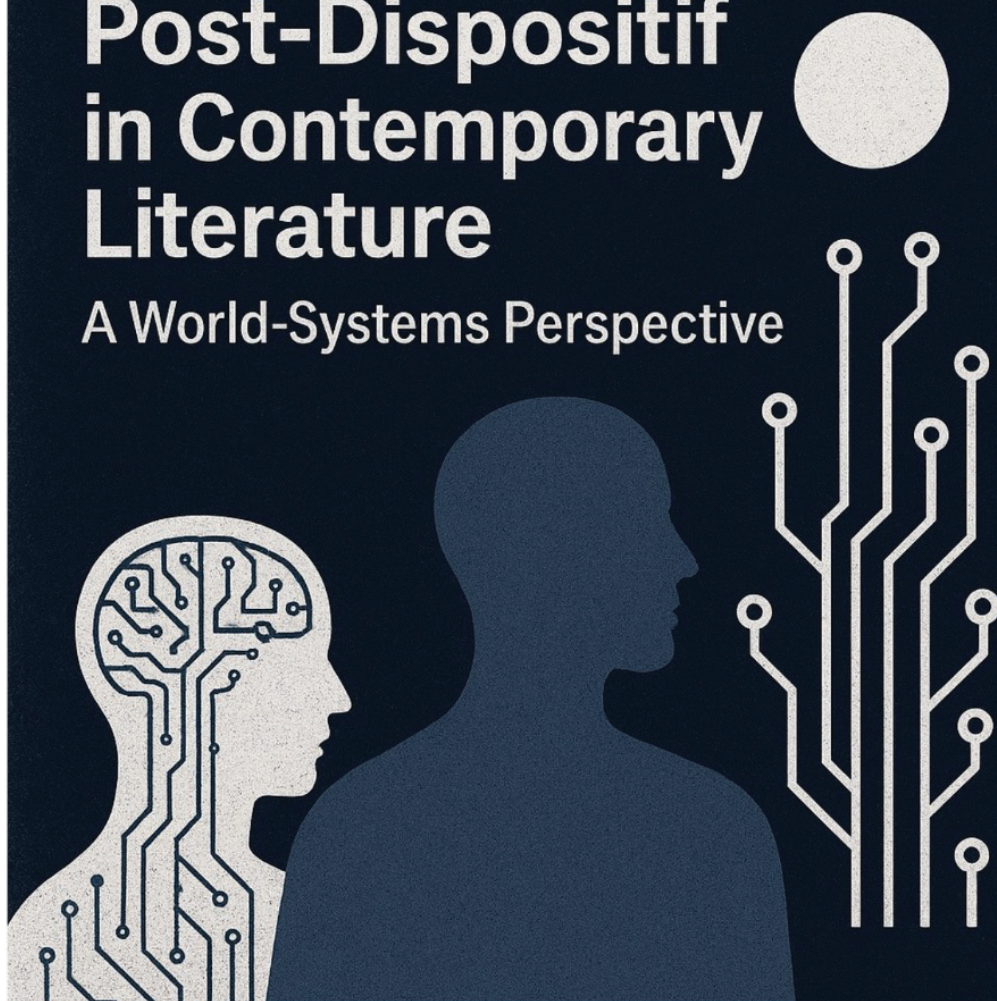


Post-Novel/ Post-Semiotic/ Post-Dispositif in Contemporary Literature

A World-Systems Perspective



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CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE. A WORLD-SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE**

Guest Editors: Stephen Shapiro and Alex Ciorogar

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INTRODUCTION

POST-NOVEL/POST-SEMIOTIC/POST-DISPOSITIF IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE. A WORLD-SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

Many of the theoretical fundamentals developed for literary and cultural studies throughout the twentieth century have become less efficacious. In recent decades, scholars have, indeed, investigated the transformations of storytelling and cultural consumption in the digital age. However, this issue looks to further explore the future of literary and cultural studies from a world-systems perspective with a focus on the alterations of novelistic narratives in the larger context of the supplanting of liberal, humanistic, sense-making mechanisms by computational regimes of meaning. In this context, we would like to investigate 1) the decline of the category of the “novel” for long-form fiction, 2) interpretive methods grounded on semiotics, and 3) the claims for truth-formations through Michel Foucault’s notion of the apparatus/*dispositif*. Today we assume all long fictions are novels because of the way this form so adeptly housed and reconfigured liberalism’s divisions. The novel could promote public-oriented national imaginaries and fictions of manifest destinies while plumbing the depths of privatizing desire by listening for interior signals. As liberalism promoted the self-enacting individual as the bulwark against the tyranny of the majority, the novel promoted the corresponding ideals of autonomous authors’ unique genius and stylistic signatures. Such was the novel’s success and dominance of liberal print culture that it managed to marginalize other forms of narrative, making them residual (the epic), or pushing them into the social subordination of “genre,” understood as the realm of para-literature and pulp or lowbrow production. Yet, all the cultural languages that were once dominant lose their magnetic authority. The novel today, for instance, is now shaped by its nemesis through what is called the genre turn, wherein prestige writers adapt the para literature of supernatural, fantasy, and science-fiction as a form better equipped to register and respond to the current moment.



Similarly, those credentialized by the university to study liberal literature similarly begin to devote their intelligence to serious discussion of generic writing or new media forms, like television, comic books, and video games. The liberal apparatus buttressed its civilizational claims for gradual development by deploying mechanistic and deterministic science and frequentist statistics to argue that social complexity could be expressed in predictable laws that were easily visualizable. However, the new computational platforms, from Google's search query to new forms of artificial intelligence now depend on a different kind of mathematics, one called Bayesian probability, wherein the known input of frequentist statistics is not required, since these are replaced with an inferential probability of future occurrences based on past examples. Unlike frequentist statistics, Bayesian probability does not seek to create regularities but looks to dynamic optimization that aims at developing better, but not necessarily always correct results. The linguistic turn that motivated so much of the Humanities in the last 50 years, in its structuralist or poststructuralist guises, was based on the Saussurean binary claim that meaning is differential. Yet meaning today is not differential, but correlative, and the semiotic models have decreasing efficacy. Nowadays, we experience life in a "post-truth" society, not because of the appeal of relativizing claims about history and documentation, but because the academic institutions that authorized these statements have themselves become prey to the declining authority of liberalism's binary theoretical machinery. This issue aims to track the changes and substitutions in the semiotic regimes of the liberal apparatus, especially through the attempt to define a concept of the "irrealist" or "post" novel from a world-systems perspective, including the Romanian contemporary literary system and beyond.

The Issue's Interventions

In the opening article, Alex Ciorogar and Stephen Shapiro explore the transformations of authorship in the algorithmic age, investigating literary production from a world-systems perspective in the larger context of both posthumanism and computational regimes of meaning, questioning the interpretive methods grounded on semiotics and liberal theory. Lightly drawing on various theoretical frameworks, their intervention offers a swift but comprehensive and historicist framework for conceptually understanding authorship beyond the limits of both ethico-political autonomy and poststructuralist intertextuality. The overcoming of authorship describes a trans-individual, oscillatory, and eco-technological configuration of authorship shaped by affective systems, platform dynamics, and epistemological shifts located well beyond the confines of postmodernism.

In her study, “The Novel Goes Utopia: On Volodymyr Vynnychenko’s *The Sun Machine*”, Natalya Bekhta draws attention to the homogenizing tendency in (world-)literary theory, caused by its strong focus on the genre of the novel. She examines the limits and limitations of the novel in opposition to utopia. In particular, a discussion of Volodymyr Vynnychenko’s bestselling “utopian novel” *The Sun Machine* (1928) and its critical reception draw out a host of critical-theoretical presuppositions related to the novel and questions of aesthetics, politics and narrative. Bekhta argues that the “unnovelistic” genre of utopia also invites a discussion of the semiotic method of reading (for) utopia and the problem of binary oppositions for literary theory more generally.

In “The Post-Communist Romanian Novel – Navigating the Political and Sociographic Dimensions”, Iulia-Maria Vîrban argues that, in post-communist Romania a genre shift has occurred, particularly in the Romanian novel. The memorial and biographical forms, cantered around the figure of the author, increasingly dominate, she argues, marking a dissolution of traditional novelistic structures in favour of fragmented, introspective, and hybrid narratives. Vîrban further contends that these forms align with broader trends of precariousness and cultural commodification, mirroring the destabilising effects of the transition, dividing this shift into two phases pre-EU accession (post-communist novels adopting a historiographical approach to document systemic trauma in the works of Vasile Ernu, Lucian Dan Teodorovici, and Dan Lungu) and post-accession works, with narratives addressing economic disparities and minority identities (Tatiana Țîbuleac, Liliana Nechita, Adrian Schiop). Overall, Vîrban maintains, the dissolution of the Romanian novel into memorial and biographical forms symbolises a dual response: a critique of transitional instability, on the one hand, and a capitulation to Western frameworks of cultural consumption, on the other.

By instrumentalizing the concept of life writing, Mihai-Cătălin Popa examines, in “Realism Without Fillers: Life Writing and Literary Form in Radu Cossașu’s *Supraviețuiri*”, the way realism is constructed in Radu Cossașu’s texts, arguing that both literary and non-literary texts could serve as social and political documents. This approach, Popa argues, not only offers a novel perspective on the construction of realism in Radu Cossașu’s *Supraviețuiri* but also contributes to a deeper understanding of collective memory formation regarding communism in Romanian literature. In “Contemporary Romanian Historical Fiction as a Mediating Transistor of the Zemiperiphery”, Alina Bako then argues that historical fiction, characterized by its ambivalence between political instrumentalization and fidelity to the real, emerges as a vector of transnational connectivity, translating (semi)peripheral narrative scenarios into the language of the global core. Post-1990 Romanian historical fiction, through its recourse to historical themes, emblematic figures, conflicts, and conquests functions as a neohermetic

channel of transculturation, liberating historical discourse from past ideological constraints and integrating it into the global networks of the publishing market. This process, Bako shows, is underpinned by an aesthetics of hyperconnectivity (Deckard, Niblett & Shapiro 2024), enabling the Romanian zemiperiphery to negotiate tensions between the local and the global.

In “The Case for Romanian Autofiction. Love & Anxiety in The Neoliberal World in Radu Vancu and Saşa Zare’s Novels”, Horaţiu Tohăţan argues that the so-called 2000s generation of Romanian writers developed an appetite for autofiction that exposed the questioning potentialities of self-narration towards the contemporary neoliberal status-quo. Specifically, he shows how two particular novels, Radu Vancu’s *Transparenţa* (Transparency) and Saşa Zare’s *Dezrădăcinare* (Uprooting), engage in polemics regarding the way in which individuality, memory and trauma are revisited through autofiction, using metadiscourse, autobiography, and fictive discourse. Tohăţan examines how sensibility, eroticism, and anxiety are handled in an introverted way, where the decentralization of self is dealt with maximalist strategies, while also highlighting autofictional innovations portraying extrovert characteristics, where the self and queer eroticism are expressed towards an integrated communitarian audience.

Amalia Cotoi, in “Cultural Trauma and Contemporary Women’s Writing. The Case of Saşa Zare’s Somatic Scriptotherapy”, examines the conceptualization of cultural trauma and its representation in Saşa Zare’s contemporary women’s writing (*Dezrădăcinare* [Uprooting]) (2022), while also addressing the emergence of a new genre informed by these concerns. Her aim is threefold: first, Cotoi analyses the contested concept of cultural trauma and its relationship to both clinical studies and women’s writing. Second, she extends Suzette A. Henke’s notion of “scriptotherapy” into somatic scriptotherapy and investigates the emergence of a new genre within contemporary women’s literature. Third, her paper explores the cultural and traumatic representations of motherhood, alongside the somatic dynamics of the mother–daughter relationship in *Dezrădăcinare* by Saşa Zare. Cotoi demonstrates that the expansion of writing into the exploration of traumatic stressors and processes of individual transformation requires a broader conceptualization of trauma, such as that advanced by theories of cultural trauma. She also reveals that the interrelation of procedural memory, therapeutic reenactment, and traumatic outcomes in contemporary women’s writing.

Bogdan Vişan and Ioana Danilescu, in “Platformising Storytelling: Short Fiction, Neoliberal Immediacy, and Twitch Streaming in Romania”, argue that, in light of the neoliberal ascent of platform capitalism, storytelling is undergoing an unmatched metamorphosis in semi-peripheral cultures. They examine both literary and cultural transformations by situating a particular case study within the ideological framework of neoliberal capitalism as it manifests on streaming

platforms. Their aim is three-fold: first, they analyze the interrelationship between the literary and platform-based content; second, they investigate the revitalization of the short story genre through participatory digital practices in the context of the prevalent trend of creative writing workshops in Romania; and, finally, they assess the immediacy-driven nature of post-millennial storytelling and its broader ideological implications.

Maria Bojan's article, "Hydrocolonial Memory, Gendered Trauma and Queer Erasure in Koleka Putuma's *Collective Amnesia*", foregrounds post-liberal critical positions by prioritizing affect, materiality, and embodied memory over representational paradigms. She argues that Koleka Putuma's *Collective Amnesia* explores the complex intersections of memory, identity, and trauma within the socio-political landscape of post-apartheid South Africa. Through the lenses of hydrocolonialism, ecofeminism, and postmemory, her study examines how Putuma challenges dominant narratives of race, gender, and sexuality, revealing the fluidity of identity and the persistence of historical trauma across generations. By moving beyond traditional semiotic readings and instead emphasizing embodied, affective, and ecological dimensions of trauma and resistance, Bojan's analysis not only highlights Putuma's poetic activism as a powerful call for visibility, resistance, and healing, but also affirms the necessity of reading contemporary literature through critical frameworks that exceed representational politics.

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OVERCOMING AUTHORSHIP AND THE END OF LIBERAL MEANING. TOWARD A WORLD-SYSTEMIC THEORY OF LITERARY PRODUCTION

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ABSTRACT. *Overcoming Authorship and the End of Liberal Meaning: Toward a World-Systemic Theory of Literary Production.* We explore the transformations of authorship in the algorithmic age, investigating literary production from a world-systems perspective in the larger context of both posthumanism and computational regimes of meaning, questioning the interpretive methods grounded on semiotics and liberal theory. Lightly drawing on various theoretical frameworks, our intervention offers a swift but comprehensive and historicist framework for conceptually understanding authorship beyond the limits of both ethico-political autonomy and poststructuralist intertextuality. Our central concept—the overcoming of authorship—describes a trans-individual, oscillatory, and eco-technological configuration of authorship shaped by affective systems, platform dynamics, and epistemological shifts located well beyond the confines of postmodernism.

Keywords: *post-authorship, world-systems, the overcoming of authorship, authorial ecologies, post-semiotic, post-novel.*

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REZUMAT. *Depășirea autorului și sfârșitul sensului liberal: spre o teorie a producției literare din perspectiva analizei sistemelor-lume.* Această lucrare examinează transformările auctorialității în epoca algoritmică, situând producția literară în cadrul analizei sistemelor-lume, dar și în raport cu postumanismul și regimurile computaționale ale semnificației. Punem sub semnul întrebării practicile interpretative liberale fundamentate pe semiotică argumentând necesitatea de a conceptualiza autorul atât dincolo de autonomia etico-politică, cât și de intertextualitatea poststructuralistă. Mobilizând, în mod selectiv, o serie de tradiții teoretice, intervenția noastră propune o lectură istoricistă asupra condițiilor în schimbare ale auctorialității. Centrală acestei lecturi este ideea de depășire a autorului: definim auctorialitatea ca o nouă formațiune trans-individuală, oscilantă și eco-tehnologică, produsă prin intermediul economiilor afective, a dinamicilor de platformă, dar și în urma transformărilor epistemologice ce depășesc granițele postmodernismului.

Cuvinte-cheie: *post-autor; sistem-lume; depășirea autorului; ecologii auctoriale; post-semiotic; post-roman.*

Introduction

The problem of authorship has haunted modern criticism³. What is interesting here is not the various positions taken over “the author’s” life or death, but how the question is posed. To move beyond antimonies determined by the question, we seek here to begin rethinking the concept of authorship by engaging with the philosophical, cultural, medial, ecological, and economic transformations that inevitably redefine, from a global perspective, what is generally termed literary production, voice, and subjectivity. By adopting material, situated, embodied, and decolonial perspectives, we look to move beyond binary and centrist liberal accounts of authorship. Moving beyond the poststructuralist death of the author and the ethical or sociological return(s) of the author, our paper contends that, in the age of AI networks and posthuman productivity, authorship must be conceptualized as an emergent, distributed, and adaptive system and that, therefore, the author is nothing, but a nodal agent embedded within dynamic literary, medial, and institutional ecologies.

In his 1992 book, *The Death and Return of the Author*, Seán Burke foreshadowed his revision of the concept of authorship, which then gained full prominence in his later 2008 book, *The Ethics of Writing: Authorship and Legacy*

³ See Alex Ciorogar, “The Pursuit of Post-Authorship: The Ascending Ecology of the World-Author,” *Transilvania* no. 9 (2024): 1-13.

in *Nietzsche and Plato*. Yet, Burke's focus on the moral responsibilities of the writer left out other complex aspects of authorship, including empirical and theoretical dimensions, as well as social and technological aspects⁴. Despite early attempts to remove the concept of the singular author, its resurrection has happened. Can we, however, move towards a new and significantly different critical phase surrounding the issue of authorship, one that goes beyond either the historical and conceptual thresholds of flickering, semiotic appearances or its ontological disappearances into? We will synthesize this movement under the theme of *the overcoming of authorship*⁵.

Let us first consider the trajectory of the concept—from the birth of the modern author as a professional figure in the 17th century (Alain Viala), through the sacralization of authorship as a site of genius and individuality in peak Romanticism (Paul Bénichou), to the death of the author as a deconstructive critique of intentionality in the late 1960s (Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida), and, finally, the return of the author as a revaluation of its social, political, and ethical agency (in Burke, but also Pierre Bourdieu, postcolonial studies and feminism)—the next step, *the overcoming of authorship*, might involve a thorough rethinking of what authorship means in this current phase of capitalism. Through the study of authorship, literary subjectivity and cultural production in the context of ecological, technological, and economic change, we seek to displace the academic debate out of the death-and-return-of-the-author paradox, and, consequently, move beyond the discourses of Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, and Burke. Our argument is that authorship, indeed, still possesses the capacity to further address serious questions and play crucial functions in the literary field. However, what seems to have been hindering so far our ability to engage properly with this question is the institutional legacy wherein English and Comparative Literature departments (with some exceptions, of course, in the Global South and the Global East) transformed, during the second part of the 20th century, into deconstructive and therefore self-reproductive social-knowledge machines which, through iterability, have time and again critiqued and displaced the subject, and its authorial avatars, through a tale of theoretical disappearance and ideological reappearance.

⁴ See Michael North, "Authorship and Autography," *PMLA* 116, no. 5 (2001): 1377–85.

⁵ John Potts charts various instances of contemporary authorship: "variants of the contemporary author-function: author as factory, author as scriptor, author as processor, multimodal author, collaborative author, remix author, author for the new patronage, blockchain author, and even author as demiurge. These reflect the ways in which the contemporary author has adjusted to the changed circumstances within networked digital culture" (Potts 2022, 173).

In the age of AI, however, all that is solid melts into algorithm. This new phase of *authorial overcoming*⁶ is better understood if we posit authorship initially as a *dispositif* and then, from a world-systems perspective, as a series of *world-apparatuses* that include specific truth-formations and particular sets of literary practices, which jointly produce the conditions that allow for what we call an *algorithmic authorial subject*. We would, nevertheless, allow the possibility of considering the presence of overlapping modes of authorial existence, since various structural systems synchronically intersect: the residual (the death of the author hypothesis), dominant (the much-touted return of the author), and emergent (the overcoming of the author).

Grounded in world-systems analysis, our intervention offers a framework for conceptually understanding authorship beyond the limits of either ethico-political autonomy or poststructuralist intertextuality. Our central concept—*the overcoming of authorship*—therefore describes a trans-individual, oscillatory, and eco-technological configuration of authorship shaped by platform dynamics and epistemological shifts far beyond the confines of earlier discussions of postmodernism, not least because ‘the socio-affective qualities of the user have become the primary sources of capital abstraction, value, quantification and governmental control’ (Parisi 2019, 1). Emmanuel Bouju, for instance, has similarly argued recently that “the power of current events seems to have set in motion again a mode of historical development that is linked to the circulation of information on a world scale and the contagion of political upheaval: new ‘revolutions,’ the resurgence and violent rivalry of religious ideologies, the crisis of the credit economy” (Bouju 2023, 2). Building on Italo Calvino’s lectures on the novel of the coming century, Bouju contends that *epimodernism*, as that which described our present condition, transforms “the death of the author into a game played with the author’s textual shadow and digital avatar” (Bouju 2023, 5). We should likewise swiftly note that digital media should not, however, be treated just as a form of technological infrastructure. On the contrary, digital writing technologies are here intricately woven into the production of contemporary authorship *per se*.

Within this broader transition to our current lifeworld, we want to further introduce the concept of *intragential authoriality*, which describes a distributed, post-individual infra-mode of authorial subjectivity, which is central to this critical phase of authorial overcoming. Dennis Yi Tenen emphasizes the omniscience of “a distributed model of authorship, one that spans not only multiple human contributors, but also includes organic, algorithmic, and chance elements of

⁶ This movement of authorship is also evident in the prevailing cloud metaphor today, wherein authorship relocates into a collaborative platform. The cloud, Christian P. Haines argues, brings “together digital infrastructure, labour politics, and the capitalist production of subjectivity” (Haines 2024, 58).

composition”, arguing that, in the digital age, an author is best understood as a distributed system that “engages in a continual dialog with other authors, automated editorial algorithms, and the platform itself” (Tenen 2024, 55). In this sense, there is an ecology of authorship that maps “the literal flows of information between minds (wet-ware), computer programs (software), and infrastructure (hardware)” (Tenen 2024, 56). However, what Tenen misses⁷ is that subject positions, as Karen Barad (2007) (2007) and N. Katherine Hayles (2017) have both shown, are not just externally distributed but also internally assembled. This would imply, as previously mentioned, leaving behind both semiotic or language-based theories of literary production (structuralist and deconstructive) and the singular preoccupation with writers’ ethical or social responsibilities, in order to move into a materialist and ecological understanding of authorship. To briefly explain what we mean by ecological in this context, we draw on the paradigm of 4E cognition (defined as embodied, embedded, enactive, and extended)⁸ and complexity theory⁹, to propose a new framework of relational¹⁰, oscillatory, and enmeshed authorship. This is an engaged and materially attuned understanding of literary voice and agency. Conceptualizing subjectivity in this way allows us to define authorship as a post-semiotic and situated mode of literary agency. The critique of global literary production through world-systems theory and intersectional theory further affords the understanding of authorship as entangled within capitalist modernity.

⁷ In a different book, Tenen argues that “text that is easy to copy is easy to cite or plagiarize. The physically diminished notion of authorship makes certain ways of talking about such constructs as authorial intent and fidelity to the original difficult to sustain. Practices of collaborative and machine-assisted writing (e.g., Wikipedia, automatic news summarization) further erode notions of authorship based on individual genius [...] The author is not dead, however; authors continue to live and collect royalties. Autopoiesis (literature writing or discourse speaking itself) does not displace the social institution of authorship” (Tenen 2017, 14-15).

