

A Book Cover as an Expression of Conceptualization and a Tool of Social Identity Construction: The Interpretation Based on the Example of G. Ritzer's book *McDonaldization of Society*

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Abstract—The study is based on the assumption that media products are appropriate subjects for the exploration of social and cultural identities as a keystone of value orientations of their authors, producers and target audiences. The research object of the study is the title page of the book cover of a professional publication that serves as a medium of marketing, scientific and intercultural communication, which is the result of semiotic and intercultural transfer. The study aims to answer the question whether the book cover is an expression of conceptualization and tool for social identity construction. It attempts to determine what value orientations and what concepts of social and cultural identities are hidden in the narrative structures of the book cover of the Czech translation of the book by G. Ritzer *The McDonaldization of Society* (1993), issued after the fall of the iron curtain in 1996 in the Czech Republic.

Keywords—Social and cultural identity, book cover, marketing communication, semiotic and intercultural transfer, narrative structure, the McDonaldisation of Society.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE research on social identities as well as other phenomena connected with them, such as a collective, cultural, gender, professional, national and ethnic identities, or politics identity and identity project, has – within the social sciences – its history and tradition that was already described [1] and whose concepts are classified and systematized [2] and the problems identified [3], [4]. This research – thanks to the activities of social psychology [5], sociology [6], socio-cultural anthropology and cultural studies [7] as well as politics – runs in two basic, not always connected and connectable directions and takes the form of both empirical research focused on the area of cognitive structures and value orientations of the individuals and groups, and on theoretical modelling of the phenomenon of social identities.

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II. THE AIM OF THE STUDY AND METHODS

The presented study is a step in a different direction. Based on the assumption that the appropriate object of the research of social identities are informational saturated media products, as they are representations of mental action/behaviour and components of social action/behaviour. The research object of the study is the title page of a book cover of the English book by G. Ritzer *The McDonaldization of Society* (1993). The aim of the study is to determine what value orientation and what concepts of social and cultural identities are hidden in the narrative structures of the book cover of the Czech translation of the book published after the fall of the iron curtain in 1996 in the Czech Republic. The study, therefore, tries, on a concrete example, to solve a general problem with the help of semiotic, narrative, and discourse analysis [8], [9] which answers the question whether the media products reflect a conceptualization and tool of social identity construction.

A. The First English Edition of the Book

The book *The McDonaldization of Society* with an unimpressive, featureless cover by the designer of Lisa Mirsky (see Fig. 1) was first published in the U.S. in 1993 in Pine Forge Press, Thousand Oaks, CA. There are more places of publication stated on the colophon page and as publishing houses [10]. Coincidentally, this book has brought an international fame to G. Ritzer and accelerated his publishing activities. The book became one of the most published, and most frequently translated, and most influential works of the sociological literature at all [11]-[14]. In the course of the following years, the author reworked and republished it several times. In June 2010, the 6th edition of the book was published in English in Pine Forge Press. The revised versions of the book were translated from English into other languages. It was translated into e.g. Chinese, Danish, French, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Hungarian, Portuguese, Greek, Spanish, and Turkish. The book was also republished several times in the individual languages (e.g. in German or Polish). And each of its new editions were issued in new covers. The cover of the Czech edition of the book is among the most interesting of them.

B. The Correspondence and Disproportion between the Title, Subtitle and Work

G. Ritzer offers a new verbal expression of "McDonaldization" to the readers' audience. Title of the book promises to clarify what "McDonaldization" of society brings to the society, i.e. explanation of the development of procedures, processes and standards that the company of McDonald's represents.

The title of the book has been happily created because it clearly defines the theme of the work. The title offers an attractive international topic linked to globalization, which affects relatively a wide target audience. Its marketing advantage is the fact that discloses the author's attitude to the phenomenon of "McDonaldization", and it is aimed at a wider target audience.

