

Infracriticism and Interartistic Dialogue

Book review: Laura Pavel, *Personaje Ale Teoriei, Ființe Ale Ficțiunii. Eseuri / Characters of Theory, Beings of Fiction. Essays.* (Iași: Institutul European, 2021)



The interpretive approach that Laura Pavel¹ engages with in her recent book *Personaje ale teoriei, ființe ale ficțiunii. Eseuri/ Characters of Theory, Beings of Fiction, Essays*² is a novelty in the realm of Romanian critical discourse, due to both the manner of arguing via the “characters” / beings of fiction, and the way of exposing the framework of postcritical theory. The latter supplements the current directions of interpretation in the field of literary studies, or in those of the visual and performing arts.

The subtitle *Essays* enables the author to adopt quasi-playful hypostases and introduce her interdisciplinary theoretical premises, based on which she builds her analyses synthesized in a prologue (argument). Here, even readers unfamiliar with the history of criticism can learn about the approach proposed by postcritical theory: “[...] The new aestheticism corresponds to a ‘post-theoretical’ period, in which theory enters a ‘reflexive’ rather than emancipatory and militant phase, being interested in rediscovering the philosophical origins of art as well as of the theory of literature, and less so in the discursive-ideological apparatus [...]”³ French structuralism, deconstructivism, American poststructuralism, neo-Marxism, postcolonialism presuppose a series of approaches – text-centred approaches, loss of meaning, “death of the author” (Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault⁴), the decline of the great

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1. Laura Pavel is an essayist and literary and theatrical critic, professor at the Faculty of Theatre and Film of Babeș-Bolyai University, where she teaches Theatre History, Theatre Anthropology, Cultural Studies and Performance Theory.
 2. Laura Pavel, *Personaje Ale Teoriei, Ființe Ale Ficțiunii. Eseuri* (Iași: Institutul European, 2021).
 3. The detachment of the current “new aestheticism” from the interpretive grid proposed by the critical theory potentiates the distance established between different ways of perception of the artistic object. At the same time, their coexistence aims at a complementarity, based on their historicity and the organic evolution of the interpretive directions, materialized in the gradual branching of the critical discourses. See, in this regard, Laura Pavel, *Personaje ale teoriei, ființe ale ficțiunii, Eseuri*, Cluj-Napoca, Institutul European, 2021, pp. 11-12. The chapter *Personaje ale teoriei. Latour, Felski, Nussbaum & Co., În loc de Argument* exposes concepts that are expounded upon later, in the analysis of interdisciplinary creations.
 4. As stated by Mihaela Ursa in Mihaela Ursa, *Scrittopia* (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia XXI, 2010), 30: “The twentieth century is infused with this nihilistic perception of representation, which leads to the death of metaphysics”. Thus, the unity subsumed to the cosmological principle is subjected to disaggregation. The critical approach converges towards a negative, demystifying hermeneutics, supported by the ontology of suspicion and secrecy, as part of an apparent universal “plot”.

narratives (François Lyotard) - which can be grouped under the name of critical theory. This entails a *political turn*, particularly through Edward Said and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. But there is, as Laura Pavel points out, the moment of an ethical turn⁵ which culminates in a greening of aesthetic experiences, an ecological turn theorized in the texts of Bruno Latour, who attacks with a “biting” verve the school of suspicion, derived, after Paul Ricoeur, from the three “masters of soupçon” (Marx, Nietzsche and Freud). Among the forerunners of postcritical theory are Stanley Cavell, Wittgenstein, Paul Ricoeur, and Bruno Latour, who anticipate the return of interest in the aesthetic and the interpretation of the intrinsic value of the work in a broad philosophical, existential context.