⁸ See Vlad Petre Glăveanu, *Distributed Creativity: Thinking Outside the Box of the Creative Individual* (Cham: Springer, 2014); Cameron Alexander, “What Is 4E Cognitive Science?” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 2025; Albert Newen, Leon De Bruin, and Shaun Gallagher, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of 4E Cognition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); James Ladyman and Karoline Wiesner, *What Is a Complex System?* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020); Alex Williams, *Political Hegemony and Social Complexity: Mechanisms of Power after Gramsci* (Cham: Springer, 2020).

⁹ Yuk Hui shows that “ecological thinking [...] artificial intelligence (the Dartmouth conference in 1956 was a response to the aftermath of the Macy Conferences), and complex theory (which is still very important today in various disciplines such as Earth system science and Cliodynamics) are continuations of the cybernetic project” (Hui 2024, 16). For previous application of complexity theory to literary study also see Richard Walsh and Susan Stepney, eds., *Narrating Complexity* (Cham: Springer, 2018), Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki, eds., *Narrative Complexity: Cognition, Embodiment, Evolution* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019).

¹⁰ Nicholas Bourriaud is, probably, the most well-known theoretician of relational aesthetics (Bourriaud 2002).

Contemporary Capitalism

As Todd McGowan puts it, “capitalism remolds the subject in its own image and protects the subject from confronting its own traumatic satisfaction” (McGowan 2016, 48) and, as Stephen Shapiro suggests, the Deleuzian version of control society, or what Shoshana Zuboff calls “surveillance capitalism” (Zuboff 2019), is based on neoliberal individuals’ disintegration within “sub-integral agents” (Shapiro 2019, 61). Our current phase of neoliberalism, therefore, and *the attending overcoming of authorship*, is based on algorithmic governmentality. While describing the transition from statistical governance to algorithmic governance, Thomas Berns and Antoinette Rouvroy describe the evolution and functioning of algorithmic governance as unfolding within three stages: 1) the collection of big data¹¹, 2) data processing, and 3) the usage of “statistical knowledge to anticipate individual behaviours and associate them with profiles defined on the basis of correlations discovered through datamining” (Rouvroy and Berns 2013, VIII). Interestingly, Berns and Rouvroy also show that algorithmic governmentality produces no forms of subjectification, because it simply evades human subjects, feeding on infra-individual data to build supra-individual models without ever involving the individual, and without ever asking one “to describe what they are or what they could become [...] or critique [...] seems to constantly become more complicated or to be postponed” (Rouvroy and Berns 2013, X). Consequently, the algorithmic subject is neither “an intentional subject” nor “one who might be addressed or interpellated in the Althusserian-Lacanian sense or normalized in the disciplinary Foucauldian one” (Shapiro 2019, 63). In this context, the disintegrated authorial subject is no longer the locus of either causes or intentions. Neither style, originality, nor signature represent valuable sources since the marketable value of literary production is located below conscious awareness, not least because every author can nowadays be translated into a data-based profile: “algorithms create what might be called a *wave-particle* subject, one that is simultaneously microscopic and a protean aggregate that is constantly changing through real-time feedback” (Shapiro 2019, 64). The algorithmic author is a concatenation, to quote Rouvroy, of “infra-individual data and supra-individual patterns” (Rouvroy 2012, 144-145). As such, we believe that it is exactly this algorithmic ecology of authorship, modelled on the “post-self [...] wave-particle subjectivity” (Shapiro 2019, 68), that must therefore be supplemented through an embodied and intersectional critique of digital cybernetics and virtual subjectivity.

¹¹ In *Supposing the Subject*, Joan Copjec emphasized, as early as 1994, in a psychoanalytical collection which responds to Jean-Luc Nancy’s more poststructuralist 1991 collection, *Who Comes after the Subject?*, that “the strong belief driving our information age – that everything can be/is recorded, that nothing exists outside this historical register – serves this capitalist logic of gain” (Copjec 1994).

The Post-Novel

The myth of “national authors” was created through the intertwining of the rigidly demarcated frontiers of so-called “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983), on the one hand, and the boundless depths of interiority, on the other. Major literary forms, such as the novel and, since the Romantic revolution, the great lyric poem, as Abrams dubbed it, promoted the corresponding ideals of autonomous authors’ unique genius and stylistic signatures (Abrams 1965). This construction marginalized other forms of authorship (non-authors or contested authors), making them residual, or pushing certain professional writers¹² into forms of social relegation, obvious, for instance, in the pejorative term “hack writer”. However, the critical languages games (*sensu* Wittgenstein) that were once dominant are now complicated by the fact that authors with high symbolic capital readily adopt cultural strategies and literary postures that once belonged to amateurs, as these seem better equipped to register and respond to our current moment.

Additionally, the 20th century has also seen the development of creative writing programs, especially within the neoliberal framework, in terms of capitalizing the surplus-value of certain prestigious writers who sell their labour. Writers’ symbolic capital or, simply put, the value of authorship paradoxically goes down, since creative writing courses represent some sort of cultural factories that produce still (other) writers as commodities. The excess of authorship is then transformed into profit by capitalists (the hiring Universities or private firms) because they reframe the typically unpaid cultural labour of authorship (the process or the work of becoming a writer) into a partially monetized and somewhat rewarded process of production. Combining Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau’s arguments with Laurent Berlant’s material examination of the potentialities within the neoliberal authorial labour of survival, we should equally acknowledge the unequal possibility of political action and individuation arising in the midst of such everyday life activities (Berlant 2016).

Correspondingly, authorship has also been thought of in terms of its distribution within new media forms, like video games (Lopes, Tavares, and Marques 2018), through players, directors, and studios, or, at the opposite end of the spectrum, through so-called mediators in premodern texts (Helle 2019). Analogously, the deconstructive death of the author that motivated so much of literary studies in the last 60 years, especially in its poststructuralist guise, was based on the Saussurean binary claim that meaning is differential. Yet, today,

¹² John Potts lists “ghostwriters, part-writers, report writers, advertising copywriters, marketing and public relations writers, public information designers and writers” (2022, 17).

meaning is no longer differential, but correlative, and the semiotic models have, as such, lost their efficacy. Nowadays, we experience life in a post-truth society, not because of the postmodern appeal of relativizing claims about history and documentation, but because the academic institutions that authorized these statements have themselves become prey to the declining authority of liberalism's binary theoretical machinery. Our aim, then, is to lay out the blueprint for complex ideas and practices related to contemporary authorship (understood, roughly, as starting in the 1990s with the advent of the World Wide Web), reflecting on their conceptual density, situated embeddedness, and diversity. Indeed, the 21st century "ushered in a new era of authorship, thanks to the affordances of digital media and the Internet", concretized in the figure of *the demotic author*: "a re-emergence of oral storytellers of old [...] and a figure of the future" (Skains 2019, 2-3).

Three areas of authorship ascend from our broad investigation: 1) ontological, 2) rhetorical, and 3) dialectical. We like to call our approach eco-materialist in that it signals the necessity of examining these three coeval dimensions of authorship in a richly coordinated fashion¹³.

It's perhaps best to remind ourselves first that authorship, at least in Michel Foucault's view, is described as a variable discursive function that appears in certain forms and under particular sociocultural conditions and power relations, and which is consequently echoed within or throughout hermeneutic/literary processes. Moreover, the role of authorship, and of those actors or agents that occupy this function, are in turn determined by the general conditions or modes of literary production and reception, and that they, finally, inform broad definitions of literature. Last but not least, authorship, Foucault suggests, is a social construct and, as such, its value will always be determined by both mediators and intermediaries (editors, translators, critics, readers, etc.) and further influenced by fields that lay beyond the confines of culture and art. What we suggest is that perhaps a better, more rounded, approach would consider contemporary authorship from both a non-liberal humanist perspective, as a trans-individual force—whether that's a Foucauldian discourse or Bourdieu's space of possibles—, and, concurrently, an agential view: feminist, relational (as in Latour's ANT, for instance), and intersectional.

First, the ontological model is, perhaps, most clearly represented within Alain Badiou's work who argues that the subject espouses a certain fidelity to an event. The subject, he continues, "is also the artist-creator [...] who opens up a new theoretical field", while the truth of an event (similar to Lacan's Real), in his view, "is solely constituted by rupturing with the order which supports it"

¹³ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi proposed an early systemic model of creativity (Csikszentmihalyi 2014).

(Badiou 2007, xiii). Even though an event is not something that can be predicted, the authorial subject is nevertheless created by truth procedures. Connecting Badiou's understanding of the authorial event with what Foucault calls "the presence of certain events in a text" (Foucault 1996, 128), which is how he describes the author-function, emphasizes the value of authorship as determined by the particular positions certain agents occupy in the international literary field and the discursive rules by which these operate. In this ontological paradigm, new authorial truths are generated, Katerina Kozova argues, by means of a subject's adherence to "a singularity without linguistic content" (Kozova 2014, 3): what Rancière would call a disagreement (Rancière 1999) or, finally, a utopic enactment, in Žižek (Žižek 1999, 2014). Joan Copjec points to the possibility of an ontological relocation of the author, claiming that "the subject, eliminated from all its own statements, deconstructed, appears in the real, or: the subject discovers itself in its very effacement, in its own modern graveyard" (Copjec 1994, xi).

On the other hand, within the rhetorical mode, authorial intention is defined as "a feedback loop among authorial agency, textual phenomena, and reader response" (Phelan, Rabinowitz, Warhol, Herman and Richardson 2012, 30). A couple of years earlier, James Phelan, indeed, conceptualized such intentions as "a recursive relationship [...] among authorial agency", intertextual phenomena, and readers' reception (Phelan 2007, 4). Although rooted in pragmatism and the theory of relevance, a similar rhetorical model is also at work in Richard Walsh's more recent anti-representational conceptualization of authorial creativity as contextual mediation and narrative understanding (Walsh 2007, 2018). In short, Walsh's author is a real-world communicative agent of serious fictional discourse. Nevertheless, both the ontological and rhetorical conceptualizations of authorship seem insufficient, as Ginsburg and Rimmon-Kenan clearly show, for instance, because they tend to reify the author as a threshold-concept: "pointing inside and out, before and after simultaneously [...] both an agent responsible for the text and a position within it" (Ginsburg and Rimmon-Kenan 1999, 72). Finally, the communicative and ontological are, of course, complemented by a dialectical model of authorship, which was probably most effectively probed, yet again, in Burke's famous *Death and Return of the Author*.

Our paper tracks the changes and substitutions in the regime of the authorial apparatus, especially through our attempt to redefine the concept from a world-systems perspective. So, we are reframing authorship beyond both the liberal-humanist model and its (post)structuralist critique, by positioning it after the novel (understood as one of liberalism's key forms), after semiotics (in a correlative, computational world), and within world-systems theory and the

space of the transnational literary field, through ecocritical and posthuman concerns¹⁴. This allows us to both integrate and surpass the three models sketched above.

The multiply interconnected question of authorship transforms when the apparatuses that once assured its functioning—individual autonomy, national narrative, private interiority, to name just a hefty few—are destabilized by computational regimes, post-truth epistemologies, and correlative logics of AI-driven meaning-making. We consider, therefore, the reconfiguration of *digital literary power*¹⁵ as a world-historical symptom. The notion of literary voice breaks down under conditions of epistemic and environmental crisis, entering a phase of post-expressivity.

Now, the idea of autonomous authorship has been one of the central tenets of liberal epistemologies. However, the obvious decline of authorship as a meaning-making function in the current computational and ecological conjuncture. Requires us to (re)think the function of authorship from a broader, post-semiotic, and even planetary perspective (Hui 2024). Deconstruction disembodied the author via language, while postcolonial thinkers recentred it within the ethical responsibility of agency. Nevertheless, both approaches remain insufficient if looked at through the windowpane of a world-systemic literary ecology, wherein authorship is shaped by geopolitical and infrastructural forces. From a post-anthropocentric perspective, then, tracking planetary authorship implies not only considering the coordinates of cultural geopolitics, but also locating it and extending it beyond human creativity to extra-human or more-than-human practices and entities, not least because, as Annemarie Bridy suggests, “all creativity is inherently algorithmic” (Bridy 2012, 27). It might also involve thinking about how ‘prestige writers’ move into platform-based algorithmic collaborations and participatory infrastructures.

In the age of platform imperialism, we are also witnessing the transformation of authorship as a brand and a form of curated identity which paradoxically reveals the unwaged and reproductive authorial work of intermediaries or brokers (translators, editors, critics, agents, proofreaders, book sellers) and legitimizing institutions (publishing houses, journals, magazines,

¹⁴ Mengchen Lang categorizes various approaches to authorship as follows: 1. Bringing together different theories of authorship; 2. Drawing on other disciplines to conceptualize authorship; 3. Putting theories of authorship in conversation with literary texts; 4. Drawing on writers’ non-fictional texts to put forth new theories of authorship (Lang 2022, 32–33).

¹⁵ We define the overcoming of authorship, post-authorship, or non-authorship in line with Laruelle’s work on non-standard philosophy: the use of this concept enables partial subscription to the tenets of a specific critical and theoretical genealogy without committing ourselves to its orthodoxies but instead, to use Said’s terms, freely radicalizing both its filiations and affiliations.

book fairs, literary festivals, awards and prizes), and the power differentials inherent within¹⁶. A world-systems theory of authorship therefore implies an awareness of planetary embeddedness and transnational literary circulation. In short, authorship is no longer just a function, pace Foucault, but *an interrelated, algorithmic knot in a world-ecological field*.

We Have Never Been Authors

We have never been authors. To unpack this gnomic formulation, let's take a few steps back. In the last couple of years, we have been witnessing, on the one hand, the regression of democratic rule, which has only intensified, emphasizing the imbroglio of neoliberal regimes with dictatorial systems of control on a global scale. Moreover, the ongoing geopolitical conflicts and the developing environmental emergencies might altogether seem to be steering us towards complete disaster. On the other hand, though, we have also, indeed, seen the strengthening and multiplication of radical, post-party movements within the intersectional left, and equally so among queer ecologists or decolonial critics. In the context of critical theory and literary studies, these practices represent a commitment to disrupt (hetero)normative and anthropocentric configurations, revealing the entanglements of power, identity, and discourse. What these and other similar knowledge-movements teach us is that oppressive structures work together and we should consequently disrupt all binary logics and naturalized hierarchies, while favouring, instead, relational and processual forms of existence.

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Michel Foucault reflected on the ruins of institutions, systems of thought, and power structures, showing how ideas and discourses emerge, change, and disappear, while also foreshadowing the idea according to which epistemological shifts will produce, in their turn, a collective type of imaginary consciousness about cultural hegemony or, to be more precise, about why and how subjectivities might be controlled or govern themselves. He consequently anticipated his own work on governmentality,

¹⁶ We might also note, in the words of Sophus Helle, that "authorship, as it is currently studied in literary history, can refer to two things: the production of a text and the depiction of how that production took place. In the first sense, authorship refers to the collection of people and practices that create a given text. Studying authorship in this sense may involve tracing the author's biography, determining the exact identity of an anonymous writer, studying the circumstances of the text's composition or its sources of inspiration and input, the co-authorship or editorial intervention that shaped its final form, and so on. In the second sense, authorship refers to how readers have since imagined this act of textual creation" (Helle 2024, 225).

biopolitics (or the turning away from structuralism and poststructuralism alike), and the technologies of the self. A few years prior to this, in *The Order of Things* (1966), Foucault also suggested that an episteme is a kind of knowledge structure that (re)produces the conditions of possibility for certain truths and facts to gain scientific plausibility. Indeed, this Kantian critique allowed Foucault to trace the development of ideas as discursive arrangements that materialize, transform, and eventually retreat into a state of ruinous decay. These works, along with his equally famous *What is an Author?*, cast light on the notion of human subjectivity as a historical construction but also on the technologies that organize and shape different aspects of it.

The rhetoric of tangential apocalypse prevalent in specialized critical debates, as illustrated in the author's circular death and rebirth, might be persuasively countered, we argue, by transversally employing a complex series of interdisciplinary methodologies. Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida all came to realize that authorship, at least in its 19th century instantiations and prolongments, were in some sense damaging to literary study. The author failed to serve theory well. Then there's the fact that it had some seriously compromising qualities: forever white, certainly not coloured, always masculine, never feminine, ever master, never slave. Indeed, authorship is intrinsically tied to authority, power, hierarchies, and exclusions, and the modern world-system has been reproducing and reifying authors to the detriment of readers or, even worse, against disadvantaged public audiences for hundreds of years now.

So, what we're saying is that authors have never truly existed as such. Sure, there were writers and lots of other techno-cultural systems that propped them up as *real*, but authorship has always already been a premodern thing: collective, relational, embedded, entangled, dynamic, and what have you¹⁷. The modern world-system simply obscured this reality through legal formulations, philosophical conceptualizations, and economic interests. Authorship is, we argue, a conglomerate of *world-apparatuses*. The sciences and humanities, though, in their post-eighteenth century restructuring of the University, have nevertheless proceeded through segregations, eliminations, isolations, omissions, and exclusions, so much so that, historically speaking, the only form of legitimate authorial subject-positionality was discursively made to be that of the white, male, imperial, heterosexual, Eurocentric, and nationalist writer, better known as the solitary genius. Technologies are naturally entangled and mutually constitutive of subjectivity and authoriality and they structure both power and opposition, registering and shaping socioeconomic structures.

¹⁷ A pioneering work in the field is Pierre Lévy's writings on collective intelligence (Lévy 1997).

The question of subjectivity has been also recently addressed by Timothy Morton and Dominic Boyer who refashioned the posthuman nomad as a *hyposubject*. The hyposubject, they argue, is a reaction to the overwhelming presence of *hyperobjects* in the context of the Anthropocene. Deleuzian becoming is in-built within the constitution of the hyposubject, since it is non-linear and non-teleological and its transformations only occur through difference, encounters, and relationality. Here is their working definition: “hyposubjects are also multiphasic and plural, not-yet, neither here nor there, less than the sum of their parts. They are in other words subscendent rather than transcendent” (Morton and Boyer 2021, 14). The hyposubject is one that enjoys or thrives in the process of transformation itself rather than any form of essentialism. What’s more, becoming only happens through situated and non-transcendental assemblages or encounters that dissolve any immanent boundaries of the hyposubject. Becoming a hyposubject (or, better yet, becoming-hyposubject) is, thus, a political affair and represents a tactical resistance to hypersubjects (molar identities). Conversely, hyposubjectivity is a continuous process of molecular and rhizomatic transformations defined by affective intensities and relational entanglements.

Now, this shift within subjectivity is admittedly evanescent or even flimsy because, as Stephen Shapiro argues, for any successful attempt to handle global changes within subjectivity will further need to be articulated with “the insights that Michel Foucault produced through his work of the 1970s” (Shapiro 2024, 18). Moreover, Shapiro continues, “Williams’s term—*structure of feeling*—might be replaced with that of *experience-system* to [...] indicate the world-system’s framework in shaping subjectivity within capitalism” (Shapiro 2024, 19). Morton and Boyer also show that hyposubjects are “feminist, antiracist, colourful, queer, ecological, transhuman and intrahuman” (Morton and Boyer 2021, 15), which sounds and looks a lot like intersectionality, at least at first. But the two concepts stem from different intellectual traditions: object-oriented ontology/posthumanism, on the one hand, and critical race/feminist theory, on the other. Nevertheless, there are some points of overlap in how they both challenge dominant understandings of subjectivity, identity, and power: hyposubjects “do not recognize the rule of androleukoheteropetromodernity and the apex species behavior it epitomizes and reinforces” (Morton and Boyer 2021, 15). They are decentred, incoherent, and often entangled within systems larger than themselves, so therefore distributed and ecologically embedded. Intersectionality, via Crenshaw, describes, indeed, a type of multiplicity but one dealing with various forms of oppression and marginalization, or what Laurent Berlant would have called “the female complaint”: the job here is that of disclosing a form of unobscured political agency (Berlant 2008). One that does challenge universalist, molar identities by emphasizing situatedness, layering, and relationality. The

key difference, however, is that, while both models foster emancipatory outlooks, the definition of the hyposubject moves away from a socially constructed understanding of identity, which remains central within intersectionality, and therefore gravitates towards an anti-metaphysical critique of being. To sum up, then, destabilizing fixed identities and highlighting the entanglements of the human subject within larger systems is where they overlap.

Nevertheless, these movements are part of a broader crusade: Vincent B. Leitch calls it “the renaissance of twenty-first-century theory” (Leitch 2014, 144), centred around the *derealization* of subjectivity, to use Judith Butler’s term, which is, in short, trying to rethink “alternative organizations of thought, agency, and practice”, whether this happens in the form of new materialisms, the abandonment of “both liberal and socialist treatments of the collective-individual opposition in favour of more complex processes of individuation”, or, finally, “in the advent of queer theory and [...] the autonomy of affect”, as well as the advent of posthumanism, ecocriticism, and global discourses (Haines and Grattan 2017, 3-5). Indeed, Fredric Jameson similarly argued that contemporary theory is engulfed in thinking subjectivity beyond the individual and into the collective (Jameson 2004). With Haines and Grattan, we also contend that “the biopolitical turn is not a negation of the linguistic turn; it is, instead, a re-turn of language to the corporeality that has always inhabited it” (Haines and Grattan 2017, 10).

Indeed, as Daniel Hartley has recently shown, “capitalist impersonal domination, then, both at the level of the economy and of culture, is best understood as a combined and uneven process of depersonalization and (re-)personalization” (Hartley 2019, 136). Christopher Breu similarly showed that the contemporary landscape of theoretical practices is currently structured by an antinomy between the effacement of the subject, on the one hand, and the voluntaristic assertion of the subject’s actuality, on the other (Breu 2017). Challenging such grand dialectic narratives and other conventional associations of authorial deconstruction with countercultural movements, for instance, and replacing them with multiply nested forms of conceptualization allows us to further argue that innovative deployments of contemporary authorship—theoretical or otherwise—can only be properly understood as forms of anti-modern and anti-capitalist engagement or resistance, even though we agree that the infringement of copyright might present serious problems for the contemporary author (Potts 2022, 172).

Our paper highlights, therefore, the ways in which authorship navigates the tensions between these cultural, social, economic, and political extremes. It further foregrounds how a contemporary conceptualization of authorship might potentially undermine both data-driven neoliberal logics and new

versions of fascism through its siding with both post-Lacanian conceptualizations of subjectivity and the decolonizing tactics of the hyposubject/queer/intersectional/decolonial left. What we are dealing with, then, is a new form of *authoriality without the Author*, a sort of counter-effect, wherein *the post-author* is now governed by the algorithmic technologies of power. As with all current theories of subjectivity and agency, authorship is best rethought, we believe, as a form of *authorialization*, that is, as a process or a vital force on the move.

We have also highlighted the differences between three defining moments of authorship: the late 1960s (mainly poststructuralist), the late 1980s (postcolonial, feminist, etc.), and our current moment. We have emphasized the hybrid nature of the term, as it intersects various fields and serves as a heuristic device to understand recent literary phenomena. Consequently, a materialist and, hence, post-semiotic understanding of the economic and social relationships of the author requires conceptual frameworks that decipher the elements or, better yet, the ecology (*i.e.* the coexistence and interdependent functioning) of technological mediation and ideological refraction. Approaching the question of authorship in a global and digital world demands moving beyond the post-semiotic mindset or the structuralist/poststructuralist frameworks of Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and S. Burke, who were mainly concerned either with the death of the author, the decentralization of meaning, or, conversely, the ethics of localized authorship. In the digital age, however, where media, communication, and production are increasingly collaborative, fluid, and distributed, authorship takes on new dimensions. By conceptualizing authors “as mediating, nonbinary, and partial” agents, Sophus Helle emphasizes, indeed, that authorship is co-created between multiple participants (Helle 2019, 115).