The literary text of the book (we find ourselves outside of the information potential of the cover) does not support the notion induced by the subtitle of *An Investigation Into the Changing Character of Contemporary Social Life*, presented by the inner title page of the book, namely that the book belongs to the scientific monographs. The literary text of the book is defined by significant popular scientific and journalistic attributes. The stylistic bases for this author's narration are not arguments, references and scientific terminology burdened with a professional style, but a light readable and persuasive journalistic style. The book even ends with poems, a couplet by Thomas Dylan.

The main theme of Ritzer's work is the story of McDonaldization, namely the irrationality of modern rationally controlled production systems, whose exemplary examples have been fast food McDonald's restaurants since the sixties of the last century. The aim of the book – rather than to analyze – is to attract, persuade, and mobilize the audience by a surprise. Civic activism is fully applicable in the last, 9th chapter of the book titled *Coping with a McDonaldized Society: a Practical Guide*. It offers a guidance on how to minimize the negative consequences of McDonaldization and thus to influence the future.

G. Ritzer managed to create a theoretical model of affecting social changes in the late 20th century and explain them clearly and in a condensed way. A popular scientific attitude and journalistic style greatly helped the fact that the book achieved an international success. The basic theoretical starting point of Ritzer's is the concept of rationality, which was created and applied to the bureaucracy by a German sociologist Max Weber [15]. It is a critical look at the rationality whose enforcement has dehumanizing social consequences. In fact, the author recalls and innovates an old problem of limits and utility of rationality in social action which – within the different professional discourses – were worked by e.g. the psychoanalyst Freud S., the logician K. Gödel or the postmodern philosopher J.-F. Lyotard. Rationality in human social action is reflected like fire and water in nature – it is a good servant but a bad master.

According to G. Ritzer, irrationality of rationality "means that rational systems are *unreasonable* systems – they serve to

deny the basic humanity, the human reason, of the people of within them who work or are served by them. In other words, the rational systems are dehumanizing systems" [10, p. 121]. A rationally designed system, i.e. an efficient, calculable, predictable and controllable production system, begins to control the man and his life, as it is under a totalitarian political system, and interferes his privacy, affects his core values, and in its consequences, it threatens the human world and the Earth. These logical consequences of the story of McDonaldization, but which Ritzer more suggests than describes, inspired authors of the illustrations placed on the covers of American books later editions and on many covers of the translations of this book.

C. The Authors of the Cover and the Producer of the Czech Book of The McDonaldization of Society

The Czech translation of *McDonaldization of Society* by Vera Topilová was published in a hardcover without a jacket in 1996 in the Czech prestigious publishing house of Academia [16]. The author of the cover design (see Fig. 2) is Věra Fišerová; she incorporated a picture by Oldřich Jelen (born in 1961) into the cover. This picture, however, was not originally made in order to illustrate the Academia's work by G. Ritzer, but it represented one of the illustrating items of a series of essays by Michal Horáček *Letters of Love and Hate*, which appeared in the magazine of *Mladý svět* (*Young World*) in 1992. Jelen's picture played, thanks to the position on book cover, a similar role in O. Jelen's career, as the first English edition of the book *The McDonaldization of Society* played in the fate of G. Ritzer. He became famous, even if only in the Czech cultural context.

D. The Basic Building Blocks of the Front Cover of Czech Book McDonaldization of Society

On the front cover, there are three separate but interconnected verbal units – the author's name, the book title, and the name of the publisher. The fourth compositional element is the illustration. The literary meaning of the words and sentences is significantly modified by the typographical arrangement and their location in the space. The book title takes the dominant position on the front part of the cover. Its first word "McDonaldizace" (*McDonaldization*) is extremely stressed and takes almost the entire left side of the cover. The second largest in size is the word "společnosti" (*Society*). It is placed in a vertical position in the upper left corner of the colourful printed O. Jelen's painting.