The tools used as an analysis medium for the fictional self and for the “stylistics of existence” in the bohemian life of the ‘60s and ‘70s, the construction of the *total novel* of the ‘70s, the theories on monodrama with psychodrama elements, the reception of the performativity of Adrian Ghenie, Victor Man and Marius Bercea or the interpretation of Klaus Obermaier’s intermediate creations – these all diversify on vast, interrelated levels. Certain notions specific to post-critical theory synthesize the stake of the recuperative approach through the concepts to which it is connected: the *quasi-object*, for Bruno Latour, designates the artistic object, with double subjectivity, of the creator and the receiver; *ekphrasis*, viewed from an etymological perspective, would translate into *giving voice*, and in this context it means one of the pre-expressive or unexpressed voices of the work of art, manifested in latent form as polyvalent facets of expression; *infraprivation* is a non-invasive critical investigation of the object, which should not be taken possession of, but only recognized, its radiography relying on the empathic approach, without the subject imposing their authority in the analysis of artistic creation. *Compositionism* (Bruno Latour) refers to a process of “post-production”, which does not deconstruct, but restores the works disfigured by the critical interpretive grids in an ecological manner. The

5. In Laura Pavel’s interpretation, the phrase the “Ethical Turn” represents, alongside other syntagms like the “Pictorial Turn”, the “Literary Turn”, the “Performative Turn”, the “Ekphrastic Turn” and even the “Postmodern Turn”, an approach generated by debates of the past few decades, through which the interpretive communities come to coexist and to offer new valences and methodological options, in a dialogical, inter-arts cultural space.

creation-interpretation interference implies the recovery of the work and its restoration through a “curatorial” perspective, as the literary historian Rita Felski states, the reconstructive intention being found in the Latourian *actor-network theory*, and the *object-oriented* phrase refers to the privilege of a critique, which has at its centre the object of reference, which is part of the terminology coined by the philosopher Graham Harman.⁶

The chapter on the anthropologist and critic Bruno Latour is titled provocatively, like in a cape and sword novel: *Latour Enters the Scene*. The opening of the chapter marks the intrigue that determines a new turn of the plot, changing the critical perspective. The latter is no longer distant and systemic, structured and detective, but complicit, empathic, recovering through the dimension of aesthetic reception, which involves a transfer between subject and object, the latter receiving new valences, by objectifying the figures of fiction. The exciting interrogations from the Cluj critical landscape can be found both in the work of Mihaela Ursa, *Scritopia*, and of Alex Goldiș, *Critica în tranșee. De la realismul socialist la autonomia esteticului*. Laura Pavel’s book also has the “aura” of multiple interrogative valences, beyond interdisciplinary postcritical analyses: What is happening on the stage of criticism today? Where is the local criticism in this context? How do we relate to the posthumanist period from an ethical and aesthetic perspective? Can distinct and polemical directions of criticism coexist in the same era? The answer offered by Laura Pavel’s essays, caught in a vast network, defined by transdisciplinary interconnections - the foundation of a *work in progress* structure - is that through Latourian figurability, through “the action of fiction, the continuous figuration of material” (p. 46), the receivers are seen as subjects, following the establishment of a complicity relationship derived from the process of creation-interpretation.

The concepts of style and theatricality become tools of analysis for metafictional texts, true “theoretical objects”, not only through “Bovarian self-fictionalization”, but also through some strategies of mythologization

6. The terminological framework is completed with the notion of hermeneutics of recollection from Paul Ricoeur’s theory, synonymous with a “revelation of new ways of being”. This anticipates the premise of the new approach to aesthetic anthropology synthesized in Laura Pavel’s volume. See also Paul Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation*, trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge [Eng.]; New York: Paris: Cambridge University Press; Editions de la Maison des sciences de l’homme, 1981), 191.

and demythologization, through the convergent functioning of the conceptual dichotomy fictionalism-biography. Thus, dandyism becomes a mark of both the biographical and fictional selves, Mateiu Caragiale being “a spectator and critical interpreter of his own life, understood as a daily scenario of a work of art” (p. 65). In a few pages we find the evolution of the concept of theatricality, from Michael Fried - who considers that the work of art should reject theatricality, in order to remain that autonomous fiction of stage reality, perpetuating the illusion that there is no spectator, the receiver being contemplative, passive - to the Canadian researcher Josette Féral, who analyses the split of otherness, both in the character and in the spectator.