The Algorithmic Author¹⁸

We think it's therefore high time to either forgo and render useless the constructivist and postmodernist navel-gazing strategies, Barthesian demystifying semiotics, or, alternatively, to systematically and patiently decolonize these techno-cultural constellations of subjectivity and reshape them within a new (and probably still emerging and self-configuring) *longue durée* of posthuman, materialist, affective, and ecological perspectives of the current capitalist world-system in an age of VUCA-world polycrisis and platform capitalism. As Sharae

¹⁸ John Potts argues we “[...] have moved beyond the “death of the author” to a reconstituted author-as-algorithm” (2022, 8).

Deckard and Stephen Shapiro argue, one central feature of neoliberalism includes “the redefinition of individuals as quantum of human capital rather than subjects of interior development or political representation [...] and the emergence of new algorithmic technologies [...] that have penetrated everyday life” (Deckard and Shapiro 2019, 2). The material processes and technologies of AI capitalism, understood as the current/ emerging phase of neoliberalism, have, indeed, laid out a new regime of algorithmic governmentality and, consequently, a particular authorial model fraught, nevertheless, with inner tensions and contradictions, and not least with broader “analogical similarities in chronically contiguous moments within capitalism’s long spiral” (Deckard and Shapiro 2019, 29), wherein older authorial postures might be reactivated and refashioned to provide fresh conceptional frameworks for accurately grasping the contours of contemporary literary production.

Nonetheless, we need also remember that, especially viewed from a culturally materialist perspective, the emerging algorithmic capitalism coexists with both dominant and residual modes or conditions of general production, consequently generating instances of what we might call combined and uneven authorial subjectivities. Philosophically exploring, à la Badiou, the mathematical substrate behind the Bayesian revolution in statistics and probability, Justin Joque helps in extrapolating what we would call the intimacy between current technological metamorphosis of AI capitalism and literary production, and the attendant production of symbolic/cultural capital which is now foregrounded by/through algorithms (Joque 2022). However, as Matteo Pasquinelli argues in his 2023 book, *The Eye of the Master*, we might also acknowledge that AI has always only imitated the abstraction of forms of labour and social relations transforming them into pure automation without any proof of actually existing sentient autonomy (Pasquinelli 2023). Authorial subjectivity is mathematically reconfigured in accordance with this machinic epistemology, overseen by the political ontology and attention economy of contemporary capitalism (neoliberal or otherwise). Unfortunately, as Safiya Noble underlines in her work on racism and search engines, even the process of encrypting algorithmic authorship might reproduce oppressive categories, maintaining previous power relations and existing hierarchies (Noble 2017).

“Economic neoliberalism, free market ideology, and late capitalist individualism can no longer be separated from the various technological and cultural posthumanization processes” (Herbrechter 2013, 55), Stefan Herbrechter argues. He shows how these processes of posthumanization command new forms of subjectivity and the existence of alternative technologies of the self (Herbrechter 2013, 85-95). Foucault’s technologies of power and of the self both reflect this imbrication. While the former “determine[s] the conduct of individuals and

submit[s] them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject," the latter "permit[s] individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and soul, thought, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Foucault 1988, 18). Dynamic and embodied, authorship is the product of multiple technologies, fields, institutions, epistemologies, and practices. Indeed, Herbrechter further argues that authorial subjects transform themselves by means of technical interactions and adaptations. Global neoliberal conditions have led to "intensified mediation between humans and their individuation [...] via information technologies, which are in the process of transforming the [...] liberal humanist subject into a new, namely posthumanist understanding of individuation" (Herbrechter 2013, 154). The transformation of the dominant subject position of liberal humanism into the posthumanist or algorithmic subject of informational code logically extends the definition of authorship in that it includes non-human actors and forces.

To be sure, Yuk Hui also argues that the generalization of recursive algorithms transforms capitalism into an organismic model realized by informational machines (Hui 2024, 55). And, of course, we also know, in the words of Maurizio Lazzarato, that "the subjectivity and subjectivations capitalism produces are meant for the machine" (Lazzarato 2014, 14). Foucault also famously argued that the author's function serves as a regulatory construct within society rather than a source of originality. Though revolutionary, Foucault did not anticipate the advent of global digital networks where authorship is increasingly fragmented, collaborative, and often non-human. What distinguishes authorship, therefore, under the neoliberal, globalized, contemporary regime is the synchronous accretion of several *world-apparatuses* (*dispositifs*, policies, instruments, strategies) which, as a cluster-concept, require specific investigative methodologies (technological, ideological, economic, and legal).

First, digital platforms challenge the notion of authorship in that they highlight its collective dimension, where clear-cut boundaries between writers, editors, and readers slowly disappear. Moreover, Daniel Punday, for instance, shows that authors use the framing concept of the platform as a self-imposed, voluntary constraint (Punday, 2020, 118-131). Without any one agent assuming full responsibility, authorship presupposes a shifting and temporary function. Furthermore, it has also become obvious that different cultural forms which might be grouped under the notion of the post-novel (Leitch 2014, 148), such as fanfiction and open-source projects, disrupt traditional models of authorship by distributing agency not only across a post-digital network, but also transnationally throughout the globe. Mixing narratology and literary sociology,

Ingo Berensmeyer has recently shown how literature itself produces authors through the mediation of different novelistic genres and consequently defines *author fictions* as stories that both materialistically address the conditions of cultural production and concoct radical models of authorship (Berensmeyer 2023). In a similar sociological vein, Rebecca Braun conceptualizes literary production through identifying four modes of authorship that have governed the 20th century German literary field (celebratory, commemorative, satiric, and utopian), while also pointing to the coming into being of an inclusive and collaborative mode of authorship (Braun 2022).

Authorship can therefore be traded, shared, or split across intercultural networks. The author becomes a node in a dynamic system of anonymous and iterative processes and interrelations. Digital technologies and their algorithms currently curate content and decide, in Rancière's terms, what is visible and shared, and therefore actively shape the consumption and production of literary works. Bernard Lahire's unique sociological work and his notion of *l'homme pluriel* might also be leveraged to show how algorithmic authorship is often multiple: a writer might be a professional writer on Medium, a satirical meme-maker on Instagram, a DJ in her spare time, and an activist on Twitter/X (Lahire 1998).

Second, AI has further decentred anthropocentric understandings of authorship. Viewed from a decolonial and world-systems perspective, this posthumanization and hybridization associated with algorithmic authorship also highlights the power relations and global inequalities that structure literary production, for example, in the Global South. As an expression of systemic inequalities, transnational flows, and the material conditions shaping creative production, the author is consequently part of a digital ecosystem where further questions of gender, race, class, and other intersecting factors mingle, thus allowing marginalized/subaltern voices to assert their authorship against cultural hegemony, on the one hand, while exposing them to new forms of oppression, censorship, or accumulation by appropriation, on the other.

In this algorithmic age, authorship might be viewed as a position shaped by unequal access to resources within a hierarchical world-economy. Authors from peripheries and semiperipheries often face structural barriers to global circulation, constrained by access to digital tools, publishing networks, and symbolic capital. Their works are frequently marginalized or commodified for global audiences, while authors in the core (Global North) benefit from broader visibility and institutional support. Some authors, like Rushdie, Franzen, or McEwan are privileged as celebrities, while others remain provincial. Social media platforms themselves, such as Facebook, Instagram or TikTok, act as

what literary sociologists call *cultural intermediaries*, determining who gets visibility and who is consequently excluded from public view.

This combined yet uneven development of authorship registers the systemic differences between various regions of the world. It is not surprising, then, that the digital environment aggravates these inequalities, as access to the digital tools of literary production and the institutions that distribute symbolic capital remain unequal. In the framework of capitalist realism, the digital divide decides access to authorship. As such, authorial labour, especially in the periphery and semiperiphery, is a form of precarious labour. Conversely, however, we might also emphasize that, caught between global pressures and cosmopolitan outbursts, digital authorship functions as or is, at least, embedded in a transnational commodity chain of cultural production, wherein semiperipheral authors, for instance, might negotiate and register in their work both wordly trends and local traditions. Here, we might even paraphrase Pasquinelli in saying that, within a Luhmannian autopoietic framework, the author is not entirely replaced by an AI system but becomes a meta-author, or a cyborg-author that provides synthesis to a score of microtasks (Pasquinelli 2024, 108). Book historians, such as Robert Darnton, for instance, have long pointed out that the entire discipline is based on examining “a communications circuit that runs from the author to the publisher, the printer, the shipper, the bookseller, and the reader” (Darnton 1982, 67). By examining each node in this circuit, or the supply chain of authorship, we might also get an idea of how the author is transmitted through its technological and medial apparatuses.

Certain authorial practices might therefore also function as counter-narratives of resistance to neoliberal logics, challenging the dominant paradigms of creativity and literary production. Authorship itself could be staged as a performative critique of neoliberalism’s ideological and cultural formations. Nevertheless, peripheral and semiperipheral cultures’ access to core markets depends on translation and adaptations as forms of cultural gatekeeping performed within hegemonic literary languages, such as English, French, or German. Digital platforms are not politically neutral spaces but embedded within what might be called neo-colonial or neo-imperialistic systems of exploitation, surveillance, and control, particularly in the Global South. Which is why our intervention is not only explanatory but also decolonial in nature, addressing the unequal distribution of cultural capital within which algorithmic authorship is entangled in the material realities of global capitalism, offering new avenues for both critique and creative resistance.

Conclusions

Part human, part machine, part community, algorithmic authorship and its post-novelistic deployments, whether autofictional or autotheoretical, are multimodal, fluid, inter-distributed, and trans-participatory: powered by the global cybernetic circulation complex (CCC) which is speeding up its turnover time (Dyer-Whiteford and Mularoni 2025, 71), we therefore understand the post-author as a multiply dynamic constellation or assemblage wedged within a hybrid ecology of co-production, marketization, and financialization¹⁹. With multiple locations or institutions (authorial hubs), authorship might also be understood, especially in its current materially composite digital fabric, as a constantly reassembling socio-cultural phenomenon. We need to acknowledge, nevertheless, that there is also a dangerous potential of authorial usurpation lurking ahead, wherein AI might be “deployed by capital to oversee and manage processes where humans, though still integral, are subservient to an opaque, market-driven machine logic”, transforming AI tools into “requisite instruments for workers, enhancing productivity under heightened surveillance” (Dyer-Whiteford and Mularoni 2025, 189).

However, even if “the subject today is being configured by the automated architecture of a computational sovereignty” (Parisi 2019, 1), it does not preclude the possibility of counter-hegemonic or transformatory authorial positions. Caught between what Lazzarato terms social subjection and machinic enslavement, and the further possibility of political emancipation, Luciana Parisi attests that “the alien subject of AI coincides with the argument that instrumentality is not a resignation to the network image of the subject”, while “re-configuring the everyday activities of computational processing in the formation of multilogical modes of reason” (Parisi 2019, 21). Justin Joque has poignantly argued that, even if rendered as a mere network effects, cybertechnologies also enable new forms of digital subjects to turn against the state and other structures of power, emphasizing that “it becomes vital to theorize the positive possibilities of the cybernetic subjects we have become” (Joque 2018, 149). More recently, though, in his turn towards a revolutionary mathematics (and a metaphysics of objectification), Joque also sustains that, in Bayesian terms, the subject constantly collects data. Bayesian methods, he adds, are “ascendant, and the machine learning models built upon them are now used to regulate everything from high-frequency trading to global supply chains” (Joque 2022). With this in

¹⁹ N. Katherine Hayles defines cognitive assemblages as “collectivities, not exclusively human, not exclusively organic, through which information, interpretations, and meanings circulate” (2024, 95).

view, Joque seems to have become more of a pessimist about the coming into being of an effective political subject and, thus, he ambivalently surmises that “the revolutionary subject is beset simultaneously by an algorithmically fragmented reality and an intensely managed digital control” (Joque 2022).

On the one hand, Matthew Eatough showed how the concept of *genre-system* might be fit for examining the ways in which the literary field disperses economic processes and ideologies through the allegorizing of certain phases of literary production within the capitalist world-system (Eatough 2012). One bridge connecting the novelization of platform capitalism and authorship is, as J.-H. Coste and V. Dussol argue, their mutual tendency or “inclination to the counterfactual” and their shared interest in “deciphering change and envisioning the future” (Coste and Dussol 2020, 13). Stephen Shapiro, on the other hand, has suggested that a more recursive logic lies behind literary innovation, namely that genres embody a form of relative fixed labour-power, as they ensure the long-term reproduction of class relations (Shapiro 2020, 100). To both perspectives we might now simply add that, in the age of algorithmic capital, authors themselves might be conceptualized as representing or, better yet, registering the fluid dimension of labour-power being in a constant yet flexible relation with AI means of production. The effects of capitalism are global but are unequally and discontinuously revealed within discrete social and cultural areas within the world-system currently shaped by non-human actors such as AI technologies. It is only natural, then, that, in a post-semiotic framework, narratives themselves might register or even actively shape this new world-ecology of posthuman cohabitation, sprawling, as it does, entangled and situated authorial algorithms, not least because, as David McNally claims, liberal ideology typically denies it, the monstrosity of the market tends to “find refuge in folklore, literature, video and film” (McNally 2011, 4). Deployments of post-authorial narratives critically stimulate and register the unhinged exploitation of digital capitalism to better uncover and deterritorialize its mechanism.

By instrumentalizing world-systems analysis as a general framework, our paper has responded to the polycrisis we are confronted with and discussed the contemporary ruinous state of literary authorship and other theoretical institutions, such as liberal humanism itself, in the age of digital/algorithmic capitalism from a variety of perspectives: materialist, ecological, or posthuman, and, more importantly, post-semiotic. We reconsidered the notion of authorship by drawing from conceptualization of agency in related disciplines, as well as from literary theories that have been previously ignored. Post-authorship, we contend, is algorithmic authorship. To restore the future of the novel, we must reverse its myth: the ascension of the AI-author must be ransomed by the birth of post-writing.

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THE NOVEL GOES UTOPIA: ON VOLODYMYR VYNNYCHENKO'S *THE SUN MACHINE*

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ABSTRACT. *The Novel Goes Utopia. On Volodymyr Vynnychenko's The Sun Machine.* This article contributes to the project of “un-noveling” literary theory by drawing attention to the homogenizing tendency in (world-)literary theory, caused by its strong focus on the genre of the novel, however global and all-encompassing that genre may be understood. In order to discern the limits and limitations of the novel, it is examined in opposition to utopia. In particular, a discussion of Volodymyr Vynnychenko’s bestselling “utopian novel” *The Sun Machine* (1928) and its critical reception draws out a host of critical-theoretical presuppositions related to the novel and questions of aesthetics, politics and narrative. An “unnovelistic” genre of utopia also invites a brief discussion of the semiotic method of reading (for) utopia and the problem of binary oppositions for literary theory more generally. It is through these two angles that the article proposes to address the overarching theme of the special issue, post-novel, and one of its sub-interests – the interpretive methods grounded in semiotics.

Keywords: *novel, “global novel”, utopia, Ukrainian fiction, world-literary theory.*

REZUMAT. *Romanul spre calea utopiei. Despre Maşina Soarelui de Volodymyr Vynnychenko.* Acest articol contribuie la proiectul deconstrucţiei genului romanesc în teoria literară prin descrierea tendinţei de omogenizare din teoria

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(mondial-)literară, cauzată de focalizarea acesteia asupra genului românesc, oricât de global și atotcuprinzător ar fi acesta înțeles. Pentru a discerne limitele și limitările romanului, acesta este examinat în opoziție cu utopia. În special, o discuție a „romanului utopic”, bestsellerul *Mașina Soarelui* (1928) de Volodymyr Vynnychenko și a receptării sale critice, scoate la iveală o serie de presupuziții critico-teoretice legate de roman și de chestiuni de estetică, politică și narațiune. Un gen non-românesc al utopiei invită, de asemenea, la o scurtă discuție despre metoda semiotică de a citi (pentru) utopie, dar și despre problema opozițiilor binare în raport cu teoria literară în general. Prin aceste două perspective, articolul propune abordarea temei generale a numărului special, post-romanul, și a unuia dintre sub-interesele sale – metodele interpretative întemeiate pe semiotică.

Cuvinte-cheie: *roman, „roman global”, utopie, ficțiune ucraineană, teorie literară mondială.*

Literary theory today, and world-literary theory specifically, has become largely *homogeneric*.² Its prevalent interest in studying literary (and extra-literary) phenomena on the basis of the novel is not merely a reflection of the international literary field, where the novel is a dominant aesthetic form and a favourite commodity. This particular generic lens also dramatically directs and formats theory's interests and claims – to a point where literary phenomena and traditions outside the novel are either omitted from theory or remain invisible and thus unavailable for study. Sticking to the novel, however 'global' and multicultural we may want to see it today, can, at best, let these 'belated' literary traditions join the big table and prove their aesthetic and theoretical worth in a reinforcement of the developmental view of literary history (see Shapiro 2023, 38). Or, worse, this literary-theoretical focus on the novel will continue obscuring the actual diversity and unevenness of the world-literary field by reinforcing a semblance of globality.

Thus, viewed as a historically specific genre, the modern novel is typically approached as a foreign form in “almost all cultures, inside and outside Europe” (Moretti qtd. in Siskind 2010, 340). Coming out of, primarily, England and France, the novel spreads through “formal and thematic imitation, importation, translation, and adaptation” in Latin America, in “colonial Africa, Asia, and Eastern and Southern Europe” (Siskind, 340). But from this angle, a

² I have elaborated this observation in Bekhta (2025). I remain grateful to Matti Kangaskoski for the term 'homogeneric'.

fact of literary history – that certain literary traditions, genres and names have exerted a significant influence on others – has also come to suggest that these ‘others’ develop linearly, by going through a specific set of ‘literary stages’ (realism-modernism-postmodernism) or by adopting and reproducing core-like genre systems.

The novel also operates as a “general type” of a literary text without history or geography and includes anything from “Latin prose from the first century CE” to *Robinson Crusoe* to the “Chinese novel” because of a specific process of semantic expansion that occurred, as Guido Mazzoni shows, between the mid-16th and the beginning of the 19th centuries in several dominant European languages and literary traditions (Mazzoni 2017, 62-64). The novel today has come to mean a global phenomenon, synonymous with literature itself, as, for example Adam Kirsch formulates it: “The global novel exists, *not as a genre* separated from and opposed to other kinds of fiction, *but as a perspective* that governs the interpretation of experience. [...] Life lived here is experienced in its profound and often unsettling connections with life lived elsewhere, and everywhere. The local gains dignity, and significance, insofar as it can be seen as part of a worldwide phenomenon” (2017, n.p.; emphases mine). Here, a writer from the world-literary periphery may have a fitting interjection: As Andriy Lyubka jokily puts in this his *small ukrainian novel* (2020), the novel is “the highest form of being for the human spirit. It is serenity itself shaped as words. An ordering of the chaos of the world on the plot canvass” (24).³ Therefore, Lyubka’s protagonist proclaims, any decent Ukrainian poet has to turn to prose and produce not “a simple story, some dragged-out novella” (24), nor a science fiction tale about the future (33) but a “real novel” – the Big Ukrainian Novel – that would “finally bring Ukrainian literature into the canon of the most developed world cultures [sic!]” (5).

Selections of case studies in the discussions of the “global novel” confirm the satirical aspirations of Lyubka’s fictional poet. Kirsch (2017) chooses writers that “span six languages and five continents”: Orhan Pamuk, Haruki Murakami, Roberto Bolaño, Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie, Mohsin Hamid, Margaret Atwood, Michel Houellebecq, and Elena Ferrante. Strikingly, not only all of the writers have been widely consecrated and promoted by the US literary-cultural institutions – no outsiders here, but half of the list also studied or taught at the most prestigious American universities. In the introduction to the special issue on the global novel, Debjani Ganguly suggests that the novelists under scrutiny in the issue are more versatile, “a mix of renowned figures and emerging creative voices” (2020, vii), and in line with the description of the ‘global novel’

³ All translations in this article are mine, unless otherwise stated.

as a signal of “the linguistic and cultural diversity of this fictional form across time and space” (vi). But the list, again, is overwhelmingly US-based, with the majority of writers working in English and, again, boasting education or employment from the most prestigious US and British universities: Besides Orhan Pamuk, J. M. Coetzee, Kazuo Ishiguro, Yoko Tawada, Gabriel García Márquez, Roberto Bolaño, Daniel Sada, Taha Hussein and Han Kang, the ‘global list’ includes Jhumpa Lahiri [Boston], Cristina Rivera Garza [Houston, MacArthur Fellow], Jorge Volpi [University of Mexico], Sinan Antoon [Harvard and New York], Pitchaya Sudbanthad [Duke], Namwali Serpell [Yale & Harvard], Amitav Ghosh [Oxford], James George [Auckland], and Indra Sinha [Cambridge]. From the Amero-centric vantage point, the novel is indeed a global form but this may be because the globe has come to live in New York, which functions today as the gateway to the vast sea of ‘world literature’ (see Vermeulen 2017), with the novel being the only (noteworthy) fish in this sea. To add a qualification to Lyubka’s quip: We, in the back alleys of the world, need a Big Novel and we need it in the Ivy-league English!

While translation may be an obstacle for the project of de-novelising literary theory, the lack of the already translated works⁴ in the current theoretical debates is, arguably, a result of a certain hierarchy of literary traditions whereby those with prominence of poetry or satire (e.g. Eastern Europe / literary semi-periphery/ ‘Second World’ at certain points in history; Bekhta 2025) or short story (e.g. certain peripheral literatures/‘Third World’; see Pravinchandra 2018) cannot join the production of literary concepts because they lack ‘the Big Novel’.

In this article I would like to challenge the *theoretical* dominance of the novel by taking as a starting point an opposition of two genres, utopia vs. the novel. While there are other genres that can challenge the scholarly and even cultural authority of the novel (see, e.g., Shapiro 2021), I pick the “unnovelistic” but still prose genre of utopia (Elliott 1970, 104), because it will also let me to briefly consider the semiotic method of reading (for) utopia and the problem of binary oppositions for literary theory more generally. It is through these two angles that I propose to address the overarching theme of the special issue, post-novel, and one of its sub-interests in the interpretive methods grounded in semiotics.

⁴ For example, Yale University Press, in the “The Margellos World Republic of Letters” series, features some of the best texts of contemporary “world literature” in the English translation but, without literary-critical interest in and a suitable theoretical apparatus, these works do not join the world-literary “globe”.

Effective utopia — a novel?

At the dawn of the twentieth century, when the struggle of Ukrainian political and intellectual elites for a national project was often cast in socialist terms, Lesya Ukraïнка published an extended essay on “Utopia in *belles lettres*” (1906). An exceptional figure herself — a prominent poet, dramatist, translator and a polyglot as well as an erudite scholar with a keen interest in social life, Ukraïнка reviews the whole history of Western utopian thought from Babylonian legends, Hebrew Biblical sources and Ancient Greece to the most recent French texts through the lens of the pressing political (and poetic) challenge of the emerging century. *How should a writer render a socialist utopia so that it convinces and inspires the widest possible readership?*

Ukraïнка observes that not many have succeeded so far in producing an artistically convincing literary utopia. After Thomas More and Jonathan Swift, she singles out only William Morris, Anatole France and — the absolute highlight — Maurice Maeterlinck. Ukraïнка translated Maeterlinck's philosophical essay “Les rameaux d'olivier” (1904) into Ukrainian in 1906 but, in terms of its classification, she wrote: “We struggle to determine, to which genre of literature this work belongs. It is not a novel and not a short story; for a prose poem it contains too many scientific hypotheses and philosophic problems. If it had been written in a different style, it could have been classified as a scientific utopia, akin to Mechnikov's ‘Disharmony of the human nature’⁵” (Ukraïнка 2021 [1906], 300). But as it stands, Ukraïнка concludes, it has to be treated as a literary work of its own kind, a genre innovation in the history of utopia: “If Ecclesiast were reborn as optimist, he would write like this” (300). I'll return to the formal reasons for Ukraïнка's high praise for “Les rameaux d'olivier” later in this section.