Jelen's visual text – regardless of its origin – plays the role of the illustration of the content of Ritzer's book study. At the same time, it represents an interpretation of the meaning of the name book, and thus it offers an interpretation of "McDonaldization" of the Czech society. Its typographic solution is in harmony with it. For these reasons, the illustration is the main subject of the following analysis. The message the authors and the producer of cover and book wanted to pass to the Czech readers' audience in 1996 is based on the story that the illustration tells and whose cultural symbols are the main structural units. There are also the

concepts of a social, collective and cultural identity hidden in this story, with the help of which we can interpret interpersonal behaviour and intergroup behaviour within a cultural area [17], but also within two confronting cultures [18].

E. The Narrator and the Space-Time of the Story Narrated by the Front Cover

From the viewpoint of narration, the narrator of the story of McDonaldization, narrated by the front cover, are along the author of the English name of the book (G. Ritzer), its translator into Czech (V. Topilová), the author of the cover (V. Fišerová) and the author of the illustration (O. Jelen).

The space, in which the story takes place, is determined by the structure shown in the illustration. Left of the centre part of the picture, there is a visible silhouette of Old Town tower and on the horizon to the left there is a silhouette of Strahov Monastery, in the middle of St. Vitus Cathedral and the Basilica of St. George on the right. These buildings represent some of the most historic architectural monuments of Prague. At the same time these buildings locate the bridge, flanked by crowds. Although it lacks the typical Baroque sculptures, it is undoubtedly the Charles Bridge in Prague.

The panorama formed by St. Vitus Cathedral and St. George Basilica has both basic literal meaning (the specific buildings) and also the national and cultural symbolic value. These iconic phrases have become the symbol of the city of Prague and, due to the position of the city as a cultural, administrative, and economic centre, are a symbol of the Czech statehood and sovereignty.

The event, which is shown in the illustration, i.e. a hamburger's arrival in Prague, determines the time of the story. A hamburger came to Prague for the first time after the Velvet Revolution, on 20th March 1992, when McDonald's company opened its first Czech restaurant at Vodičkova Street, in Prague.

F. The Hero of the Story Told by the Illustrations – Tank-Burger

The central figure of the O. Jelen's iconic narrative is a hamburger. He finds himself in the middle of the illustration. It proceeds to a crowd of people of Prague along the Charles Bridge to the city centre, the Old Town. A hamburger brings a metaphorical symbolic meaning in narrative – in addition to the basic meaning, indicating a type of food. A hamburger became (along with the clown Ronald McDonald) a symbol of McDonald's, but also a symbol of the general trends associated with the expansion of American culture to other cultural areas.

The way, how this event was captured by O. Jelen, reflects the contemporary idea of the McDonald's activities on international markets and a new hegemony on the Czech political and economic scene, and about the Americans and the U.S.A. The illustration simultaneously captures the contemporary search for a new group (socio-cultural) identity of the Czech community undergoing dramatic social changes after the Velvet Revolution in 1989. This textualisation of

collective and individual knowledge and behaviour is created in van Dijk ideological space, in the process of building and confrontation of our own (Czech) "we/us" and the foreign (American) "they/them" [19].

The knowledge of contemporary life and institutions is the basic communication competence necessary for the interpretation of the story of the hamburger coming to Prague. American hamburger arrives in Prague on belt wheels of a tank, and thus creating a double symbol – tank-burger. A part of this story is the crowd that passes the tank-burger. In this context, it is necessary to answer the question, how "hamburger" was accepted as an ambassador of the American culture in the Czech environment regardless of the fact whether its economic and cultural campaign will ultimately be successful.

Foreign tanks appeared in Prague three times – on 15th March 1939, the German occupation tanks, the second time on 9th May 1945 when the Soviet tanks liberated the country, and the tanks of the Warsaw Pact troops occupying the territory on 21st August 1968. The Soviet tanks symbolized not only the defeat of fascist Germany, but in fact they guaranteed the origin of a totalitarian political system in Czechoslovakia after 1948. For these reasons, the Czech nation feels a negative relationship to foreign tanks as symbols of military and political power. The symbolism of a tank-burger gets into the position of a foreign aggressor. This symbolism has a foothold in the socio-cultural reality McDonald's at the time became the largest operator of fast food restaurants in the Czech Republic, with about one third of all these restaurants operating in Prague, and the American community is one of the strongest and most active of Prague immigrant subcultures.