The chapter entitled *Literary Bohemia of the '60s and '70s: Ways of Being Between the Autobiographical and the Fictional* pertinently captures the transgression of the biographical-fictional levels, by fictionalizing the self, so much so that the rhythm of authorial life comes to be confused with fiction. Bohemia is defined as a way of self-aestheticization and “self-irresponsibility” and puts into action the transformation of the writer into a character, through a true “stylistics of existence” (Marielle Macé). The analysis of this *modus vivendi* is done through the lens of Latourian interpretation, because what Laura Pavel calls *co-fiction* takes place in a network in which the entire constellation of bohemian characters of the '60s-'70s participates, becoming beings of fiction, by self-officialization. The phrase socialist aestheticism (Mircea Martin) is repurposed beyond the thesis of an autonomy of aesthetics, in the context of the '70s, the appearance of the total novel cultivating a “fantasy of the authors’ power” (p. 110), which involves a type of *fiction*, different from fictionalization, a dynamic transfer between biographical and fiction.

In another essay, *The Psychotropic. Defictionalization and self-exposure*, with an undisguised verve, correlated with interdisciplinary cultural information, the author analyses the paradoxes of the psychodrama character and the reception of a monodramatic, autobiographical performance. The interpretive network is composed of: “the effect of presence [...] identity, self-politics, life writing, performance and performativity, liminality, the Other (otherness), the mind/body dichotomy and, last but not least, psychotropic unity” (p. 129), this summing up the fictitious and the biographical content, through the concept of theatricality realizing the link with the spectator,

who identifies or distances himself. The short history of corporeality conveys an incursion into the aggrandized ego, through the monologue in which the actor performs, through a duality of the fictionalized self with the biographical self, as well as of the fusion of the public space with the private one. Corporeality has a semiotic connotation and is a sign of a universal essence, theatricality being established when receiving the performer's duality. Laura Pavel has an essayistic penchant, punctuating certain pauses for breath after providing dense information about the theories of performativity, to gloss, for example, about the disappearance of the Dutch performer Bas Jan Ader, in 1975, who, trying to cross the Atlantic, became invisible or committed suicide, staging his own disappearance, as in a performance. But "characters" are not only performative artists and writers who construct certain aestheticizing social positions, but also theorists themselves, such as Stanley Fish, known for his concept of interpretive community. In the light of this notion, Laura Pavel analyses several cultural "turns," and refers, among others, to the meeting between the ideas of the American school with the French theory (French Theory), resulting in the "battle for showcasting."⁷

The transdisciplinarity of the essayistic approaches is distinguished by the transition to the analysis of the visual, self-reflective metapictures of the School from Cluj. Laura Pavel manages to pertinently analyse the imagotextual creations with post-critical methods, seen in the form of cryptograms with permanent reference to literature. The author discovers the meaning of these pictorial creations through an ekphrastic interpretation that claims its notions of "potentiality-not-to" (Giorgio Agamben) and "I would prefer not to" (Herman Melville), imagological substrates being probed. The final essay *Breaches in Fiction: Aesthetic and (Bio) Technological Boundaries* problematizes the posthuman, hybrid, asymptotic condition. Laura Pavel performs the aesthetic analysis of the intermediate shows, directed by Klaus Obermaier. The aesthetic mutations of the 21st century are discussed, through which the combinations between fictional and non-fictional, virtual

7. François Cusset, *French theory: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Co și transformările vieții intelectuale din Statele Unite*, trans. Andreea Rațiu (Cluj-Napoca: Tact, 2016), 98-99.

and *live art*, interfere, asking big ethical questions, testing the limits of perception and overlap between human and nonhuman. The virtual thus becomes an autonomous, anthropomorphic and even postanthropomorphic fiction, the hybrid artistic environment engaging in an empathic dialogue with the spectator-receiver, perceived as a whole. In the analysis of hybrid mechanisms, the author's aesthetic gaze probes the infrastructure of the work of art, discovering "the hidden third", which completes and transgresses the mimetic and non-mimetic interpretive valences.

Characters of Theory, Beings of Fiction. Essays can be read as an incursion into a work that has already become, through its own figurability, a *being of fiction*, which asks questions about the evolution of criticism, giving no final answers, problematizing idea-characters, opening perspectives for interpreting literature and visual and performative arts through the *Other*, in a hermeneutic dialogue of empathic and "infracritical" type.

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CRISTINA SELEUȘAN

PhD Candidate
Faculty of Theatre and Film,
Babeș-Bolyai University
cristina.gherghina@ubbcluj.ro