As for the rest of her contemporaries (e.g., Maurice Spronck, Camille Mauclair, Ludovic Halévy, Herbert Wells), Ukraïнка is ruthless: their writing is simply “senile drivel from a decadent bunch and a desire to scare the readers with the invented horrors of socialism. These populist [політіканські] utopias are worthy of attention as polemical efforts but as fiction they are absolutely uninteresting” (300). Even in the more socialist utopian attempts (Nikolai Chernyshevskii, chiefly, but also Edward Bellamy), utopian propositions remain the least convincing parts of these works and, when it comes to questions such as female emancipation — or female characters more generally, they are outright backward and bourgeois (287-289). Thus, when utopia enters a literary text,

⁵ A reference to the work *Études sur la nature humaine* (1903) by the Ukrainian-French microbiologist and Nobel laureate, Ilya Mechnikov.

aesthetics seems to yield way to didacticism on either side of the political spectrum. Ukraïнка's critical evaluations also foreshadow those of Fredric Jameson: Our utopian imagination remains bound to the coordinates of the present. If realized in the concrete terms of the storyworld and plot, these utopias tend to offer a reconfigured present, reproducing some of its major contradictions in the process, but they do not show a truly new, futural world.⁶

Ukraïнка nevertheless argues for a literary form for utopia precisely because of the ability of *belles lettres* to make us feel that, which theoretical discourse can only offer to reason, and, via this feeling, potentially inspire us to a struggle and even sacrifice for a socialist ideal, which now, at the dawn of the 20th century, has become a tangible possibility (Ukraïнка 2021 [1906], 298). Whereas Thomas More in the 16th century was a "solitary voice in the desert", whereas William Morris had to work hard to educate a small group of "apostles of the new Evangelium", a "utopist of our epoch" is "surrounded by the masses thirsty for a prophetic word about the world that is coming into being" (298). But, paradoxically, this makes the utopian task (of educating desire, we may add, after Miguel Abensour) even more difficult:

How to convince a reader-evolutionist to accept the possibility of the vision of a new world, without having shown to him step-by-step how that world would arise from the contemporary form of social existence? How to make him step out of his time and occupy the future not just as a mental [theoretical] exercise (any scholar can do that) but with his feeling? How to "infect" with the futural spirit that person, who already knows she will not live to see the forthcoming "paradise" nor "hell", neither in this life nor after death? For to elicit in another person an interest in our ideas, we need to find some kind of common ground or, at least, a common starting point. We cannot comprehend the future from the standpoint of future people, unknowable to us, we only cherish it in those elements, which we *now* desire, even if the people of the future would perhaps disregard these very elements.⁷

Ukraïнка (2021 [1906], 285)

The task, as we can see, is enormous. So, what literary form would be fit to take on the challenges of the new century, to optimistically and without fear project a radically new future? In addition to the imperatives Ukraïнка notes in the

⁶ See, e.g., Fredric Jameson: Utopia's "function lies not in helping us to imagine a better future but rather in demonstrating our utter incapacity to imagine such a future—our imprisonment in a non-utopian present without historicity or futurity—so as to reveal the ideological closure of the system in which we are somehow trapped and confined" (2004, 46)

⁷ For another curious resonance, see Jameson on the "unknowability thesis" (2007, 111, 113).

quote above, a successful literary utopia must also have “fictional verisimilitude” (287), a “living, dramatized (and not scholastic) language” (281), scenes from everyday life, psychological depth of characters — in other words, it must write out its ideas through the focal point of a human being, with “colours, forms, perspectives that are alive” (282). Any utopia must be in tune with contemporary political and scientific reality and thus, for example, at the threshold between the 19th and 20th centuries, there is no place anymore for religious visions or the device of a dream that could transport romantic characters to better places and lands. We must unexpectedly conclude that an aesthetically and politically successful form for utopia is not a tractatus or satire, not a pastoral or the chivalric *romanzo* but... the novel.

And, if we look ahead to the genre debates of the 1920-30s, the question of the novel seems to remain on the table. It is taken on even more explicitly by Volodymyr Vynnychenko, the author of a bestselling “utopian novel” *The Sun Machine* (1928) and a prominent writer, politician as well as a dedicated utopian thinker himself. In a preface to his later, fictional-polemic text *The Floor is Yours, Stalin!* from 1950 (published posthumously in 1971), Vynnychenko writes:

I have outlined the main idea of the social-political and pacifist conception [framework], offered in this *book*, in my previous *work* that was published under the title “A New Commandment” [1932, N.B.]. There I deliberately dressed up this conception into such literary form that could most easily attract the attention of the widest readership (i.e., *into the form of the novel*), starting with a factory worker and ending with a university professor. (Vynnychenko 2024, 3; emphases mine)

While Vynnychenko's later works, including *The Floor is Yours, Stalin!* (published under the genre category of “Political proposal in figures”) moved away from strictly fictional genres into the direction of tractatuses, this comment in the preface offers us another glimpse into the heated genre struggles of the first decades of the 20th century, where modernist aesthetic imperatives combined with the political ones.⁸

⁸ And, not to a small degree, material ones – a writer had to be sold and read widely to be able to earn her or his living. She had to be, in many senses, *popular*. Cf. Krisch's defense of the ‘global novel’, which polemicizes with the authors of n+1's essay “World Lite”, accusing them of “nostalgia for the union of modernist aesthetics and radical politics that characterized the advanced intelligentsia in the 1930s and 1940s” (2017). Difficult literature, Kirsch suggests, is unpopular and this makes it “an uncomfortable bedfellow for socialist politics”, making “great modernists [...] more often sympathetic to fascism than socialism”. I suspect that a look beyond the conventional novel-heavy canon of the 20th century would unearth many examples to challenge both sides in this polemic, as brief examples from Ukraïнка and Vynnychenko already suggest.

To return to my main question: If the novel is indeed a fitting genre for spreading a utopian argument with conviction and inspiration, then why has Ukraïнка, in her unfinished utopian sketches, opted for short prose or poetic dramas? Why was it not possible for her to complete any of these sketches? Why has Vynnychenko continued to look for the most fitting literary form, after his bestselling novel *The Sun Machine*, with whose ending he was ultimately not satisfied? Finally, Ukraïнка's most praised example of an aesthetically successful utopian text, Maeterlinck's "Les rameaux d'olivier", is non-narrative and decidedly non-novelistic.

One of Ukraïнка's own utopian attempts, the unfinished fantasy drama "An Autumn Tale" (dated 25 December 1905 and written in Tbilisi, amidst the revolutionary events in Georgia), is structured as a series of polemical conversations between figure-types: a Knight, a Princess, servants in the King's court (Dishwasher Girl and Shepherd) and a group of workers. These workers are builders summoned to construct a hospital in place of the castle's old pigsty – the pigsty was polluting the ground waters and caused a widespread dissatisfaction with the King in the neighboring villages. The new hospital, however, in addition to calming down the masses, would also serve as a new kind of prison for those deemed insane by the court doctors (Ukraïнка, 2021 [1905], 199).⁹ (Pigsty already being a prison, of course, for the animals but also for the Knight, who's freed from an actual prison and locked in there by the Dishwasher Girl at the beginning of the play). While the workers don't know about the hospital's double purpose, by the end of the sketch they decide to drop this senseless labour anyway: "prison, hospital, then prison again, / and this till the end of days. Boys, let's not allow this! / Enough of hospitals and prisons!" (203; my translation). They then embark on a dangerous ascend towards another former prison that sits at the top of a crystal mountain and from which the Princess was freed, with plans of turning it into their fortress in the imminent fight with the King's army.

The drama ends abruptly with the Knight appealing to realism (a typical anti-utopian argument today as well) when the workers express optimism that, even though the road to the mountain top is long and difficult, it'll end in spring "like an autumn fairy tale". To which the Knight quips: "After autumn winter comes" and gets a reply from the Builder, full of (utopian) conviction: "But winters end as well". The author's final note reads: "Ending will perhaps be [written] some day" (216). Left as is, the text is indeed incomplete: more a

⁹ In her monumental study of Ukraïнка's work, Oksana Zabuzhko notes Ukraïнка's often involuntary prophetic discoveries (since, according to Zabuzhko, Ukraïнка has deliberately avoided futural and utopian genres), such as this vision of penitentiary psychiatry that will come into being in the USSR of 1960s (Zabuzhko 2021, 237).

parable or allegory than a drama with its narrative set-up of a fairy tale. The structure of narrative is incomplete without a closure (even an open one) – and closure is something Ukraïnka cannot (yet) provide in 1905 for the upward movement of a group of workers on a slippery crystal mountain.

This unfinished drama, however, seems to be well in line with Ukraïnka's theory of utopia, developed around the same time. Positive utopias, Ukraïnka observes in her essay, have conventionally relied on the technique of contrast between a bright future versus the darkness of the current life. She singles out the genius of Maeterlinck's "*Les rameaux d'olivier*" because in this text "the dark background stays somewhere deep in the back, as a memory of the chaotic past of the planet and of the humankind, but the center of the painting, its brightest spot is the present moment, and this spot radiates its light into the future, into eternity" (Ukraïnka 2021 [1906], 302-303). A better life is not some time or some place else. It's here and now and we only need to see the utopian potential inherent in the present, seize it and make sure that the future, which grows out from the present, is still following these rays of light. But such a utopia, as Jameson (2004) has also demonstrated, is essentially non-narratable as substance, as a concrete futural vision.

To provisionally sum up the above considerations, utopia, when it inserts itself into the structure of a narrative text, unsettles the familiar narrative logic. Most clearly it is visible in the complications caused for narrative closure (see Bekhta 2023, 4-7 for elaboration). Put differently, there is an unresolvable tension between utopia and the novel, which lies in the issue of narrative.

Utopia vs. the novel

At this point a more detailed elaboration is in order on the problem of definitions of these two genres. Historically, utopias have often been re-read as anti-utopian by later generations and, since the beginning of the 20th century, it has become difficult to draw a firm line between utopias (positive and negative) and works of science fiction (see Suvin 2010, 30 for an attempt at a definition). The novel, on the other hand, has become synonymic with literary fiction in general and rarely, if at all, raises the question of what exactly this form comprises. Of course, being one of the most flexible and ever-changing genres, the novel can only elicit contingent definitions in the first place. But even the most general definitions confirm one key thing: the novel equals some kind of story. The genre of the novel and the narrative form go hand in hand (even when the novel may want to 'break' or 'experiment' with the narrative framework). To borrow a formulation from Guido Mazzoni: "The first defining

characteristic of the novel as we understand the term today is its narrative form. The second is its capacity to tell all sorts of stories in all sorts of ways" (2017, 60). For utopia, on the contrary, the story and related questions of representation are subordinated to its socio-political agenda, and its futural vision is, essentially, unknowable in the present and therefore non-narratable.

To reiterate, when utopian inserts itself into the narrative form of the novel, this provokes a clash between the two competing desires: to create a convincing story(world), drawing the reader into it, and to communicate a convincing political vision, which often comes at the expense of fictional verisimilitude. This clash comes to the fore in the literary-critical discourse, which frequently reads utopias as deficient novels.

For example, in his *The Shape of Utopia: Studies in a Literary Genre* (1970), Robert C. Elliott mentions Aldous Huxley's *Island* (1962) as a positive utopia, "an honorable, if unnovelistic, mode of fiction" (104). *Island* was published as a novel and "most reviewers, accepting the designation without question, proceeded to belabor the book accordingly: despite its interesting ideas, one of the worst novels ever written, Frank Kermode decided" (102). Wayne Booth suggested that "although it calls itself a novel, *Island* actually belongs [. . .] [to] works which use fictional devices to provoke thought. Booth avowed his interest in *Island*, although he felt unable to pronounce an aesthetic judgement, the criteria for this 'nameless and tricky genre' not yet having been worked out" (Elliott, 102–104). It is interesting that Booth was unable to define the genre of *Island* as utopia. Probably because the novel employs a stern critical discourse, which falls within the conventions of the novel.¹⁰

Another good case in point is Oleksandr Biletskyi's influential review of Vynnychenko's bestseller *The Sun Machine*. The 1928 review starts right off with the question of genre: *The Sun Machine* appeared under the label "utopian novel" and could signal a major shift in the Ukrainian literary tradition, typically uninterested in this genre. But is this designation coming from the author (and hence signals a key to the text) or is it a publisher's move (evidently, a less important genre imperative)? Solving the question of genre designation, Biletskyi rightly notes, is not a mere typological exercise but it would "in part, influence the characterisation of Vynnychenko's new novel as a literary text" (1990 [1928], 122). For Biletskyi, in the 1920s Soviet Ukraine, utopias were expected to have a

¹⁰ Robert C. Elliott cites Richard Gerber's argument who, in 1955, observed how contemporary utopian fiction "slowly assumes the shape of a novel" (Gerber qtd. in Elliott 1970, 103) in becoming problematic and "full of social and moral conflicts, its characters diversified and individualized" (104). The gist of my argument in what follows is to suggest that, while the novel exerts a strong pressure on utopia, the latter genre nevertheless cannot fully dissolve into a "utopian novel" due to its formal and ideological peculiarities.

strong, convincing science-fictional element. And since Vynnychenko's fictional invention (the sun machine) is more of a symbol than a science-fictional device from the near future, and since any science-fictional problems, "insignificant to begin with" (126), fall off in the course of the novel as old leaves, Biletskyi concludes that this text cannot be deemed a utopia. Instead, it's an engaging socio-psychological novel.¹¹

There is, however, a contradiction in Biletskyi's analysis: He has to note that also psychologism and the most interesting plot twists and conflicts (love rivalries, detective mysteries, cunning plans of power seizures and coups) gradually are "liquidated by the author" rather than developed to some logical conclusion. Thus, for example, when the Head of the United Bank (almost literally "the King of the Earth"), Friedrich Mertens fails to keep his power, fails to, brutally and violently, reign in the revolution of the adepts of the sun machine and has to subsequently learn to live in the new social order, he eventually simply sees its emancipatory potential and even offers his help to the emerging commune – without any conniving agendas or unexpected plot twists. His storyline simply recedes into the background without a dedicated closure or resolution, once the mimetic-argumentative role of his character – to offer an initial caricature of a capitalist – is exhausted. I argue that these are precisely the generic discontinuities that expose the limits of the novel.

The imperative of the novel is to follow the logic of a particular story, but the utopia's imperative is to try and give an answer to the socio-political concerns that *The Sun Machine* was set to examine: Is there a non-violent alternative for a radical rebuilding of a society? Would a socialist re-organisation or merely an elimination of work inevitably deteriorate social structure? In the storyworld of the book, a scientific discovery functions as a catalyst for such radical re-organisation. A ground-breaking mineral termed "helionite," when fused with a glass lens, makes solar energy suitable for direct consumption – by infusing a kind of plant 'smoothie' made from plain grass or fallen leaves with this energy. The trick is that you have to add a few drops of your own sweat to this mix in order for it to properly fuse. Such "sun machine" is extremely easy to make at home and, by providing access to easy sustenance, it frees masses of people from hard, forced work or else death by hunger (the novel was written during 1922-1924). At the same time, the fact that a production of "solar bread" still demands human sweat, in the literal sense, makes the sun machine into a symbol of some overarching necessity of work, central to human life: Solar bread is not a gift of heavens but a result of human ingenuity and work. It is in

¹¹ Another literary scholar, Marko Pavlyshyn, points out how Vynnychenko's critics often focused on the question whether his explicitly formulated ideological positions retracted from the aesthetic value of his literary works (Pavlyshyn 1989).

this sense that the invention of the sun machine is both an enactment of the Biblical imperative (“By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground”, Genesis 3:19) and a utopian victory over God, who banished humankind from Paradise.

If we read *The Sun Machine*¹² first and foremost as a utopia, then criteria for its aesthetic judgement and “characterization as a literary work” would be far less plot-based than for a novel. Following Jameson, I approach a utopian text “as a determinate type of praxis, rather than a specific mode of representation” (Jameson 2009, 392). This praxis, furthermore, is not a game of construction of a specific idea of a ‘perfect society’ but “a concrete set of mental operations to be performed on a determinate type of raw material given in advance, which is contemporary society itself—or, what amounts to the same thing, on those collective representations of contemporary society that inform our ideologies just as they order our experience of daily life” (392). Viewed in this light, the abundance of plot elements, character types, political organisations and (narrative) conflicts *without resolution* makes complete sense in *The Sun Machine* given the tumultuous historical reality behind it: In particular, the Ukrainian revolutions of 1917-1920 (peasant, national and socialist), with their competing fractions and governments, a Polish-Ukrainian war within the Austro-Hungarian empire, a joint Polish-Ukrainian attack on the Soviet Ukraine, and the WWI, much of which has played out on the Ukrainian territory (see Hrystak 2021, Chapter 5 for overview).

The dramatic and often tragic nature of this “raw material” behind *The Sun Machine*, and Vynnychenko’s own role in the events (including as the head of one of the governments in 1918), make his utopia into a remarkable document of the political imagination of the early 20th century. Furthermore, as Mykola Soroka observes, *The Sun Machine*, written in exile in Berlin, can be read as “Vynnychenko’s attempt to polemicize with the Soviet form of socialism, but it was broadly addressed to the Western readership as a way of highlighting the main problems of the capitalist system” (2005, 328-329). The book also begins to outline the foundations of Vynnychenko’s idea for harmonious life, which he subsequently termed a “concordist” system. But on top of its clearly utopian agenda, *The Sun Machine* was also Vynnychenko’s attempt at the ‘Big Novel’ that should have become “a calling card for Ukrainian literature in Europe” (Vynnychenko 1983, 279) and carved out a space in the international canon alongside the works of Herbert Wells, Karel Capek and Anatole France.¹³ While these hopes didn’t

¹² For a very detailed plot summary and analysis see Smyrniw (2013; Chapter 6 “The Solar Machine”). See also Soroka (2012; Chapter 4). Since Vynnychenko’s work has not been translated into English, I refer to it in my own translation as “The Sun Machine”.

¹³ He commissioned translations of this novel into French, German and English but, eventually, could not find a publisher – neither in Germany nor in France. This was partly due to the anti-

materialize, *The Sun Machine* was an immense success in the Soviet Ukraine: Upon its publication, three consecutive printings of the book were sold out, there were waiting lists in the libraries; it also had three editions in the Russian translation, reaching far across the Soviet Union.¹⁴

Given how with each element in the discussion of *The Sun Machine* its opposite inevitably emerges, I suggest that this text is best approached not with a question framed by the 'either/or' choice (novel/utopia, Ukrainian/European, positive/negative) but via the complex structure of a binary opposition, which lies at heart of utopian discourse more generally. Utopias are conventionally understood as drawing a firm line between good and bad but in practice an opposition (or "contrast", in Ukrainka's formulation) does not mean an either/or choice. Ursula K. Le Guin once offered to view utopia as a yin and yang symbol in action, "not a stasis but a process" (196): "Every utopia since *Utopia* has also been, clearly or obscurely, actually or possibly, in the author's or in the readers' judgement, both a good place and a bad one. Every eutopia contains a dystopia, every dystopia contains a eutopia" (195). Oppositions such as these, Jameson notes, "betray some more fundamental dynamic in the utopian process" (2004, 48). His elaboration is worth quoting at length:

These utopian oppositions allow us [...], by way of negation, to grasp the moment of truth of each term. Put the other way around, the value of each term is differential, it lies not in its own substantive content but as an ideological critique of its opposite number. [...] Yet the operation does not conform to that stereotype of the dialectic in which the two opposites are ultimately united in some impossible synthesis (or what Greimas calls the 'complex term'). If dialectical, then this one is a negative dialectic in which each term persists in its negation of the other; it is in their double negation that the genuine political and philosophic content is to be located. But the two terms must not cancel each other out; their disappearance would leave us back in that status quo, that realm of current being which it was the function and value of the utopian fantasy to have negated in the first place; indeed—as we have now been able to observe—to have doubly negated. Jameson (2004, 50-1)

capitalist stance of the book, partly due to its 800-page volume and partly due to xenophobic and almost colonial attitudes a writer from Ukraine faced in Europe at the time, especially in France. For details, see Soroka (2005, 339-351).

¹⁴ Vynnychenko notes in his diary on 10 February 1928, in a rebuff of the professional readers-critics: "My hopes for *The Sun Machine* have become reality: a mass reader is reading it, lower classes are reading it, *Donbas* [reference to the proletarian population of this region, N.B.] is reading it, they are reading it without critics' instructions, without paying attention to various Demchenkos" (Vynnychenko 2010, 410).

Jameson, following Louis Marin (1973) and Greimassian semiotics, elaborates also a method of reading for utopia (in this terminology, the 'neutral term'), which I cannot discuss here in detail. I shall note, however, that an identification of the initial structuring opposition, which the utopian operation then proceeds to doubly negate, is one of the main interpretative moves within this method. To stay with the example of *The Sun Machine*, the end of the backbreaking toil that the book proposes is, undoubtedly, an eutopia. And yet, once the social repercussions of the invention of the sun machine are thoroughly seen through, Vynnychenko shows that such an invention not only eliminates the need for labour but soon puts an end to basic comfort, medicine, education, culture and leads to a dystopian downgrading of human life to the level of mere physical survival. (This condition, in a properly utopian spirit, is also considered seriously by Vynnychenko: What makes animal life seem worse than human life? Would we not be happier leading an animal-like existence?) To phrase this in Jameson's terms, the moment of truth about daily toil that we see via the relation of opposition is that such toil is not merely dystopian (in the sense of exploitation of labour) but it also exposes the destructive potential of a work-free life (selfish hedonism or else – aimless, vegetative existence). Similarly, its opposite, freedom from forced work («праця-примус», Vynnychenko 1989, 530) illuminates our inability to conceive of work in some joyous, non-material and non-monetary terms as an activity indivisible from human life itself («творча праця-насолада», "creative work-as-pleasure", 520).¹⁵

Capitalist exploitation vs. freedom from all work is, however, only an initial and the most obvious opposition, structuring the utopian experiment of *The Sun Machine* – an initial dead-end of imagination demanding further exploration. If exploitative toil as well as removal of all work from a society do not lead to a better life, what does? The logic of the basic structure of meaning (as revealed by the procedures of the semiotic square; see Jameson 2009, 402) would now offer several possible developments to the initial opposition, which Vynnychenko formulates in political terms: (a) 'monarchism vs. capitalism', where a version of democratic monarchy re-emerges as a more desirable, more noble and morally robust form of power in comparison to the brutality of capitalist accumulation and the logic of profit for the sake of more profit without any principles. But this opposition also figures in the novel as (b) 'liberalism vs. feudalism', with the frail and theatrical aristocratic nobility getting satirized for their failure to side with the new forces of history. The opposition of (c) 'socialism vs. capitalism' for Vynnychenko already presents itself as outdated, with socialism

¹⁵ This resonates with the idea of "congenial work" («сродна праця») by the Ukrainian 18-th C philosopher Hyrhorii Skovoroda.

having turned into a legitimate 'opposition party' within a liberal-capitalist government, to which *The Sun Machine* offers a utopian-speculative solution of 'sontseism vs. socialism', where a 'sontseism', or 'sun-ism' in translation, is Vynnychenko's neologism for a pacifist reconfiguration of the communist cause.