A certain role in the process of the Czech reception of the hamburger and the construction of a negative image of American "they/them" in the early nineties was played by an international climate when there arose strong western campaigns of civil and environmental activists aimed against the practices of multinational corporations [20], devastating natural and human resources, and when the hamburger became a symbol of irresponsible corporate behaviour. This process could also be entered by reminiscence from the socialist period before November 1989, when the hamburger was officially classified as a product of a foreign, capitalist, American, and therefore hostile culture.

G. The Symbolism of the Crowd and Characters Standing out of the Crowd, and Their Narrative Status

The inhabitants of Prague standing on the Charles Bridge find themselves in the position of a gray, anonymous crowd. They obtain the status of a secondary character of the storytelling. The people of Prague do not welcome the tank-burger, even if the setting of their faces towards it indicates that they perceive it. The anonymous crowd with black glasses and white sticks, representing the Czech community, symbolizes rather ignorance than blindness. It is evidenced by the fact that the crowd faces are turned towards the tank-burger.

There are four human figures and a dog separating from the crowd at the bottom right that behave differently than the figures of the anonymous crowd, i.e. they represent other forms of personal or collective behaviour. These above mentioned characters in the narrative structures of the book illustration create another iconic chapter in the story told by illustrations.

The first character is a pregnant woman with her face turned to the tank-burger. She wears black glasses on her eyes, but she holds a white stick in the right hand raised in a menacing gesture over her head, and thus she actively expresses her hostile attitude towards tank-burger. This figure probably represents a mother or parent who feels a great responsibility for their offspring.

The black dog also expresses its fear and a hostile, fighting attitude towards the tank-burger with gnashing teeth it is kept on a tight leash by a little girl. She is probably the only one who does not know the order, and therefore she is standing a few steps ahead of the first row of the aligned "blinds". The author of the illustration combines resistance to McDonaldization with a dog probably because its standard role is to protect his master.

There are two more female characters separating from the crowd. They are placed again in the lower right corner of the picture. The first figure wears a black robe of nuns with a black wimple on the head, lined with a white border looking through the black glasses towards the Old Town. The second female character that can be due to her smaller stature considered a teenager, her head is bowed to the ground, so it is not possible to decide whether she wears the dark glasses or not. Their narrative status is different from the role played by the crowd in the narrative. They are standing in one line of the first series of the "blind", but they take a different communication attitude than the crowd – their heads are not turned towards the tank-burger. This proxemic sign indicates a disinterest of the characters, symbolizing both ecclesiastical subculture, and teenagers' subculture of a tank-burger.

H. The Characteristic Features of the Target Audience of the Czech Book of The McDonaldization of Society

The Czech book *McDonaldizace společnosti (The McDonaldization of Society, 1996)* is a product of a standardized intercultural transfer, translation and adaptation, coming into existence in the process of literary communication [21]. This transfer had to overcome difficult obstacles – a lack of communication competencies of the Czech audience [22]. The Czech community awareness about the status and trends of American and world culture that Ritzer's book deals with was relatively small in the early nineties of the 20th century. The phenomenon of globalization, which significantly influenced the planetary culture, did not affect, however, the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, which was culturally and economically totally dependent on the U.S.S.R.

And after the Velvet Revolution, the Czech and Slovak community had to deal with other problems than globalization and Americanization of the society. The country tried to build-

up a new legal framework to legitimize a new social practice (private business, political pluralism, freedom of speech, free travelling). The key problems were those associated with the new laws, the splitting up of Czechoslovakia, restitution and privatization. These factors also affected the construction of the characters of the story recorded on the cover illustration.

