the public. Moreover, in so doing, the spectacle of *The 5 O'clock News* functions as an instrument for the self-regulation of the spectator, at the same time as it 'others' the bodies that it represents. While it arguably makes visible marginalized strata of society, the spectacle of *The 5 O'clock News* does not produce awareness of social issues or invite social transformation. As the repository of hegemonic ideological investment, the spectacle-as-consumer-product helps obtain political consent from the public, together with a certain feeling of self-contentment that comes from opposing the 'normal us' with the 'abject them'.

I am aware that the present paper has not touched on all the complexities of the issue at stake, and that more space and time would be required for a more in-depth analysis and discussion. However, I have tried to give an overall image of this phenomenon while providing a theoretical framework in which to analyze it, and hope that I have at least partially succeeded in doing so.

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<http://www.protv.ro/stiri-protv/stirile-pro-tv-de-la-ora-17-00>

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