Sontseism as a quasi-anarchic world revolution but without violence, a radical and all-encompassing grass-roots movement motivated by love. Here the potential derogatory accusations of being a utopian lurk between the lines (Biletskyi, e.g., accused Vynnychenko of "naivete in the set-up and resolution of the social problem", 131). But such is the quality of all utopias: once actualized, verbalized, put into concrete representational terms, they become dull, naïve, they disintegrate. And yet, 'sontseism' offers itself as a double negation of the available terms of the initial opposition, capitalist exploitation or socialist stagnation — "a desperate (and impossible) final attempt to eradicate the contradictions of the system by some extreme gesture" (Jameson 2009, 402). It is fitting to conclude with Vynnychenko's diary entry, ten years after the publication of *The Sun Machine*, which turned out to be less a work of fiction but a starting argument in Vynnychenko's life-long utopian programme:

I hope that my prediction about the victory of *The Solar Machine*, that is, nature, labour, science, and freedom in the life of human society, is justified sooner and on such a scale. I wish a "solarist", or preferably concordist Republic of Earth comes sooner, for this would have great importance! I can predict with absolute confidence that this will come true one day. The only question is how soon? Shall we live to see the realization of my prophecy? What stages will it take to fight for *The Solar Machine* and for sunism? How many epochs? What will be sacrificed on its altar? What "shadows of the past" will be the most durable, fierce, and bloody in this great and final struggle, indeed the final one? (Vynnychenko, *Diary*, 1938, trans. by Mykola Soroka, qtd. in Soroka 2012, 97)

Conclusion: Un-noveling literary theory

A cursory look at the texts and at the genre debates of the beginning of the 20th century that I have offered in this article reveals how utopia comes forward as a genre working in parallel with the novel, productively illuminating the latter's boundaries – as well as biases of literary criticism and theory – in the process. Utopian and alternative or parallel to it polemical-satirical traditions of the Eastern-European semi-periphery during the revolutionary struggles and the emergence of new state formations of the early 1900s cannot be easily

read within the long world-literary history of the novel – nor are they even visible,¹⁶ for various reasons, from the contemporary vantage point of the world-literary theory. Philip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro have identified a similar problem in the context of Early American Studies: “Before 1820, the novel was still in flux, formally speaking, and coexisted with a host of alternative forms of expression. Yet once the novel became dominant, it became so dominant that it tended to obscure or efface the prior existence of these other forms as contemporaneous competitors” (Barnard & Shapiro 2022, 552). With this contribution, I join Barnard’s and Shapiro’s call for “un-noveling” our approaches to the study of individual authors and traditions as well as literary theory more generally.

In conclusion, I would like to stress: establishing the one and only ‘correct’ genre designation for a literary work, especially such a mix of genres as *The Sun Machine*, has not been my goal and in itself this is not a very useful exercise. My larger aim has been to draw attention to the genre preconceptions that literary theory and criticism bring to literary work, which then determine its analysis, evaluation or judgement and a subsequent inclusion into canon. A comprehensive theory of the world-literary system should be able to account *on their own terms* for the literary traditions and epochs outside the trajectory of the initial rise to prominence and spread of the novel. A comprehensive theory of a literary system should also be able to hold in view residual and emergent genres (if any) at specific points in history in specific literary traditions and regions. Finally, a comprehensive theory of a literary system would be world-systemic, multiscalar and open to what Divya Dwivedi has recently described as homologues and polynomia operating in the field of literature and literary theory: phenomena that have “multiple common origins rather than a single theological or hypophysical origin” (2024, 313) and constructions that “enter into new regularities or are legislated into more than one regularity” (316). At the same time, while the novel seems to pose a hindrance to such a project of literary theory today, I have suggested that the structure and operation of binary opposition (especially as elaborated by Fredric Jameson), understood in properly semiotic terms, continue to offer a productive interpretative method for literary theory, and, in particular, for those literary and aesthetic artefacts that are semantically and artistically multidirectional, like utopias.

¹⁶ Here I echo Divya Dwivedi’s discussion of the problems of decolonization and de-canonisation of literary theory – with theory understood as “the discourse of the principles of selection, criticism, and interpretation, or theory as *seeing*” (2024, 312).

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REALISM WITHOUT FILLERS: LIFE WRITING AND LITERARY FORM IN RADU COSAȘU'S *SUPRAVIEȚUIRI*

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ABSTRACT. *Realism without Fillers: Life Writing and Literary Form in Radu Cosașu's Supraviețuiri.* Radu Cosașu entered Romanian literary history as a somewhat minor writer who published an incredible series of short stories titled *Supraviețuiri* [*Survivals*] (1973-1989), which combined were read as a big novel on the theme of living in the communist regime. Moreover, his volumes of short stories are still considered to this day (maybe) the most representative piece of literature on the topic of the 'haunting decade'. My aim is to look at the way realism is constructed in these texts, and, at the same time, to read Radu Cosașu's *Supraviețuiri* applying the concept of 'life writing' and adding to this the theoretical methods promoted by literary sociology. Given the fact that literary and non-literary texts both could serve as documents for the social and political context, also having the quality of literariness embedded, the analysis of these texts could be much more fertile, all relating to what Margaret Cohen called "literature as social practice". This approach not only offers a novel perspective on the construction of realism in *Supraviețuiri* through the means of composing and assembling but also contributes to a deeper understanding of collective memory formation regarding communism in Romanian literature.

Keywords: *Radu Cosașu, short story, realism, Life Writing, literature, sociology of literature, novel.*

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REZUMAT. *Realism fără fillere: life writing și formă literară în Supraviețuirile lui Radu Cosașu.* Radu Cosașu a rămas în istoria literară românească drept un scriitor oarecum minor care a publicat o serie incredibilă de nuvele intitulate *Supraviețuiri* (1973-1989), care puse laolaltă ar putea fi citite ca un mare roman pe tema trăirii în timpul regimului comunist. Mai mult, volumele sale de povestiri scurte sunt considerate până în ziua de astăzi unele dintre cele mai reprezentative piese ale literaturii pe tema „obsedantului deceniu”. Scopul lucrării de față este analizarea modului în care este construit realismul în aceste texte și, în același timp, realizarea unei lecturi a *Supraviețuirilor* lui Radu Cosașu în grila teoretică a „life writing”-ului, adăugând la aceasta metode teoretice specifice sociologiei literare. Având în vedere că atât scrierile literare, cât și cele nonliterare, ar putea servi drept documente pentru contextul social sau politic al unei perioade, analiza acestor texte s-ar putea dovedi mult mai fertilă dacă am privi-o din perspectiva lui Margaret Cohen, care vedea „literatura ca practică socială”. Această abordare ar putea să ofere atât o perspectivă nouă cu privire la modurile de construcție a realismului *Supraviețuirilor* (prin metode de compunere și asamblare formală), cât și o înțelegere mai profundă a modului în care se formează memoria colectivă în literatura română din timpul comunismului.

Cuvinte-cheie: Radu Cosașu, povestire scurtă, realism, life writing, literatură, sociologia literaturii, roman.

Radu Cosașu was a prolific Romanian writer who entered Romanian literary history as a somewhat ‘minor’ writer who published a series of short stories *Supraviețuiri*² [*Survivals*] which were considered by many critics his best work and one of the best texts on the theme of living in the communist regime in the ‘haunting decade’ (Crohmălniceanu, 1989, 145). I used the term ‘minor’ writer in quotation marks because the attribute is not entirely valid, but neither can we speak of him as a canonical writer in the academic sense. Although he has benefited from a good number of republished works – especially after the 1990s – Radu Cosașu has not managed to gain recognition in the broader Romanian cultural mainstream exclusively for his literary work, but also through his journalism – the term is used in a broad sense and includes his work in the field of film criticism, sports commentary, and essays. Furthermore, Radu

² Originally published: Cosașu, Radu. 1973-1989. *Supraviețuiri* [*Survivals*], 6 volumes, Bucharest: Cartea Românească. Reordered and republished: Cosașu, Radu. 2011. *Opere* [*Works*], vol. 4: *Supraviețuirile* [*Survivals*]: 1. *Rămășițele mic-burgheze* [*The Remains of the Petit Bourgeoisie*], 2. *Armata mea de cavalerie* [*My Cavalry Army*]. Prefaced by Paul Cernat. Iași: Polirom. Cosașu, Radu. 2013. *Opere* [*Works*], vol. 5: *Supraviețuirile* [*Survivals*]: 3. *Logica* [*The Logic*]. Iași: Polirom. Cosașu, Radu. 2014. *Opere* [*Works*], vol. 6: *Supraviețuirile* [*Survivals*]: 4. *Pe vremea când nu mă gîndeam la moarte* [*Back When I Didn't Think About Dying*], 5. *Gărgăunii* [*The European Hornets*]. Iași: Polirom.

Cosașu's position on the periphery of the canon can also be observed in Romanian literary histories and dictionaries³. Most often, the writer is presented as a complex character with a commendable body of work, but most literary critics do not discuss volumes other than the cycle of stories entitled *Supraviețuiri* [*Survivals*] in any depth, and the most common model of interpretation is aesthetic and thematic – these being the most widespread and representative interpretative models of the moment, which led the literary critic Alex Goldiș to call this attitude the 'fetish' of aesthetic autonomy (Goldiș 2015, 590). Born into a petit bourgeoisie Jewish family in 1930, Radu Cosașu debuted in 1952 with a volume of reportage entitled *Servim Republica Populară Română* [*Serving the Romanian People's Republic*] – a text 'on the line', modelled after the ideology of socialist realism. His biographical trajectory is interesting to say the least, given that the writer renounces his social status and petit bourgeoisie upbringing in order to become a communist party activist, and shortly after his active involvement in the 'revolution' that was taking place he was penalized by the very institution he was staking his life on for a lecture that was misperceived and negatively received as a theory of 'integral truth' in literature (Cordoș 2012, 58-61). These topics – and many others – are presented and analysed in the short story cycle *Supraviețuiri*, which is also the central element of analysis of this paper. I intend to address two issues. On the one hand, I want to borrow some conceptual elements from the sphere of life writing and apply them to Radu Cosașu's short story cycle. On the other hand, I intend to analyse the difference or the novelty that Radu Cosașu's text brings to the Romanian literature of that time, using theories related to both formalism and realism.

***Supraviețuiri* as (almost) life writing**

The first discussion point of the present approach is the motivation for the choice of the phrase 'life writing'. First, the option for this concept is explained by Marlene Kadar's introductory statement from *Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice*: "Life writing has always been a more inclusive term,

³ See Manolescu, Nicolae. 2008. *Istoria critică a literaturii române. 5 secole de literatură* [A Critical History of Romanian Literature. Five Centuries of Literature]. Pitești: Paralela 45: 1114-1119. Ștefănescu, Alexandru. 2005. *Istoria literaturii române contemporane: 1941-2000* [History of Contemporary Romanian Literature: 1941-2000]. Bucharest: Mașina de scris: 354-356. Simion, Eugen (ed.). 2004. *Dicționarul general al literaturii române* [General Dictionary of Romanian Literature], volume 2: C-D. Bucharest: Univers Enciclopedic: 393-395. Simion, Eugen (ed.). 2016. *Dicționarul general al literaturii române* [General Dictionary of Romanian Literature], volume 2: C. Coordinated and revisioned by Gabriela Dantîș, Gabriela Drăgoi, Laurențiu Hanganu, ..., second edition. Bucharest: Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române: 650-654. Zăciu, Mircea, Papahagi, Marian, Sasu, Aurel (eds.). 1994. *Dicționarul scriitorilor români* [Dictionary of Romanian Writers], volume I: A-C. Bucharest: Editura Fundației Culturale Române: 666-670.

and as such may be considered to have certain critical advantages over 'biography' and 'autobiography'." (Kadar 1992, 4) But how does the concept manage to be more inclusive? The definition of the concept offered by the same Marlene Kadar gives a more general meaning to writing about the self than the classical theory of autobiography does:

Life writing comprises texts that are written by an author who does not continuously write about someone else, and who also does not pretend to be absent from the [black, brown, or white] text himself/herself. Life writing is a way of seeing, to use John Berger's famous phrase; it anticipates the reader's determination on the text, the reader's colour, class, and gender, and pleasure in an imperfect and always evolving hermeneutic – classical, traditional, or postmodern. (Kadar 1992, 10)

At the same time, the description of the concept broadens the range of textual categories/types that can be categorized as 'life writing', but it also indicates the relationship with the reader and anticipates the critical perspective:

Life writing as a critical practice, then, encourages (a) the reader to develop and foster his/her own self-consciousness in order to (b) humanize and make less abstract (which is not to say less mysterious) the self-in-the-writing. Thus, there are many forms, or genres, in which a reader may glean this written self, but we usually think immediately of autobiography, letters, diaries, and anthropological life narratives, genres in which the conventional expectation is that the author does not want to pretend he/she is absent from the text. (12)

Up to this point, I am interested in borrowing the concept because it allows for a different typological framing of *Supraviețuiri* – it is no longer a short story with a biographical core but becomes a life writing about life in the communist regime. Moreover, as David McCooey points out in *The Limits of Life Writing*, life writing brings in the following additional elements in terms of critical discourse: minority discourse, the critique of the human subject, and the reconfiguration of the subject (McCooey 2017, 277). This fact becomes relevant in the case of Radu Cosașu's writings, because in *Supraviețuiri* we have a situation of a somewhat double marginalized individual. Although it is the story of a white, heterosexual man, brought up in a family with a stable economic condition, the text of *Supraviețuiri* presents the life of an individual marginalized through identity. On the one hand, it is the marginalization 'by default' that young Oscar Rohrllich experiences because he is born into a Jewish family and bears a Jewish name:

Naturally, this 'Rohrlich Oscar' became in a single day: Rolling, Roli, Rolih, Rori, Roric, Rolic, Rolrih, especially Rolrih, and this for years, from the first grade of primary school, at Școala Tancului, when in the catalog, after him, followed, like an oasis of peace and serenity, the laureate Ruptureanu Teodor; since this Rohrlich Oscar had recorded the secret and substantial difference with which the teacher, reading the catalog, pronounced the two consecutive names, I realized that something would not be in order in the life of this little boy, otherwise normally developed, well cared for in his petit-bourgeois home, with his accountant father and housewife mother [...].⁴ (Cosașu 2011, 23)

At the same time, having the socio-economic status of the petit bourgeoisie, the protagonist lives in constant tension with the activist community of the communist era, a community of which the protagonist wanted to be part of:

He left me in the doorway, rummaged under a bed, put something in his coat pocket – I had the impression it was a revolver – and, on the way back to town, finally told me that 'your petit-bourgeois fear stinks worse than my room... I can't breathe when I see you shit yourselves... ideas can shit, too, from fear. At least learn to breathe some ideas in and breathe them out'.⁵ (45)

On the other hand, once involved in party activities, the young man – who, in the meantime, will assume the identity of Radu Cosașu – becomes marginalized from his family environment because of his choice to become a party activist and to deny his socio-economic origins:

From tomorrow you will leave our house, my house. I will admit anything in the name of revolution, because I am aware of its limiting character, but I will not admit the breaking of the laws of common sense. If this is the beginning of your revolution, do it without my assent. Rely on my contempt

⁴ "Firește, acest «Rohrlich Oscar» devenea într-o singură zi: Rolling, Roli, Rolih, Rori, Roric, Rolic, Rolrih, mai ales Rolrih, și asta de ani de zile, din prima clasă primară, la Școala Tancului, când la catalog, după el, urma, ca o oază de liniște și senin, premiul Ruptureanu Teodor; de când acest Rohrlich Oscar înregistrase secretele și substanțiala diferență cu care profesorul, citind catalogul, rostea cele două nume consecutive, îmi dădusem seama că ceva nu va fi în ordine în viața acestui băiețel, altfel normal dezvoltat, bine îngrijit în casa sa mic-burgheză, cu tată contabil și mamă casnică [...]" Cosașu 2011, 23.

Note: All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

⁵ "M-a lăsat în prag, a cotrobăit parcă sub un pat, și-a pus ceva în buzunarul hainei – am avut impresia că era un revolver – și, pe drumul de întoarcere în oraș, mi-a spus, în sfârșit, că «frica voastră mic-burgheză putea mai rău decât camera mea... Eu nu pot să respir când vă văd cum vă căcați pe voi... ideile se pot căca, și ele, de frică. Învăță-te măcar să tragi unele idei în piept și altele să le respiri pe gură»" (Cosașu 2011, 45).

and protest. That which proceeds in defiance of common sense is doomed to perdition, do you understand me, comrade Benjamin and esteemed comrade? You understand?⁶ (Cosașu 2013, 106)

We can see, therefore, that applying the concept of life writing to Radu Cosașu's *Supraviețuiri* would not necessarily be entirely appropriate – which is why I want to 'borrow' elements from life-writing theory and not to adopt them entirely –, but we can also see that there are common elements that could serve to eventually extend the theoretical perspective on this type of texts.

Another topic debated in the theory of life writing that has had and may still have echoes in the analysis of Radu Cosașu's texts is the idea of fictionalization. What is the difference between novels and life writing? As Evelyn J. Hinz points out, one of the fundamental differences is the articulation of mimesis:

More important than the fact that auto/biography and prose fiction have narrative in common, therefore, is the fact that they differ radically in the area of mimesis. And the importance of a dramatic analogy is that it enables one to recognize the historical/referential component of auto/biography while still arguing for its artistry, whereas the use of a novelistic model leads to the nihilistic cul-de-sac of denying the reality and the humanity of the individual and of arguing that existence itself is 'ultimately fiction' (as Petrie titles his study of biography). (Hinz in Kadar 1992, 199)

On the same topic, but with a different approach, Max Saunders addresses the dynamics between the autobiographical mode and the fictionalization of the self in his work *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiography, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (2010), drawing on post-structuralist theories. Based on Linda Anderson's statement that "the autobiographical self is a fictional construct within the text, which can neither have its origins anterior to the text, nor indeed coalesce with its creator" (Anderson 1986, 59), Saunders comes to the following conclusion:

To say an autobiographical text is a fictional construct is one thing. To say an autobiographical self is a fictional construct is almost something else. At least, Anderson's phrasing might imply that an 'autobiographical self' – a self written in an autobiography – is a fictional construct, as opposed to the self doing the writing or the self doing the reading. But taken together

⁶ „de mâine vei părăsi casa noastră, casa mea. Admit orice în numele revoluției, pentru că sînt conștient de caracterul ei limitativ, dar nu admit călcarea legilor bunului-simț. Dacă astfel începe revoluția dumneavoastră, atunci fă-o fără asentimentul meu. Bizuie-te pe disprețul și protestul meu. Ceea ce se desfășoară în pofida bunului-simț e sortit pieirii, mă înțelegeți, tovarășe Beniamin și stimată tovarășă? Mă înțelegeți?” (Cosașu 2013, 106).

with the philosophical position that the self can only be understood narratively, it appears to imply something much more sweeping: namely, that the self is altogether a fictional construct. (Saunders 2010, 509)

Therefore, given the above statements regarding textual fictionalization, we can consider it as an inevitable result of writing about the self. Making the transition from content to form, there is another important element in discussing and differentiating the forms of auto/biographical writing: the 'formal mode', to use Saunders' terms. He identifies four 'fundamental formal modes': (1) 'autobiographical writing'; (2) 'biographical writing'; (3) 'creative/fictional writing'; (4) 'commentary (usually of the Editorial kind)' (212). This taxonomy provides yet another layer of categorization and understanding of the genre, but they may also exist in combination: "The four modes can also be combined in various ways, and with different ratios of each mode." (213) This is important in terms of integrating *Supraviețuiri* into a certain category of writing because, from the very first chapters, the short story cycle presents both an objective narrator, who presents the life of the young Oscar Rohrich, and a subjective narrator who, we later learn, coincides in identity with the protagonist.

Finally, let's consider the relationship between text and social space. Given that in our understanding of life writing implies, to a certain extent at least, a literary dimension, but also a connection to the social sphere (especially thematically, through what has been called the critical perspective), the social dimension of the text becomes a significant element to discuss. Referring to Pierre Bourdieu, Margaret Cohen summarizes the inevitable relationship between the literary text and the social sphere:

Bourdieu offers his account as a challenge to Marxist criticism for the direct correspondence it establishes between social formation and text. If a literary text responds to social conflicts, Bourdieu points out, it is shaped by literary as well as social factors, or rather by social factors that are themselves literary, for it responds within a horizon of literary codes and institutional constraints that confront a writer at a particular literary historical moment. (Cohen 1999, 7)

This relationship is all the more important in the case of life writing because, according to Evelyn J. Hinz, one of the main features of life writing is its emphasis on 'reshaping' reality: "Novels are intertextual, in short, but drama and auto/biography are inherently contextual; [...] In both cases, art is less a matter of imaginative creation and more a matter of imaginative re-creation, less a matter of inventing and more a matter of reshaping." (Hinz in Kadar 1992, 199) Finally, Margaret Cohen's approach on the topic of literary genres emphasizes

another important idea: literature as ‘social practice’. In anticipation of another topic of this paper, I recall the statements on the idea of literature as a social practice, based on Fredric Jameson’s observations on the relationship between genre & social life:

The concept may reveal nothing about textuality, but it reveals much about literature as a social practice, for genre is a social relation, or, as Jameson puts it, a social contract. [...] Attention to genre thus counteracts a vulgar sociology of literature that identifies a text’s social dimension on the level of content as well as complicating the Foucauldian equation of a text’s social significance with its participation in nonliterary discourses. As Jameson observes, the problem of genre ‘has in fact always entertained a privileged relationship with historical materialism,’ mediating between individual works and ‘the evolution of social life.’ (Cohen 1999, 17)

This perspective on literature offers a particular agency to the text, allowing it to go beyond the limits of the literary sphere and to become a possible object of study or point of reference for other fields – a pertinent example in this respect, which can also be functional in the case of Radu Cosașu’s *Supraviețuiri*, can be provided by the approaches that bring literature closer to the historical document, functionalizing it as a kind of vehicle of collective memory⁷. Furthermore, unlike autobiography – where the purpose of the text is to present/reconstruct an individual’s life – or autofiction – where the focus is on exposing biographical elements through a veil of fiction, drawing the reader in through the tension between reality and fiction that is implied but not explicitly stated – which can be seen as limiting concepts, life writing and its contents is a much more transdisciplinary concept. Thus, the tools that can be used in analysis can vary from those specific to literary study to those related to sociology or historiography in a general sense, especially if we consider the social and historical stakes that the historical practice of life writing contains. Thus, life writing can also be understood as a cross-genre, where the form of the genre matters less than its content and significance.

⁷ For further reading, see Confino, Alon. 1997. *Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method*. In *American Historical Review*, no. 5, december, 1386-1403; and Mironescu, Andreea. 2015. *Textul literar și construcția memoriei culturale. Forme ale rememorării în literatura română din postcomunism* [*Literary text and the construction of cultural memory. Forms of Rememory in Post-Communist Romanian Literature*].