I. The Czech Book Cover of the McDonaldization of Society as an Expression of Conceptualization and Design Tool of the Collective Identity of the Czech and American Community

G. Ritzer enters the context of the Czech cover as the author of its name of *The McDonaldization of Society*. He has a metonymic form of *pars* type for this. The name of *McDonaldization of Society* only says that the principles of one "company" apply throughout the society. The neologism of "McDonaldization" became the basis and foundation stone for the development of a general concept expressing and identifying general trends implemented in the American society and culture, but also in other national and state contexts. Therefore he focuses on a broad international readers' audience.

The story included in the literary text of the book already takes a strong critical attitude to "McDonaldization". Many illustrations on the book cover express the condensed expression of these contents. It is a kind of translation of the literary content into the language of artistic illustrations. This direction is taken e.g. in the 2nd and 5th American edition of 1995 and 2008 (see Fig. 3) or the first Polish edition of 1999 (see Fig. 4), which in a metaphorical hyperbole expressed creatively and powerfully and in an organic way the importance and critical focus of Ritzer's work.

Jelen's illustration is not, however, a translation in the right sense. The illustration on the front cover of the Czech book brings a different story about the McDonaldization. The Soviet occupation of 21st August 1968 became Jelen's basic historical and political reference framework of the story for the adoption of McDonaldization in the Czech Republic. Jelen included it into his iconic narrative as a separate story. The Soviet occupation of Prague (and the Czech Republic in the concept of political totalitarianism), however, is outside Ritzer's narrative.

A tank-burger in the role of an iconic sentence, however, represents only one, even though a key component of the narrative included in the picture. It forms the basis and foundation stone for one of the stories encoded in the text. O. Jelen anchors this story in the Czech cultural scene and the symbol of a tank-burger in the story then connects it with the remote and in the given space-time a little-known American culture. He creates a virtual story about the U.S. occupation of Prague in the form of visions, predictions and threats. In this way he complements the open book title with the evaluation dimension using different arguments (occupation of August 21st 1968), but it corresponds with a critical view, included in Ritzer's work.

The story is based on the confrontation of attitudes and value orientations of the two main actors, "Prague people" or the Czechs versus the American culture and community. The

American culture (“they”) is represented by one, from a narrative point of view a crucial figure, because it is the most active one – a tank-burger. The narrator presents American culture and community – in its behaviour and its value orientations – as a homogenous and unified group, but as aggressive into foreign areas expanding a fast food nation [23]. The Czech culture (“we”) in the story is captured like rugged and differentiated, partly without confrontation with an external enemy (“they”), which demonstrates that van Dijk’s model of an ideological square [19] is difficult to apply in the interpretation of the book cover illustration.

Collective identity of a crowd as a majority Czech subculture is associated with blindness, ignorance and indifference. Other characters included in the Czech society and culture that behave in a different way than the crowd, are actively defined against the American culture in the way that they show (and reflex) group or individual attitudes of defiance, resistance or fear (a pregnant woman, a barking dog). The basic identification attribute of the minority religious subculture is lack of interest in a “tank-burger”. This type of behaviour is also associated with adolescent groups, characterized by “diffuse identity, where an adolescent is not interested, or refuses the framing of his/her own identity, uniqueness, subjectivity that is different from others” [23].

III. CONCLUSION

G. Ritzer’s book is a report about the difficulties of a new type of work organization, economic development, and cultural transfer, rather than a politically motivated crisis of culture as H. Arendt interpreted and offered to the Czech readers in the mid-nineties. Jelen’s illustration distorts and extends Ritzer’s narrative. The illustration with regard to functions they perform, genre and construction falls within the field of social advertising. The essence of communication is not the fact that a “tank-burger” brings a new cultural paradigm, globalization and Americanization to Bohemia, but it warns that this process can lead to the destruction of the Czech culture and that the Czech culture recipients were unable to recognize the consequences of the globalization effect in the early nineties of the 20th century. The effort to activation of civic responsibility was also the driving force behind the process that led to the conceptualization and construction of social identities of the characters in the narrative structures of the book cover.