On the topic of realism and formalism

Another point of interest for this paper is the opening of a discussion about the formal dimension of texts, with an emphasis on the relationship it establishes with realism. I am interested, in this respect, in understanding formalism as developed by Anna Kornbluh in her work *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space*:

Formalism should study how to compose and to direct – rather than ceaselessly oppose – form, formalization, and forms of sociability. A formalism that professes such constituency might be deemed ‘political formalism’ on account of its willingness to entertain the political imagining that can issue from studying forms, and even more so because its elementary affirmation addresses the formed quality of the political as such. Contrary to the destitute paradigm’s ideal of formlessness, a formalism of the political avouches the constitution and agency of forms, underscoring that life itself essentially depends upon composed relations, institutions, states. (Kornbluh 2019, 4)

As we can see, this is a certain perspective, that of ‘political formalism’. But why opt for the political formalist view? Because, as Kornbluh points out, “political formalism evaluates form’s composedness and form’s agency – the contingent and emergent quality of form’s relationality, the dispensation of interrelation and what relations make possible – and thereby approaches politics and aesthetics from the purview of the constitution of social form, not just destituent dismantling.” (4) This is particularly important for our approach because it unites the intention of formal analysis (which I consider necessary in order to complete the critical overview of *Supraviețuiri*, since they have been evaluated almost exclusively through the lens of aesthetic autonomy) with the social dimension of the text, an element of particular importance both in the theory of life writing and in our vision of literature.

Also, regarding the social dimension that matters, I find the work of Mark Fisher *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* an important contribution – both for the present approach and for the more general updating of the theories that have been used in the discussion of Radu Cosașu’s writings. A first element in Mark Fisher’s approach that is important for shaping our understanding of the idea of realism is the conception of a social construction as ‘realistic’ only if it is naturalized first: “Needless to say, what counts as ‘realistic’, what seems possible at any point in the social field, is defined by a series of political determinations. An ideological position can never be really successful until it is naturalized, and it cannot be naturalized while it is still thought of as a value rather than a fact.” (Fisher 2009, 16) The other fundamental element for shaping

the vision of realism is the understanding of the concept of 'Real' in Lacanian psychoanalysis: "At this point, it is perhaps worth introducing an elementary theoretical distinction from Lacanian psychoanalysis which Žižek has done so much to give contemporary currency: the difference between the Real and reality. As Alenka Zupancic explains, psychoanalysis's positing of a reality *principle* invites us to be suspicious of any reality that presents itself as natural." (17) To deepen the conceptualization of the Real, Mark Fisher notes:

For Lacan, the Real is what any 'reality' must suppress; indeed, reality constitutes itself through just this repression. The Real is an unrepresentable X, a traumatic void that can only be glimpsed in the fractures and inconsistencies in the field of apparent reality. So one strategy against capitalist realism could involve invoking the Real(s) underlying the reality that capitalism presents to us. (18)

It is not just realism that can only try to imitate reality, and not the 'Real', since the 'Real' is a matter of personal perception. Moreover, the fact that the 'Real' is the 'unrepresentable' rest that reality tries to 'suppress' becomes relevant in discussing texts such as Radu Cosașu's *Supraviețuiri*, where the main stake is not to produce a text that can be categorized as realism, but a life writing. Therefore, in parallel with the problem of capitalist realism that Mark Fisher discusses, the option for life writing over the traditional realist formula could become a much more pertinent formula to represent/invoke, at a textual level, the 'Real'.

Returning to the formalist territory, Anna Kornbluh's approach also tackles the problem of articulating realism in relation to form. In shaping her theory, she starts from the statements of theorists such as Georg Lukács, to get to the link between realism and the construction of the social – of course, she uses terms such as 'to build' to continue the architectural metaphor: "Even across the self-described political awakening in the middle of his intellectual career, Georg Lukács consistently understood realism as this productive building of sociality, and he hinged this understanding to figures of architecture." (Kornbluh 2019, 46) Another important element in Anna Kornbluh's definition of realism is the deterministic link of composition, which is made up only of functional elements that have a role: "true realism, as against naturalism, melodrama, or modernism, inheres in the integrality of every aspect of the composition. No effects without causes, no details without events, no individuality without sociality, no agency without determination." (47) Last but not least, Anna Kornbluh's theory could not be complete without considering the perspectives of Fredric Jameson – who, of course, has a Lacanian theoretical foundation, and a perspective to which Mark Fisher's vision can be likened:

And it is finally this antagonistic whole that Jameson admires, for it eloquently bespeaks an “ambition to grapple with the totality of the social itself.” Totality for Jameson means the “properly unrepresentable ensemble of society’s structures as a whole” — the mode of production, the relations of production, ideology, and their negations, the coexistence of other structures, along with the epistemological impossibility of fixing these dynamic negations and relations. (52)

In this case, the main difference with what Mark Fisher was saying, from a Lacanian perspective, is that Fredric Jameson inserts the concept of ‘totality’ and brings the dynamics between understanding reality and the ‘Real’ closer to an understanding of the social structure – which is composed, in Marxist terms, of modes of production, relations of production, ideology, etc. Thus, these points of view allow Anna Kornbluh to reach the following conclusion:

Realism’s integral modelling of social space braces the forms that constitute sociality, enunciating the political formalist truth that there is no world without form. Realism’s enchantment of quotidian worldly forms animates a constructivist marvel for what can be made. Realism encompasses not the world but a world, drafting a structuration of social space that does not reify the extant order of things even though it acknowledges the inevitability that constructed realities take on ontological solidity. (54)

This point of her approach is relevant, as she manages to integrate in a concise fragment the perspective on realism based on the modelling/building of social space, which becomes the fundamental element of analysis for political formalism.

Formal novelty in *Supraviețuiri*

The theoretical picture I have tried to sketch did not directly concern Romanian literature or culture, which is why I think it is time to shift our attention towards the context of Romanian literature of the 20th century. In his recent study entitled *Naratorul cel rău: un studiu despre realismul românesc: Rebreanu, Preda, Dumitriu* [*The Evil Narrator: a Study on Romanian Realism: Rebreanu, Preda, Dumitriu*], C. Rogozanu mentions, speaking about the mutations of genres “from the metropolis of literature to the peripheries”, that the realist novel shifts its centre of gravity from bourgeois to petit bourgeois society: “Established as a bourgeois genre, a product of pure-blooded capitalism, the realist novel in Central and Eastern Europe moves from the bourgeois point of

view towards petit-bourgeois characters. The further east, the more important the petit bourgeoisie becomes in filtering artistic reality.”⁸ (Rogozanu 2024, 33) This shift from the bourgeois to the petit bourgeois position can only be explained by the more general change in socio-economic conditions in the Eastern countries, where the mass of people were (and still are) part of the middle class, which is why the novel also changes its point of view. Further on, C. Rogozanu notes two moments in the evolution of the Eastern realist novel: “The evolution of the Eastern realist novel seems to follow two stages: mimetism and communist rupture.”⁹ (33) This division into phases is relevant for the present approach, since it marks the strong influence of the mimetic attitude in the configuration of realism, the immediately following moment in the development of the novel being that ‘communist rupture’ – which is largely due to the doctrine of socialist realism. As far as the situation of the Romanian cultural space is concerned, the period of socialist realism was overcome during the so-called ‘ideological thaw’, after Nicolae Ceaușescu became the new leader of Romania. At this moment, a new ‘fashion’ was established in the Romanian novel: the ‘haunting decade’ novel. To understand the form of the novel of the ‘haunting decade’ I recall Alex Goldiș’s work entitled “Pentru o morfologie a romanului «obsedantului deceniu»” [“For a Morphology of the ‘Haunting Decade’ Novel”], where the critic realizes the scheme of the novel by indicating the two fundamental elements. On the one hand, there is the relationship that the novel establishes with the historical past: “It is, first and foremost, a constant alternation of planes, between the present and the past – dimensions that are often seen as antagonistic.”¹⁰ (Goldiș 2017, 497) On the other hand, Alex Goldiș considers the construction of the protagonist to be important for the scheme of the novel of ‘the haunting decade’:

The hero is usually a former activist who is re-educating himself in the light of the new precepts of destalinization. When he himself does not initiate an analysis of the dark regime, the central character becomes its object. At the end of the self-analysis – which also means a reassessment of the world from the roots up – we are dealing with a rehabilitation: the hero goes through, almost step by step, the process of ‘un-enlightenment’,

⁸ “Stabilizat ca un gen burghez, produs al capitalismului pur-sânge, romanul realist merge, în Europa Centrală și de Est, de la punctul de vedere burghez înspre personaje-reflector mic-burgheze. Cu cât mai spre Est, cu atât mai importantă devine mica burghezie în filtrarea realității artistice” (Rogozanu 2024, 33).

⁹ “Evoluția romanului realist estic pare să urmeze două etape: mimetism și ruptura comunistă” (Rogozanu 2024, 33).

¹⁰ “Ea pendulează, în primul rând, printr-o permanentă alternare de planuri, între prezent și trecut – dimensiuni privite de multe ori antagonic” (Goldiș 2017, 497).

as opposed to the 'enlightenment' of socialist realist prose: from a fierce communist, ready to sacrifice lives and nuances for the sake of doctrine, he becomes a hesitant, reflective, complex character.¹¹ (497)

This recipe of the novel is also valid for Radu Cosașu's *Supraviețuiri*, because, in the unfolding of the short stories, we meet both a communist party activist protagonist, who recounts his contributions to the revolutionary movement and later comes to self-criticize his actions, and a more subtle (but present) alternation between the youthful past and a period closer to the present. What we are particularly interested in is not the adequacy to the model of the 'haunting decade' novel, but the way in which the distancing from it is realized – which is, in fact, the novelty element that the *Supraviețuiri* brings. More precisely, it is about the formal change that Radu Cosașu's writings involve. This formal change is related to the writer's choice to compose short stories and is telling of the writer's textual relationship with society, as Margaret Cohen also argues: "to use Bourdieu's terms, genre is a position. Genre designates the fact that writers share a common set of codes when they respond to a space of possibilities, a horizon formed by the literary conventions and constraints binding any writer at a particular state of the field." (Cohen 1999, 17) This idea could be extended along the lines of the reception of 'minor', non-canonical genres during Romanian communism as being close or even synonymous with a subversive genre.

Beyond the discussion about the ideological tensions existing in the Romanian literary sphere at the time, Radu Cosașu's choice to realize a novel of the 'haunting decade' in a different genre may become an important point in the evolution of Romanian prose genres. Although Radu Cosașu was not the first Romanian writer to produce such a text, his writings can be categorized into what theory has called 'short story cycles' or 'short story composites'. Victor Cobuz published in 2020 and 2021 a series of articles using the term 'proză compozită' – a Romanian adaptation of 'short story composite' – and its related theory. In the first article of a cycle of three, Victor Cobuz provides a theoretical framework for 'composite prose', referring to several definitions, taxonomies, and a specialized bibliography. In this respect, for a better understanding of the genre I am particularly interested in L. Ingram's definition of this genre: "the

¹¹ "Eroul e de regulă e un fost activist care se reeducă în lumina noilor precepte ale destalinizării. Când nu demarează el însuși o analiză a întunecatului regim, personajul central devine obiect al acesteia. La capătul autoanalizei – care înseamnă însă și o reevaluare a lumii din rădăcini, avem de a face cu o reabilitare: eroul derulează, aproape etapă cu etapă, procesul „dez-lămuririi”, opus „lămuririlor” prozei realist socialiste: din comunist feroce, gata să sacrifice vieți și nuanțe de dragul doctrinei, el devine un personaj ezitant, reflexiv, complex" (Goldiș 2017, 497).

dynamics of the twentieth-century short story cycle require a modification of our initial definition of story cycles. I will define a *short story cycle* as a *book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader's successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts*" (Ingram 1971, 19), and Rolf Lundén's taxonomy from the book *The United Stories of America: Studies in the Short Story Composite* (1999) in which he "proposes four sub-genres: *cycle*, *sequence*, *cluster*, and *novella*."¹² (Cobuz 2020)

The other two articles in the series published by Victor Cobuz deal with the subject of the short story composite applied to various Romanian literary works of the 20th and 21st centuries, texts among which *Supraviețuiri* are also discussed. The critic notes the following: "one of the most powerful volumes about the 'haunting decade' wasn't a novel [...]. The post-Revolution rearrangement brings *Supraviețuiri* even closer to a *sequence*, with a chronological chaining and a coherent main narrative thread."¹³ (Cobuz 2021) His analysis underlines the fact that, in the first edition, the coherence of the stories could not be so easily observed, and this fact has been solved in the second edition, in which the author rearranged the short stories chronologically – an action that resulted, without the author's will, in a kind of trajectory of becoming: "I didn't change them, I didn't bring them up to date, I didn't make them more intelligent, more politically correct; I ordered them according to the eternal and immutable epic law: adolescence, youth, maturity and so on."¹⁴ (Cosașu 2011, 19)

The option for this 'composite' form may have another interesting effect, this time in the sphere of the evolution of Romanian prose. In the chapter 'Serious Century' from the volume *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature*, Franco Moretti discusses the presence of fillers in the structure of narrative and their function, such as their potential to "«reawaken' the everyday, making it feel alive, open" (Moretti 2013, 75). Costi Rogozanu, following Franco Moretti, expands the discussion on fillers to the subject of mutations in the realist novel and notes that: "the mutations of the realist novel are best observed by following the *fillers*, with which the novelist fills the spaces between two intense points in the novel. *Fillers* appear in the nineteenth-century novel, says Moretti, as a natural consequence of the reproduction of bourgeois life, itself made up of

¹² "propune patru subgenuri: *cycle*, *sequence*, *cluster*, and *novella*" (Cobuz, 2020).

¹³ "Unul dintre cele mai puternice volume despre «obsedantul deceniu» nu a fost un roman, ci un volum de proză compozită. Rearanjarea efectuată după Revoluție apropie și mai mult *Supraviețuiri* de un *sequence*, cu o înălțuire cronologică și un fir narativ principal coerent (Cobuz, 2021).

¹⁴ "nu le-am modificat, nu le-am adus la zi, nu le-am făcut mai inteligente, mai juste din punct de vedere politic; le-am ordonat conform eternei și imuabilei legi epice: adolescența, tinerețea, maturitatea ș.a.m.d." (Cosașu 2011, 19).

plenty of dead or unspectacular narrative moments”¹⁵ (Rogozanu 2024, 73-74) and concludes his remarks with the following statement: “these *fillers*, these descriptions of ‘everyday life’, are essential to the realistic novel.”¹⁶ (74) This topic is perhaps quite important to note and discuss in *Supraviețuiri*. Of course, being volumes of short stories, it is almost obvious that the nature of the texts does not permit (or require) the presence of fillers. However, given that critics – both at the time of publication and retrospectively – have also suggested that Radu Cosașu’s *Supraviețuiri* could be seen as a large novel, things could get a bit complicated. If we accept the hypothesis that Radu Cosașu’s writings – although presented as a cycle of short stories, each with a high degree of autonomy – make up a broad novel of the obsessive decade, the absence of fillers could be an interesting element of development of realistic writing. On the one hand, this architecture which does not allow fillers to exist could be explained in terms of an opposition to the traditional form of the novel, understood as the superior genre for the telling of a story of great span. On the other hand, this arrangement in short stories – instead of chapters – could be seen as necessary for a different kind of articulation of textual realism: realism without fillers. Instead of attempting to reproduce or imitate reality – this being the most widespread method – in the case of *Supraviețuiri* the configuration of realism is achieved by shaping the text in a seemingly immediate manner, a kind of immediate recording of reality that is not composed according to aesthetic norms. This way of writing about the past could be related to Walter Benjamin’s perspective on how the past should be recorded: “articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it ‘the way it really was.’ It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger” (Benjamin 2003, 391) and could serve very well in extending the analysis of life writing towards the approach of the text as a vehicle of memory. At the same time, this method of composing a literary text that can be categorized within realism could be seen as a partial solution to the problem of articulating the Lacanian ‘Real’ or Fredric Jameson’s ‘totality’ at the textual level. The text is much closer to reality than those that aim to do so. Although paradoxical, the lack of awareness/consciousness of the conventions of realism – real or staged – but marked as such in the text could serve a more realistic textual product than one that follows the implicit or explicit conventions of realism.

¹⁵ “Cel mai bine se observă mutațiile romanului realist urmărind *filler*-ele, cu ce umple romancierul spațiile dintre două puncte intense din roman. *Filler*-ele apar în romanul secolului al XIX-lea, spune Moretti, ca urmare firească a reproducerii vieții burgheze, la rândul ei formate din destule momente moarte sau nespectaculoase narativ” (Rogozanu 2024, 73-74).

¹⁶ “Aceste *fillers*, aceste descrieri ale «vieții de zi cu zi», sunt esențiale pentru romanul realist” (Rogozanu 2024, 74).

Finally, this shift towards the short story cycle form could also be important for discussing another key element of prose architecture: the character. In the case of the novel, for example, characters are part of the story, they often have a purpose and/or a function – which is usually observable as the action unfolds. In the case of short stories, given the nature of the text, which involves a less complex and shorter narrative thread, things may differ. But what happens in the case of writings such as Radu Cosașu's *Supraviețuiri* where several short stories make up a novel? In this case, I was most interested in the presence – if any – of the so-called ideologist, the ideologist character, since my approach is interested in the relationship with the social dimension (implicitly economic and political). In his analysis of Liviu Rebreanu's novels, C. Rogozanu opens a similar discussion about the 'position of the ideologist' and the necessity of its presence in the text: "Horatio's position in *Hamlet* is the position of the ideologist, writes Moretti, he is a witness, he is not involved in the intrigues of the court, he has only a 'function', not a 'purpose'. [...] A novel limps badly if it does not present a good ideologue for a virtual party, with a virtual ideology to which virtual readers can adhere."¹⁷ (Rogozanu 2024, 78) Searching in Radu Cosașu's texts for a character with such a function, I ran into a problem generated by the structure of the text: as these are short stories with a high degree of autonomy, the characters who take part in the action are rarely present in more than one story. The next target of the analysis was, of course, the character narrator, but here another impediment unfolded: there are stories in which the narrator is objective and talks about Oscar Rohrllich – as is the case with the story with which the first volume of *Supraviețuiri* opens in the second edition – and there are stories in which there is a first person narrator – stories in which critics assume that this narrator has common identity traits with the author. Thus, we cannot establish that there is only one narrator, and therefore we cannot call this one in the position of the ideologist – unless we call all the narrators of the *Supraviețuiri* ideologists, but this could also present itself as a difficult task, since from one story to the next we have no guarantee that the narrator does not change. Thus, one might conclude that Radu Cosașu's *Supraviețuiri* do not have such an ideological character or that the form of the composite prose does not allow the existence of such a character. The present approach does not allow to confirm or refute an idea like the latter, related to the form of composite prose that does not allow such an ideological character. However, we can say that there is no lack of ideological positioning in *Supraviețuiri*. A demonstration that there is a single common narrator in all the stories that

¹⁷ "Poziția lui Horatio în *Hamlet* e poziția ideologului, scrie Moretti, este martor, nu este implicat în intrigile de la curte, el are doar o «funcție», nu un «scop». [...] Un roman șchioapătă grav dacă nu prezintă un ideolog bun pentru un partid virtual, cu o ideologie virtuală la care să adere cititori virtuali" (Rogozanu 2024, 78).

make up *Supraviețuiri* would be possible and perhaps useful in demonstrating the existence of an ideologist character, but it would require an extended close reading across all volumes and is not a functional solution for the present approach. Instead, we can find a solution by starting with Terry Eagleton's statement about elitism: "for elitism, as Nicos Poulantzas has argued, is a structural trait of the petty bourgeoisie." (Eagleton 1978, 14) If we consider intertextual practice as a mark of elitism, we could build a case in favour of discussing *Supraviețuiri* as a result of an elitist, and thus implicitly petit bourgeoisie, posture. One of – if not the most – used textual practice by Radu Cosașu is the intertextual practice. Thus, the construction of texts based on complex intertextual practices – both in terms of titles, character construction and the events narrated – could be read in an ideological analysis as a sign of a petit bourgeoisie posture.

Conclusions

One of the first conclusions of this approach should be articulated around life-writing theories. The present endeavour has shown that approaching some writings received as literary writings with an autobiographical 'core' as such is much more restrictive and limiting than approaching slightly newer theories or theories more appropriate to the content, context, and intention of the text, as is the case with *Supraviețuiri* and the relationship that can be established with the practice of life writing. The second conclusion that I have reached because of this, and which might be a little more relevant for Romanian literary studies, is related to the updating of the critical bibliography in the case of writers such as Radu Cosașu. The case of Radu Cosașu is, I think, not special, being a Romanian writer who has been analysed almost exclusively through the filter of aesthetic autonomy, which has resulted in him being perceived as a minor writer. However, as the present approach has shown, the application of theories that go beyond the aesthetic factor and look more closely at the relationship of the text with the social sphere, at the form of the text, and what it encapsulates or even new perspectives on realism could be a good way to rediscover these writers who have been recognized as minor writers.

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CONTEMPORARY ROMANIAN HISTORICAL FICTION AS A MEDIATING TRANSISTOR OF THE “ZEMIPERIPHERY”

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ABSTRACT. *Contemporary Romanian Historical Fiction as a Mediating Transistor of the “Zemiperiphery”.* Historical fiction, characterized by its ambivalence between political instrumentalization and fidelity to the real referent, emerges as a vector of transnational connectivity, translating (semi)peripheral narrative scenarios into the language of the global core. In the post-1990 Romanian context, this dynamic acquires particular salience through the lens of “zemiperiphery”, which, as Stephen Shapiro contends, operates as a “transistor” (2024, 54) amplifying the subaltern voice, otherwise inaudible to the core without its mediation. Post-1990 Romanian historical fiction, through its recourse to universal historical themes – emblematic figures, conflicts, and conquests – functions as a neohermetic channel (Braga 1995) of transculturation, liberating historical discourse from past ideological constraints and integrating it into the global networks of the publishing market. This process, underpinned

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by an aesthetics of “hyperconnectivity” (Deckard, Niblett & Shapiro 2024), enables the Romanian *zemiperiphery* to negotiate tensions between the local and the global, generating a hybrid cultural memory. By transgressing national boundaries and recontextualizing narrative, Romanian historical fiction constitutes a node of cultural flow, asserting a dynamic identity in dialogue with transnational networks. The theoretical framework is applied to a diverse range of historical fictions, selected for their distinct conceptual approaches and narrative strategies. These works exemplify different ways in which authors such as Răzvan Rădulescu, Constantin Țoiu, Doina Ruști, Constanța Vintilă-Ghițulescu, Filip Florian, and Octavian Soviany interpret and reimagine history.

Keywords: *historical fiction, metafiction, zemiperiphery, model.*

REZUMAT. Ficțiunea istorică românească contemporană ca un transmițător mediator al „zemiperiferiei”. Ficțiunea istorică, marcată de ambivalența între instrumentalizarea politică și fidelitatea față de referentul real, se afirmă ca un vector de conectivitate transnațională, traducând scenariile narative (semi)periferice în limbajul centrului global. În contextul românesc post-1990, această dinamică capătă o relevanță aparte prin prisma „zemiperiferiei”, care, conform lui Stephen Shapiro, funcționează ca un „tranzistor” (2024, 54) ce amplifică vocea subalternului, invizibilă centrului fără medierea sa. Ficțiunea istorică românească post-1990, prin recursul la teme istorice universale – figuri emblematice, conflicte și cuceriri –, devine un canal „neohermetic” (Braga 1995) de transculturare, eliberând discursul istoric de constrângerile ideologice ale trecutului și integrându-l în rețelele globale ale pieței editoriale. Acest proces, susținut de o estetică a „hiperconectivității” (Deckard, Niblett & Shapiro 2024), permite „zemiperiferiei” românești să negocieze tensiunile dintre local și global, generând o memorie culturală hibridă. Prin transgresarea frontierelor naționale și recontextualizarea narativă, ficțiunea istorică românească se constituie ca un nod de flux cultural, afirmând o identitate dinamică în dialog cu rețelele transnaționale. Cadrul teoretic este aplicat unui spectru divers de ficțiuni istorice, selectate pentru abordările lor conceptuale distincte și strategiile narative. Aceste opere exemplifică diferite moduri în care autori precum Răzvan Rădulescu, Constantin Țoiu, Doina Ruști, Constanța Vintilă-Ghițulescu, Filip Florian și Octavian Soviany interpretează și reimaginază istoria.

Cuvinte-cheie: *proza istorică, metaficțiune, zemiperiferie, model.*

Conceptual Delimitations of Historical Fiction

Defining “historical fiction” entails a dual orientation: first, it involves the deployment of historical themes within literary texts, manifesting through multifaceted perspectives, whether by projecting narratives into distant or proximate epochs, employing characters grounded in documentary sources, or

engaging in fictionalizations and reinterpretations in the service of literary imagination. Additionally, a crucial distinction must be established from the outset between "historical fiction" and the "historical novel." As Alexander Manshel explains, "historical fiction" encompasses "a broad continuum of fictionalizations of the historical past," while the second "describes a specific sector of that continuum occupied by narratives primarily concerned with world historical figures and events, and that take place anywhere between one generation and several centuries before their publication" (2023, 12). Undoubtedly, György Lukács's theory in *The Historical Novel* remains a foundational touchstone for analyzing the historical novel, identifying a paradox exemplified in Flaubert's work: "The proud and bitter paradox which contends that the novel has nothing at all to do with the present, is simply a defensive paradox contending against the trivialities of his age" (1962, 189). The historical novel, therefore, is not merely a recreation of the past but a dialogic engagement with the present, serving as a lens through which contemporary dilemmas are interrogated, thus affirming literature's utilitarian function in shaping a coherent social vision. In Lukács's view, the historical novel functions as a lens for addressing contemporary issues, ordering a social vision through the reimagination of history, inherently embodies this mediatory role.

Universality without mediation is necessarily abstract. We could observe this abstraction in Erckmann-Chatrion though they kept strictly to an exact rendering of immediate reality. Their exclusion of historical determinants (mediations), which in the everyday life: average person are not, as a rule, readily perceptible, but which interacting in their totality with immediate everyday existence form the concrete, essential features of an historical situation, transformed naturalist authenticity into abstraction (215).

Contrary to Georg Lukács's assertion (1969) that realism is the sole mode capable of representing distant lives and experiences in historical fiction, we will demonstrate the limitations of such a prescriptive view. Lukács's framework assumes a direct correspondence between representation and historical reality, prioritizing a dispassionate, historian-like accuracy that disregards the affective and subjective responses elicited in readers. By integrating innovative techniques such as stream-of-consciousness and nonlinear storytelling, the authors that I will use for demonstration craft complex fictional worlds that resonate with readers through emotional depth and cultural interplay, challenging Lukács's notion that realism alone can capture the essence of the past. This affective dimension, as highlighted by Kate Mitchell and Nicola Parsons in *Reading the Represented Past: History and Fiction from 1700 to the Present*, underscores the capacity of historical fiction to evoke diverse, passionate responses, positioning it as a dynamic medium that transcends the rigid boundaries of historical verisimilitude advocated by Lukács.

We observe, as Anne H. Stevens elucidates in *Learning to Read the Past in the Early Historical Novel*, that historical fiction engenders a dialogic interplay between past and present, as well as between central and peripheral zones, by aligning congruences discerned by the universal reader: “Reading the represented past involves a new set of processes, including drawing parallels between the past and the present, reading history as a veil for contemporary scandal, and comprehending historically probable yet invented characters and situations” (Stevens 2013, 21). History and fiction do not merely converge in relations of proximity or distance but are structured through complex, often asymmetrical, dynamics of “distance” and closeness, constituting a “topography” of temporality. The temporal topography of historical fiction can be understood as a symbolic articulation of peripheral positions relative to a global historical core. Within this framework, certain events, moments, or perspectives are selectively receded or distanced, while others are foregrounded or amplified, shaped by the interplay of cultural, political, and social contexts. Consequently, historical fiction functions as a cartography of multiple temporal spirals, characterized by non-linear and uneven lines of distance and proximity. These configurations reflect disparities in power, access to historical memory, and cultural representation, offering a nuanced portrayal of how narratives negotiate the complexities of time and historical experience. Thus, Hamish Dalley notes that one may conceptualize a topography constructed upon layered temporalities:

Historical novels possess ‘temporal systems’ – multiple overlapping constructions of time organised into a more or less coherent order – that are a major part of the text’s symbolic structure. Rather than as an equation in which fiction equals proximity and history equals distance, we need to understand temporality as a kind of topography in which historical novels are structured by uneven relations of distance (Dalley 2013, 34).

In a footnote to a chapter discussing historical fiction, Mircea Muthu, citing Máté Gábor elucidates the role of literature in Central and Southeast Europe in shaping Lukács’s theory: “There is, however, the opinion that Lukács wrote *The Historical Novel* (1936–1937) with the historical novel of Central and Southeast Europe in mind. Cf. Máté Gábor, *Filozófia és regény (Philosophy and the Novel)*, Scientific and Encyclopedic Publishing, Bucharest, 1982” (Muthu 324). A model derived from the Central and Southeast European space serves to better understand authors of historical fiction from these regions. These theories intersect with Shapiro’s proposition, which discusses the use of the transistor areas as a mediating device to facilitate the exchange of cultural information between different fields. Muthu further notes and develops his theory on the idea that “the dialogue and confrontation between East and West is the other,

defining axis for the historical novel of the Southeast" (Muthu 327), to which he adds a synthesis of its three constitutive concepts: opposition, synthesis, and complementarity (Muthu 353).

The second element transfigured, sustained, and reinterpreted in post-1990 Romanian historical fiction is what Linda Hutcheon terms "historiographic metafiction" in her seminal study *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988). We reproduce here her clarification, noting the orthography employed by the author, which elucidates, to a certain extent, the relationship between historical fiction and historiographic metafiction: „Historiographic metafiction incorporates all three of these domains: that is, its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (*historiographic metafiction*) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past". (Hutcheon 5) and „In problematizing almost everything the historical novel once took for granted, historiographic metafiction destabilizes received notions of both history and fiction". (Hutcheon 113). Historiographic metafiction transgresses the boundary between fiction and history, radicalizing the hybridization already present in the traditional historical novel. It is neither merely self-reflexive nor a simple variant of the historical or nonfictional novel. While historical fiction presents history as a real, objective, formative force, historiographic metafiction contests and destabilizes the boundaries between fiction and history, acknowledging the ideological implications of any representation of the past. History is politicized and self-reflexive. Concurrently, another distinction lies in the fact that historical fiction may perceive the past as distinct or sharing values with the present, whereas historiographic metafiction is paradoxical: it depends on what it contests, politicizing historical realities through metafictional "games" without trivializing them, questioning authority, and challenging conventions. Traditional historical fiction treats history as a stable, formative reality, whereas historiographic metafiction deconstructs it, rendering it part of an ideological and self-conscious discourse. As a precursor genre, historical fiction sets the stage, while historiographic metafiction represents a postmodern evolution that radicalizes its inherent hybridization. Historiographic metafiction is not "merely another version of the historical novel" but a form that undermines its conventions, layering self-reflexivity and ideological contestation. Hayden White (1978) introduces the notion that historical representations bear ideological implications, paving the way for postmodern contestation. From the "metanarratives" discussed by Jean-François Lyotard to the „metafiction" proposed by Patricia Waugh, it becomes evident that, succinctly put, historiographic metafiction constitutes an evolutionary branch of historical fiction, a positioning shaped by the proliferation of postmodernism.

In this context, we also observe that the Romanian literary space has experienced a distinctive inflection of the definition of historiographic metafiction as proposed by Linda Hutcheon. We also underline this component related to the contestation of history, involving the “rethinking and reworking” of the past. Mihaela Ursa notes, in a chapter from the *Enciclopedia imaginariilor din România* titled “Textualism, Postmodernism,” that “the narrative perspective on literary theory and criticism first infuses the work of certain neomodernist prose writers and critics (the Târgoviște School, onirism) to constitute a true semantic basin in Romanian postmodernism” (Ursa 2020, 364), identifying three critical stances in defining Romanian postmodernism: the first, as a “revolutionary hue of rupture from modernism” in Liviu Petrescu and Monica Spiridon; the second, as an “extension of modernism” in Nicolae Manolescu and Ioana Em. Petrescu; or the third, which views it as “a simple cultural operator” in the definitions of Mircea Martin or Alexandru Mușina. From the same perspective, Gheorghe Glodeanu remarks on the inconsistency of the concept and its non-functionality in Romanian literature. Particularly eloquent for our demonstration is the dissociation made by Corin Braga in his article from “Caietele Echinox,” which explains the fabric emerging from the analysis of the postmodern moment. For Braga, postmodernism has “two slopes: one poststructuralist, through which modernity reaches its ultimate consequences and a dissolution ‘from within,’ and another neohermetic, prefiguring the ‘full’ period to follow, barely glimpsed today” (1995). This “neohermetic” component seems essential to us in defining post-1990 historical prose. From the theoretical trajectory sketched, we conclude that Romanian historical fiction has held a distinct status compared to other European spaces, an aspect which, in my view, is linked to the semiperipheral position of the geographical area under discussion. We thus observe that the attempts at framing, categorization, delimitation, and construction of a new paradigm lead to the formation of a writing formula whose boundaries are permeable, interchangeable, and characterized by multiple relations: “Diverse in form and focus as twentieth- and twenty- first- century historical fiction has become, it seems less accurate to describe it as a single, monolithic genre than as a kind of contemporary literary mode, a more capacious term that unites multiple and increasingly porous genres of historical narratives while acknowledging their shared aesthetic, political, and pedagogical projects” (2023, 17) as Manshel observes. Contemporary American historical fiction and post-1990 Romanian historical fiction, though anchored in distinct geopolitical contexts, share common traits in recontextualizing collective memory; however, they diverge according to their positions within the world system: American fiction operates from the

global core, amplifying marginalized voices from within, while Romanian fiction, from the "zemiperiphery," mediates between local peripheries and the global core, in accordance with Shapiro's "transistor" model (2014).

Historical Fiction as the "Transistor" of the "Zemiperiphery"

It is imperative to provide further clarification regarding the (semi)peripheral status of the Romanian cultural space and the role of the "zemiperiphery" as a concept that elucidates the function of historical fiction. Stephen Shapiro associates "zemiperipheries," such as the Romanian space, with a transistor-like zone that mediates and translates "the culture and commodities" (Shapiro 2023, 49) between center and periphery. This underscores the valorization of these buffer-like cultural spaces, which nonetheless encompass a coherent ensemble of intersections, generating, through historical fiction, a response to dynamics within the global book market.

Discussions of a "historical turn" frame it as a form of literary salvation: "One way of understanding literary fiction's turn toward the historical past and the self-evident cultural significance that that past connotes is to say that, amid the ongoing assault on literary fiction's relevance to culture, falling back into history is to some extent a retreat to higher ground" (Manshel 2023, 17). An analysis of contemporary American literature reveals the persistence of postmodernist hallmarks, coalescing around anachronism, metafiction, and fabulation, yet concurrently a shift in focus not toward contestation but toward a "revisitation" of history – a phenomenon also evident in Romanian literature. The latter's case is tethered to its geographical positioning as a (semi)peripheral zone. Romanian historical prose has served as a mediator between central and peripheral literatures/cultures, operating as a transistor-like "coil of wire" in the transmission of ideas, thereby delineating a functional model for world literature, characterized as a "contemporary literary mode" (Manshel 2023, 12) and, concurrently, a "neohermetic" literature (Braga 1995, 22) that draws its vitality from "historiographic metafiction."

In the perspective of the Warwick group, the semiperiphery is conceptualized as a structural zone within the world-system, mediating between core and periphery, with economies and social structures that blend characteristics of the core (industrialization, urbanization) and the periphery (economic dependency, inequalities). These zones serve as a "buffer" in the global economy, facilitating flows of capital and labor between core and periphery. Shapiro emphasizes the concept of "combined and uneven development," wherein the semiperiphery simultaneously experiences modernization and

underdevelopment. For instance, a semiperipheral country may boast advanced industries while remaining reliant on raw material exports or cheap labor. This framework explores how literature, and by extension culture, in semiperipheral regions reflects this ambiguous position, articulating tensions between modernity and marginalization, globalization and local identity. For example, fiction from semiperipheral countries may thematize conflicts between global influences and local traditions. In this sense, literatures from these spaces can combine global aesthetics (such as modernism or postmodernism) with local themes (such as communist memory, local historical narratives, or rurality). The “zemiperiphery” is not merely a passive conduit between core and periphery but an active zone of “calibration” that facilitates interactions between the economies and cultures of the core and periphery. It “translates” and monetizes flows of commodities and people, forging new social and cultural relations. This process generates novel literary and cultural compounds through the interplay of conceptual chains and cultural flows.

The concept of “semiperiphery,” originating in Wallerstein’s theory, centers on economic dimensions, whereas Shapiro’s “zemiperiphery” identifies a function of cultural and political mediation, with literature and culture reflecting tensions between the global and the local, modernity and marginalization. The “zemiperiphery” generates novel forms of cultural representation through the collision of the periphery’s “trauma” (violence and coercion) with the core’s “speculative entrepreneurship.”

Yet the zemiperipheries are not only zones that react to pressures between the core and periphery, they are also the spheres that are highly productive of new social and cultural phenomena that often occur in advance of either the core or the periphery. These are the locations where political economy receives its greatest cultural inflection and amplification, the semiperipheries are the sites where the experience of trauma by peripheral peoples and the speculative entrepreneurship of the core collide to produce new forms of representation, especially as it receives both the oral, folk beliefs of the periphery and the core’s printed matter and institutionally consecrated notations, objects, and behavioral performances (Shapiro 2023, 49)

These regions amalgamate diverse cultural influences, such as the oral beliefs and folklore of the periphery and the narrative formulas or cultural institutions of the core, generating novel “artifacts” and “affects” that prefigure more concrete articulations in other zones of the world-system. Shapiro notes that

the "zemiperiphery" constitutes a "fertile ground" for social, organizational, and technological innovations. It is also a space where significant political movements emerge, owing to its intermediary position and the tensions it navigates.

Romanian Historical Fiction: „Thinking in old ways about new history”

The central thread of this article posits post-1990 Romanian historical fiction as a "transistor" element, continuing the legacy of earlier works. In Lionel-Decebal Roșca's comprehensive study, "Literatura română de inspirație istorică" („Romanian Literature of Historical Inspiration") from *Enciclopedia imaginariilor din România*, three essential sources in the development of historical prose are delineated: the first pertains to "various Western poetics subsumed under the genre" (2020, 80); the second, rooted in indigenous traditions, concerns folklore, which "provides historical literature with an entire series of topoi" (81); and the third is represented by "the historical writings of chroniclers" (81). To this synthetic identification of sources, one might add an outward-looking perspective, extending beyond the poetics of Western Romanticism, for instance, as certain writers have drawn on foreign texts and sources enabled by the dissemination of information through digital media or archives, which have facilitated the circulation of inspirational elements in contemporary prose. Furthermore, many historical prose works benefit from the scholarly preparation of authors who incorporate historical references derived from readings of global texts. Additionally, to the five sets of topoi identified by Roșca, for which substantial corpora are established (protohistory, the "Dacian eon," "indigenous medievality," the "age of Phanariot solitude," and the "awakening of vital forces"), one could append another, encompassing historical prose that interweaves contemporaneity. In Shapiro's view, the „zemiperiphery" entails the amalgamation of peripheral folk beliefs with the cultural institutions of the core, generating new cultural forms. Historical fiction, by referencing folkloric roots and grafting them onto established narrative formulas, thus emerges as an innovative form. The "zemiperiphery" operates as an "arterial matrix" of the world-system, facilitating communication and flows between the core, periphery, and other zemiperipheries.

Romanian historical fiction operates on two levels: the first pertains to its intrinsic thematic value, which fosters connections with global history, as no territory can be perceived in isolation but rather through its relations with surrounding or distant regions, whether referencing proximate eras or those separated by millennia. Historical fiction navigates the permeable boundaries between historical phenomena and the writer's imagination, embodying a fragmentation driven by the existence of provinces in the twentieth century and

the influence of the Ottoman, Habsburg, and Russian Empires, and it offers a potential model for understanding how communication was forged among the diverse cultural spaces that converged in the region of Southeast Europe.

Historical fiction occupies a dominant role in Romanian literature, sequentially expressing in the nineteenth century the ideal of national state formation and proposing exemplary figures for inclusion in the political paradigms of the time; in the twentieth century, it is associated with the mythologization of the past and the idealization of eras deemed “golden ages,” later with political struggles and the delineation of new social classes; and post-1990, it becomes a mode of engaging with a schizoid past – either through metafiction and occasionally excessive archival documentation from the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, or by addressing temporally closer events perceived as more accessible to a diverse audience eager for rapid decoding of meaning without extensive hermeneutic intricacies. „Thinking in old ways about new history” (2023, 239) observes Manshel in his attempt to define the engagement with the past in contemporary prose. The meaning advanced by this type of contemporary fiction aligns with Manshel’s assertion: in reality, its purpose diverges from the postmodernist pursuit of novel means to transpose history and adopt divergent approaches to it; instead, the new history is engaged through traditional means derived from historical experiences. Historical prose is intertwined with the origins of Romanian-language literature, as what subjects were more compelling in the context of the nineteenth-century quest for statehood than a return to an immediate or distant past to propose models. In the article by Cosmin Borza, Alex Goldiș, and Adrian Tudurachi, “Subgenres of the Romanian Novel: The Laboratory of a Typology” (2020), the subgenre of the historical novel is examined alongside fifty others identified through an analysis of the corpus of novels in the *Chronological Dictionary of the Romanian Novel from Its Origins to 1989*. This juxtaposition underscores the significance of classification, not only from a thematic perspective but also from the viewpoint of the reader, who chooses to initiate a dialogue with a distant era to paradoxically comprehend their own contemporaneity.

The production of literature inspired by history is substantial, and post-1990, there emerges an openness to valorizing the recent past, employing innovative tools within a regained freedom. Novels emerge that draw upon diverse historical sources, engaging in a dialogue with ancient documents as well as with characters from distant or proximate eras, which bring to the present the ambiance of the past, various historical figures, or spaces reimaged through the tools of literary imagination. A distinct category comprises novels that address the traumatic past of the pre-1989 Revolution period, authored by writers such as (but not limited to) Lucian Dan Teodorovici, Dan Lungu, Florin

Lăzărescu, Marin Mălaicu-Hondrari, T.O. Bobe, Matei Florian, Marta Petreu, Cristian Teodorescu, Sorin Stoica, Radu Pavel Gheo, Liviu Radu, Bogdan Popescu, and Mircea Cărtărescu. Within the category of historical fiction with a metafictional component, works such as Filip Florian's *Zilele Regelui* [The King's Days], Ioan Mihai Cochinescu's *Ambasadorul* [The Ambassador], Gheorghe Schwarz's *Cei o sută* [The One Hundred], Răzvan Rădulescu's *Teodosie cel Mic* [Teodosie the Small], Constantin Țoiu's *Istorisirile signorei Sisi* [The Stories of Lady Sisi], Simona Sora's *Hotel Universal*, Doina Ruști's *Manuscrisul fanariot* [The Phanariot Manuscript], *Homeric*, and *Zavaidoc*, Simona Antonescu's *Hanul lui Manuc* [Manuc's Inn], *Darul lui Serafim* [Serafim's Gift], and *Fotograful curții regale* [Photographer of the Royal Court], Constanța Vintilă-Ghițulescu's *Evgheniții* [The Eugenians], Octavian Soviany's *Viața lui Kostas Venetis* [The Life of Kostas Venetis] and *Moartea lui Siegfried* [The Death of Siegfried], and Mircea Cărtărescu's *Theodorus*, stand out. In a recent study, Sharae Deckard proposes a classification of global novels into three categories, each underpinned by the indispensable backdrop of real historical events: „the first relates to the “deliberately homogenized magical realist novel, emptied of local specificity and endowed with insipidly uniform appeal,” dând exemplu ficțiunea lui Murakami; the second category “includes transnational ‘network’ novels (...) which ‘traverse multiple geographies and periods in an ambitious attempt to narrativize globalization,’” and the third category is composed of “novels that offer crucial perspectives situated in the zemiperiphery (...) [that] are critically conscious in content and form, even if this critique is suppressed in their marketing and reception.” Roberto Bolaño's novel, 2666, is such an example (Deckard, Niblett, and Shapiro 2024, 92) that Deckard employs to demonstrate the implications of labor relations in Mexico, reflected in literature.

Răzvan Rădulescu, in *Teodosie cel mic*, proposes a narrative style that fits within the second category previously analyzed by Deckard. Interwoven with historical references such as “the donjon of the Ottoburg fortress” and allusions to the Danube-Black Sea Canal, as well as the imaginary setting of Filiași–Our Sea, where “Green Ants” (Rădulescu 2006, 3) are at work, the novel exemplifies a transient blend of history and fiction. This blend manifests in a meteoric manner through recourse to allegorical geographies constructed from elements derived from actual mental maps. The topology of temporality, discussed earlier through Dalley's theory, is built by recording spaces overloaded with multiple temporal layers: Bucharest and its marshy counterpart – Lacul Rece – featuring emblematic buildings such as the Bulandra Theatre, Lazăr High School, Lămâița pastry shop, and Cișmigiul Park. The narrator manipulates both time and space: “And who doesn't confuse a hot breath of air passing quickly over the Izvor Bridge on Dâmbovița with the ventilation system of the subway?” (4),

bringing narrative events of the present and the past into a moment of simultaneity. The characters are hybrid and embody allegorical constructions such as Kaliopi Owl, Little Theodosie, CatDog, Otilia's Ghost, Samoil the Minotaur, the Guarding Catfish, Iorgos the Ant, the Great Little Monster, Otto, and General Căciulata. Throughout the narrative, remarks like "Ultimately, civilization and politeness distinguish us, Southerners, from the barbarism of the North" are expressed (24), emphasizing prejudices arising from imagology. Conflicts are said to be resolvable only through dialogue: "That's why words were left in the world – to negotiate and understand each other" (167).

The novel allegorically addresses history, as by setting aside the substrate, we identify different references – sometimes to the past, other times to the present. It illustrates the neo-hermetic nature of Romanian historical fiction, employing the metaphor of the "machine of history" to evoke an inevitable force, layered allegorically, as well as the plurality of historical interpretations within the "zemiperipheral" space (Shapiro 2014). This hyperconnected representation (Deckard, Niblett & Shapiro 2024) transforms Bucharest into a node of transculturation, where history fragments into narrative "geometric forms," mediating tensions between the global center and the local periphery through a relational aesthetic.