Jelen’s story of McDonaldization of Prague is capable of its independent life, outside the book cover. It is addressed to the Czech audience, but it has a broader scope. It is a report on American economic and cultural expansion into Central Europe and more generally a report on cultural imperialism as a form of cultural transfer, through which the political power controls the world.

APPENDIX

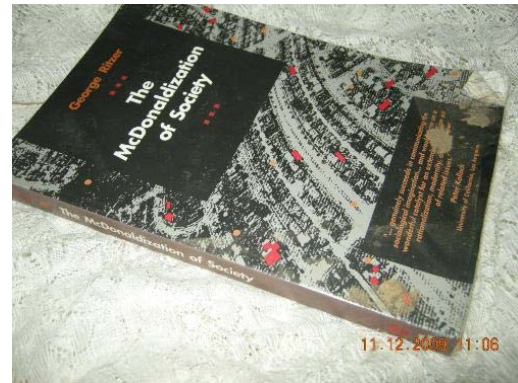


Fig. 1 The first edition of book *The McDonaldization of Society* (1993). Source: http://www.amazon.com/McDonaldization-Society-Investigation-Contemporary-Publication/dp/0803990006/ref=cm_cm_u_pg_t

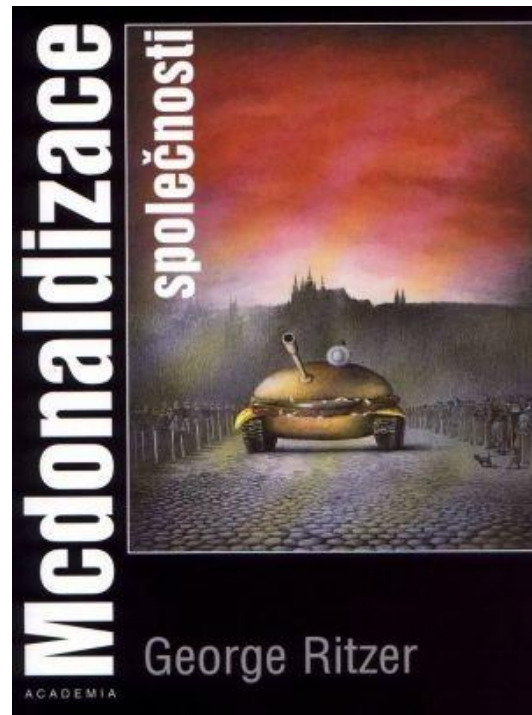


Fig. 2 The first Czech edition of book *Mcdonadizace společnost* (1996). Source: http://www.arara.cz/i/imgs_orig/453/115453.jpg

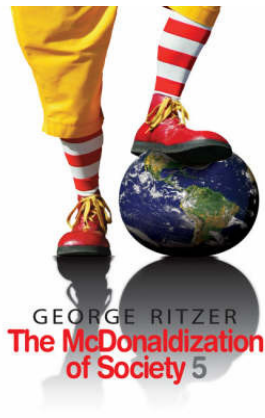


Fig. 3 The edition of book *The McDonaldization of Society of* (2008). Source: : http://www.amazon.com/McDonaldization-Society-George-F-Ritzer/dp/1412954290/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1280899371&sr=1-1#reader_1412954290

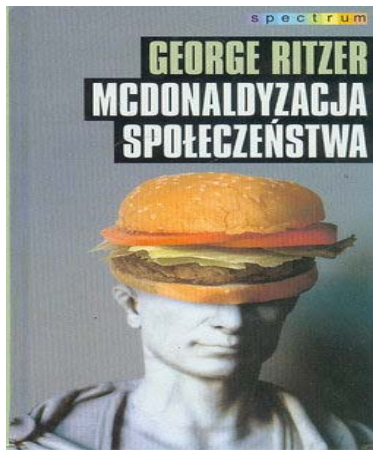


Fig. 4 The first Polish edition of book *McDonaldyzacja społeczeństwa* (1999). Source: <http://www.muza.com.pl/>

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