You should have said that earlier. Now it's too late. The machine of history has begun, and nothing can stop it anymore. I'm sorry. When he spoke of "the machine of history," the Sleep Protector thought, diffusely, of Otto's war machines, which were slowly advancing toward the Bay of the Whale (...) For Teodosie, "the machine of history" reminded him of Minotaur Samoil's flying apparatus, with its fragile gears and spokes, and his journey above the mushroom farm; from there, the land appeared divided into rectangular geometric shapes, all gray, but distinguished by the texture and shade of each plot. (195)

The image of "Otto's battle machines" advancing toward the "Whale Bay" alludes to an external influence – potentially a European center – acting upon a local, „zemiperipheral space" ("Whale Bay," an imaginary location with indigenous resonances). It takes local historical experiences – potentially tied to Romania's complex history of conflict, division, or marginality – and translates them into narratives that resonate with global readers. The fantastical imagery of flying apparatuses and geometric landscapes serves as a "transistor-like" mechanism, amplifying local voices within the global literary circuit. The "Violet Ants" and the "fish" that "care for" the lake's water seem to symbolize local agents facilitating this interaction, similar to the "sub-imperialist" role of the "zemiperiphery" described by Shapiro, where intermediate regions manage the influence of the

center on the periphery. The "flying device of Samoil the Minotaur" combines modern technology with local mythology. This illustrates a process where cultural elements from the center (technology) and the "zemiperiphery" (mythology, folklore) intertwine to create a new narrative form. Teodosie's aerial perspective, viewing the land "divided into rectangular geometrical shapes, all gray but distinct through the texture and hue of each parcel," expresses an integrative vision typical of the semi-periphery, which orders and "translates" the diversity of the periphery into a coherent system, connecting disparate regions into a cultural network. The panoramas generated by the text evoke an idealized vision of the past, represented by the flying machine, but also relate to the present with the tools of warfare.

The novel also features reinterpretations of fairy tales, such as *The Goat with the Three Kids*, retold in the story of the Great Monster: "The goat engaged in coal exploitation and, after a few years of underground work, became coated in a Saturnism of great beauty" (234). This retelling, where the traditional Romanian fairy tale (*The Goat and Her Three Kids*), rooted in oral folklore, is reimagined in a modern industrial context linked to the global center (coal mining – an allusion to industrial capitalism), exemplifies a clear transfer between spaces. The traditional Romanian fairy tale, with its peripheral roots grounded in oral folklore, is reimagined within a modern industrial setting associated with the global center. This reinterpretation creates a new cultural "artifact" that reflects Romania's "zemiperipheral" tensions: economic modernization (the influence of the center) overlaying a traditional society. *The Little Prince* recounts the story of a prince who arrives in Levant – a "variant for children of Machiavelli's *The Little Prince*" (234) – transposed into a local environment. Other titles and names are also mentioned, creating interactions with them, such as Dumas the Elder, Racine, Thomas A. Quincey, R. Kipling, Breban, Hippolyte Taine, Villon, Aesop, André Gide, Matei Călinescu, Radu Petrescu, Roland Barthes, Anatole France, Émile Zola, Lacan, among others. The mention of authors from different cultures alongside Romanian figures such as Matei Călinescu, Breban, and Radu Petrescu indicates a cultural mediation between the European literary center (classicism, realism, psychoanalysis) and local literary traditions. This reflects the role of the "semi-periphery" in "translating" and integrating global influences within local contexts.

Another example of historical fiction is the novel *Istorisirile signorei Sisi* by Constantin Țoiu (2006), which narrates a story of communication breakdown caused by the presence of extremes in politics, leading to a climate of terror. Spanning nearly a century of history, with reflections on the tragedies of the two World Wars and the communist terror of the 1950s, as well as the evolution

of the Legionary movement, the novel centers around the female character Sisi, a descendant of the Ghiculeștilor family. Beyond the turbulent background – featuring a family history with a father who is a potato farmer and ends up committing suicide – a complex network of histories emerges, intertwining real historical personalities and characters amidst a tumult of the times.

Sisi's marriage is marked by change, a concealment under the impossible matching of social classes. Bucharest, as a "zemiperipheral" space, becomes a setting where the modern influences of the global center meet with the traditional structures represented by Dinu's Moldavian peasant origins, for example. Sisi's marriage, described as a "true Ghiculeasă" but belonging to a "scattered" lineage, symbolizes this mediation – combining aristocratic prestige (the center) with the social ascent of a peasant son. Thus, although she marries Dinu Alucăruță, he changes his surname to Cărauțeanu. Shapiro emphasizes that the semi-periphery functions as a "manager" of the center's interests vis-à-vis it. In the fragment, Sisi – representing a declining aristocracy – imposes the name change for Dinu, suggesting a form of cultural control over the periphery (Dinu's rural origin). This act of renaming is a zemiperipheral strategy: it translates the protagonist's local, peasant origins into a form that resonates with the hegemonic cultural norms of the urban center, much as Romanian historical fiction translates local histories into globally recognizable narratives.

In fact, between us, her true family name of the Moldovan peasantry was Alucăruță; having come from Fălticeni to Bucharest, studying Law and building a brilliant career – partly thanks to his marriage to Sisi Ghica, a genuine Ghiculeasă – even though her aristocratic lineage had long been dispersed. So, it was Sisi herself, a scion of noble blood, who compelled him, even before their wedding, to change his surname, calling himself Cărauțeanu (Țoiu 2006, 24).

The choice of this text was influenced by the observation of a particular feature of hyperconnectivity, seen by Deckard as "an episodic form of these fictions that treats historical periods as a static set of interchangeable units that can be swapped as easily as the novels switch between literary genres" (Deckard, Niblett, and Shapiro 2024, 92). The episodic structure of the novel, which combines disparate historical moments (social ascent, aristocratic decline, the background of her father, gambling addicted, who ends up committing suicide) with reinterpreted fairy tales and intertextual references, reflects the nature of hyperconnectivity characteristic of Romanian fiction. Moreover, in a similar vein, Țoiu appears as a forgetful puppeteer, manipulating episodes of history on the fiction stage according to his own whim, without regard for chronology.

Doina Ruști proposes an alternative form of historical fiction in *Manuscrisul fanariot* (2015), using the turbulent atmosphere of the late 18th century as its backdrop. She imagines a character enrolled in the fleet of the Greek Lambros Katsonis, fighting against the Ottoman army of "the great Gazi Hasan." With a narrative rich in historical references – from the library of Sultan Selim III to the construction of Bucharest's fame, which "Greeks from Phanar" considered "the city where dreams come true" (Ruști 2015, 5) – the novel explores a scene rooted in historical texture.

The perspective Ruști offers is one of domination through the word: power manifests in the imposition of a language. Beyond this, however, lies an underground force created by the multitude of communities. Bucharest and Thessaloniki are portrayed as "zemiperipheral" spaces under the influence of the Ottoman center (represented by Sultan Selim III and the Phanariot administration) and populated by peripheral local communities – Vlach, Jewish, and Turkish groups. Bucharest, described as "the city where dreams are fulfilled" by Greeks from Phanar, becomes a convergence point between aspirations of modernization and the multicultural realities of the periphery. This illustrates the zemiperiphery's capacity to "translate" and integrate diverse cultural influences, creating a hybrid identity.

The "words embedded in honey" of the Vlachs, accessible only to them, suggest a peripheral cultural resistance – an assertion of authenticity in the face of Greek central influence. The dominance of the Greek language in Thessaloniki, "from morning till evening," reflects this sub-imperialist role, where the Phanariot elite mediates Ottoman control over various local communities. Yet, the persistent presence of peripheral languages (Turkish in the markets, the "whispered" Jewish language, the Vlach Romanian) hints at a cultural resistance that complicates this dominance. The depiction of Thessaloniki's multilingual society is a local narrative rooted in the historical realities of the Ottoman Empire, but its framing – through vivid, almost poetic imagery and metafictional hints – engages with universal themes of cultural coexistence and historical complexity. This aligns with Shapiro's (2023) notion of the zemiperiphery as a space that valorizes cultural intersections, amplifying peripheral voices within the global literary circuit:

It seems that the very merciful Selim turned his gaze upon our poor Thessaloniki as well, said the teacher (...). In the city, everyone spoke Greek from morning till night. Only in the white houses, under the tangled crowns of pines or among groups of market vendors, the Turks argued among themselves in Turkish, the Jews whispered in their language, which no one understood, and as soon as you entered the Cățol neighborhood, you could hear words swollen with honey, their core known only to the wise ones (34).

Ioanis Milikopu becomes Leun, a name with which he is confused by the townspeople. Boierul Dan Braşoveanu Doicescu intervenes in the character's destiny, providing an occasion to discuss the plague epidemic that had decimated almost his entire family: "Around the Courthouse Academy, then near the Zlătari Inn, the lanky silhouette of the plague slips through in search of windows" (22), illustrating Bucharest's customary attitude toward strangers: "not to cross beyond the river, into the place called Bozărie, and not to linger in conversation with the Bucharest crones, who were very skilled in the art of hypnosis" (24). Marginal communities, such as those of the Vlachs, as well as the conflict between Greeks and Turks, are brought into focus. Leun exemplifies a transitional model that produces a fusion of the two spaces it represents. Simultaneously, this model reflects how identity is not static but evolves as a process of negotiation and adaptation, in which initial values are layered and redefined within new contexts. Ioanis's preference for personal freedom, symbolized by material luxuries like "perfumes and fine clothes" and "hair oils" reminiscent of "silk from Brusa," serves as a *zemiperipheral* act:

Ioanis loved freedom and hated the Turks, as any normal person from Săruna would, but life under someone's command – on a ship threatened by cannons – removed any patriotic interest from him. He wished all Greeks to be free, but even more he loved his own freedom, which at that moment was made of perfumes and fine clothes. [...] He liked pockets, as many as possible, camouflaged by buttons and intricate embroidery, which few knew how to appreciate. Apart from that, he also valued hair oils, which made his black curls look heavy and supple, like the silk from Brusa (45)

The identified historical spaces, such as the Hanul Greci, Hanul Roşu, Hanul Zlătari, and Lipscani Street, define a zone of transit – a network connecting centers and peripheries. The inns and Lipscani Street, as commercial and social spaces, become convergence points where merchants, travelers, and locals (from Phanariots to Vlachs) interact, mediating between the global center (the Phanariot elite, Ottoman trade) and the local periphery.

Bucharest, for those who do not know, is a city that devours words – a hole fed with whispers, a repository of hissings and songs. It is a sapping city. It doesn't matter where the words come from, whether they are Germanic, Greek, or even from a dead language. Every word is a spark, a fuel that keeps the city alive. Anyone wishing to dig up lost words, anyone obsessed with the charm of those sweet antiquities must definitely start with Bucharest. Within its fabric, all the words spoken freely or involuntarily within the city's territory circulate like the strip of a luxury display case. (Ruşti 33)

Words serve as a catalyst, embodying social energies and cultural identity, while the city is shaped through the interplay of ideas, narratives, and languages. Historical spaces transcend mere geographical locations; they encapsulate the identity framework of Bucharest as a center-periphery nexus – a site of migration, memory, and social discourse.

Constanța Vintilă-Ghițulescu, in *Evgheniții* (2006), reconstructs an atmosphere emblematic of early 19th-century Bucharest, employing the tools of the historian enriched by the writer's imagination. The narrative begins at the end of 1826, a period when the echoes of the 1821 revolution had yet to fade: "You mean it was better with Tudor's rabble? He only brought the Turks back into the country and stirred the waters, and he died a fool, betrayed by his own army. Some thieves and bandits," (Vintilă-Ghițulescu 2006, 37) states a character observing a transistor-like fusion of two different stages: "the frontispiece and the collarbone merged with the umbrella and the fan" (37).

The historical figure of Tudor Vladimirescu is portrayed through pejorative terms such as "reckless" or "thieves and bandits," perpetuating a subordinate narrative that diminishes the revolutionary agency of subaltern groups or the "lower classes." This framing casts their actions as chaotic disruptions, posing a threat to imperial stability and order. Concurrently, references to "the frontispiece and the collarbone," alongside symbols like the umbrella and fan, evoke an orientalized lifestyle, where adornments such as jewelry and clothing serve as markers of cultural and social alterity. The voices of the marginalized are thus reduced to stereotypes, while the dominant discourse, in its bid to legitimize power, constructs an image of "the others" as inferior, disorderly, and dangerous. This narrative reinforces an orientalized imaginary, positioning the culture, values, and actions of subjugated groups as exotic, feeble, and dysfunctional, in stark contrast to the civilized, orderly image projected by Western "elites." Within the zemiperipheral context of Bucharest, this dynamic underscores the city's role as a liminal space, navigating tensions between center and periphery, where local identities are both shaped and marginalized by the interplay of global and regional power structures.

Against this social backdrop, the story of a marriage unfolds between an older nobleman and a young woman, which culminates in her betrayal. The Bălăceni manor is situated between "Mahala Colții" and "Mahala Sărindar," belonging to Alecu Bălăceanu, married to the young Catinca Filipescu. The voice that speaks the truth belongs to Stanca, the Romani woman, representing the voice of the subaltern who articulates what others dare not say:

I see that only your ego matters and the gossip of the neighborhood, that pride is greater than a man's life, that the whispers of the mahala are more important than the soul and heart of a girl, that all the old and foolish nobles have joined together to condemn what they themselves did in youth. The same gossip that separates and kills you today did the same thing in your time. None of you has a clear conscience or peace. None of you can say you've never made mistakes or that you are now as pure as a tear, capable of judging with an open heart. (155–156).

The voice of the marginalized – here represented by Stanca – becomes one of protest and a yearning for truth within a landscape dominated by hypocrisy, corruption, and expressions of patriarchal and aristocratic power. Her perspective is not merely critical; it is a revealing critique of the hypocrisy and opportunism of those in authority, who engage in moral judgments to justify their own past mistakes and hide their youthful guilt. The described social setting, with its neighborhoods and mansions, underscores a stratified, corrupt society where class differences – nobles, Romani, peasants – represent various levels of subjugation and mutual domination. The voice of the Romani woman becomes a symbol of outsiders to the elites who can speak plainly without fear of retaliation, even though they are often ignored or discredited. Her speech calls for a collective conscience, a reflection on human nature, and a recognition of ongoing divisions and conflicts. Stanca's capacity for critical revelation illuminates the falsehood and hypocrisy of the ruling class, warning that true moral purity lies in honesty and responsibility for past sins.

Filip Florian's novel proposes a meta-historical perspective on royalty. *Zilele Regelui* (2008) constructs a fictionalized character – the crown initially proposed for Philip of Flanders is seen as “a small thing, resembling a turban” (Florian 2008, 6) – and explains the situation of the Romanian Principalities under Ottoman rule in 1866. The event is documented historically, including through the presence of notable figures of the time such as Lascăr Catargiu and Ion Ghica. Florian imagines the moment of a toothache as an acceptance of the throne, expressed through the question posed to the dentist: “if perhaps he would follow it to Bucharest, forever.” The imaginary map the character envisions is that of a space “somewhere in the colonies” thousands of kilometers away (11). Accompanied by the cat Siegfried, Dr. Joseph Strauss traverses Europe, on a journey partly geographer, partly culinary.

Beyond the postmodern irony employed by the writer in a rebours, we observe narrative hybridization through the inclusion of letters. This serves to explain the situation of the “former patient”: “Karl Eitel Friedrich Zephyrinus Ludwig, now sitting on the throne of a country with five million souls, had sent him a pipe tobacco pouch, in which he had hidden so many ducats, gulden, and

florins that Joseph was dizzy, along with a map of the continent in which he had drawn a red-ink itinerary and marked some key points with brown crosses." (15). This sequence highlights an ironic-critique perspective on the geopolitical and social situation of the Romanian lands, seen as zemiperipheral space under Ottoman domination and in transition toward a modern state form, as symbolized by the allegory of the crown. The postmodern irony, characterized by subversion, employs a skeptical outlook on the "glory" and noble symbols, such as the crown described as a turban.

The narrative hybridization, through the inclusion of letters, contributes to the consolidation of a multiperspectival outlook, creating a bridge between political, historical, and personal discourses. It allows the reader a deeper understanding of the "former patient" turned monarch's situation. Displaying a certain irony toward symbols of authority and inherited values, the text suggests that these gifts – the pouch of tobacco, the map drawn with red ink – are testimonies of a tumultuous transition, in which old power structures and former bonds of loyalty become mere artifacts, while the new rulers have established their positions and influence pragmatically – sometimes symbolically, sometimes materially.

Thus, the narrative evolves into a subtle yet incisive critique of the identity and legitimacy of monarchical-political authority, as well as of the complexities of power relations within the European space². In the context of the "upheaval of Wallachia," the text hints – ironically – at the image of a leader in flight, ready to abandon his position and betray national interests. The motif of stirring, ciphered letters and the preparation to cross the ocean with wealth hidden in hundreds of chests symbolize an escape or flight from responsibility amid political chaos. Simultaneously, the protagonist's infatuation with a young Lyonese woman and his complete trust in her to keep military documents secret serve as a sharp irony about his vulnerability and immaturity in the face of great problems:

Similarly, during the upheaval in Wallachia, it was said that Bismarck, the chancellor, was close to losing his mind; that he had begged for forgiveness and mercy from Gambetta and Trochu through stirring and ciphered letters; that he was preparing to cross the ocean to America with wealth stored in hundreds of chests; and that he had fallen in love in his old age with a shameless Lyonese girl, a young flirt, to whom he had entrusted all the existing military secrets from Berlin – hidden in her palms and between her breasts. (139)

² See more details about centers of power and fictional cartographies in Romanian fiction in Alina Bako's studies.

The threat of King Carol's abdication on the night of March 10–11, 1871, becomes the climax of this transformation – a moment of overturning the established order, symbolizing the end of an era and the beginning of a new one. Temporality is perceived at different rhythms: “time (...) no longer flowed like a lazy, foul-smelling river, but acquired a different cadence, suddenly, similar to the gallop of a team of horses” (150). The small, local history gives way to the grand narrative, which involves unprecedented and major events for a regional space. The abdication moment is seen as such an event: “Prince Carol, furiously angry, smoking incessantly and on the verge of boiling over, decided to abdicate. He initially requested Ion Ghica's resignation” (151).

The scenes of the three empires – the Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and Russian – intertwine throughout the narration³. The journey he undertakes to the sultan's court, alongside the king, becomes a pretext for observing the Orient. Dolmabahçe Palace, the meeting with Sultan Abdul-Aziz, the Bosphorus, and Istanbul serve as pretexts to explore the seduction these places exert on the king. Interspersed with small poems by the feline Siegfried, the text is rich in historical references. *Metamorphoses* or *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius is the work the doctor reads during a studied *mise en abyme*.

The progress is recorded at the level of urban transformations “in the great city's effort to shed its Turkish attire,” as the writer describes. He categorizes these changes as “style” modifications – shifts made to follow fashion trends – such as the street *Işlicarilor*, which takes on the name of *Rue Franceză*; *Hanul lui Manuc* becomes *Hotel Dacia*; *Otelul Oteteleşeanu* turns into *Hotel Frascatti*; *Casa Slătineanu* appropriates the name *Capşa*, after the confectionery brothers; while the church of Saint John the Great, originally built by the treasurer Preda Buzescu and reconstructed by Brâncoveanu, was razed with axes and pickaxes along with its cells, stables, and ancillary buildings (123). Replacing traditional street names and historic monuments with Western or commercial names (e.g., *Rue Franceză*, *Hotel Dacia*, *Hotel Frascatti*) symbolizes a form of hegemony – an infiltration of a central culture into a “*zemiperipheral*” space – and marks the beginning of an instrumentalization of the urban space for interests of a new social class. Describing these “transformations” as “style” changes refers to imposed modernization – often superficial – aimed at fashioning the city according to current trends, replacing traditional values with borrowed ones. Simultaneously, the destruction of the church of Saint John the Great and the convent cells, alongside the construction of sophisticated greenhouses, symbolizes an implicit conflict: on the one hand, the dismantling of conservative, traditional

³ See details about the interimperial concept in Parvulescu, A., & Boatca, M. (2022). *Creolizing the modern Transylvania across empires*. Cornell University Press.

landmarks; on the other, the emergence of an expanding social class that consolidates power through investments and capital accumulation, often at the expense of cultural patrimony.

From the perspective of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital, urban changes and renamings are not merely aesthetic or administrative modifications – they are acts of revendication and reaffirmation of prestige, power, and social recognition by those beginning to amass wealth and forming a new social elite. The use of Western-origin names and the replacement of old patrimony with symbols of modernization and economic prestige (luxury hotels, greenhouses, restaurants) serve as strategies through which these classes legitimize their position, assigning cultural and symbolic value to the new urban landscape shifts. For them, this symbolic capital becomes a tool of social differentiation, marking belonging to the economic and cultural elite, while the destruction of traditional patrimony can be seen as a symbolic loss for local communities. These transformations are not only physical or aesthetic – they constitute acts of "symbolic capitalization," where new symbols and names are used to consolidate status, legitimize the new social order, and symbolically exclude traditional values and collective memory.

Historical fictions, resistance through literature

I chose two novels by Octavian Soviany that are part of this interstitial corpus of historical fiction, where narrative functions as a „heterobiography” richly intertwined with complex cultural references: *Viața lui Kostas Venetis* [*The Life of Kostas Venetis*] (2011) and *Moartea lui Siegfried* [*The Death of Siegfried*] (2015). Lucia Boldrini discusses, from this perspective of first-person narration in historical fiction, the paradoxical status that involves a visionary projection turned backward toward the past. The question posed by Shapiro about the voice of the subaltern (from zemiperiphery also) is realized in Soviany's novel as a voice of history that has fallen silent. Lucia Boldrini's observation⁴ (2012, 57) that heterobiographical novels restore voice to the historically silenced through a testimonial, autobiographical form underscores their role as resistance literature. In the context of Romanian historical fiction, such as Soviany's novels, this framework highlights how zemiperipheral narratives amplify subaltern perspectives, mediating local histories within global literary discourses to challenge marginalization and assert cultural agency. History here functions as a background that contributes to reconstructing moments

⁴ "Heterobiographical novels, through an autobiographical form that gestures towards the testimonial, give back a voice to the historically silenced, and can in this sense be seen as a form of 'resistance literature,' to use Barbara Harlow's expression (1987)" (Boldrini 57).

from social descriptions of meticulously documented epochs – the European society of the second half of the nineteenth century – through a periphrasis across Bucharest, Paris, Vienna, or Venice: “... I started to reconstruct Kostas Venetis’s story. I strove to reproduce entirely, without leaving anything out or adding anything from myself, his words, although sometimes I felt that in the thread of history some foreign fragments were mixing in, and that, by telling Kostas’s story, I was also telling my own...” (Soviany 2011, 12). Violence, cruelty, and the defilement of reader expectations combine to form ingredients of a world molten from Dostoevsky’s, Sade’s, or Mateiu Caragiale’s magma, as the author himself admitted in an interview. I will recount a single episode that hints at the beginning of the *slavery* of the main character, won in a card game: “I later learned, directly from the prince’s own mouth, that his entire estate – and that of his family – had been acquired through theft and plunder. The toil of serfs, who could not even earn their cold lumps of polenta, the widow’s coin, and the orphan’s inheritance – slaughter, either with a dagger or poison, treachery, and cunning – stood as the foundation of boyar Mihalache’s wealth” (45). Emanuela Ilie notes the *cratyism* in the novel, as well as the “cultural memory and consciousness of descent,” which permeates a space evocatively named “an absolute Sodom, flawless in its wickedness.” The crises traversed by the character become successive layers of a history proposing convulsive images of humanity. The use of first-person discourse is notable because “adoption of the heterobiographical first person often reflects this interest in representing how historical conditions directly touch individual lives” (Boldrini 150). The historical phenomenon is not merely an abstract notion but penetrates everyday life, shaping choices, traumas, and aspirations of individuals. Concurrently, this perspective highlights the role of personal experience in understanding and contesting social order, illuminating how historical and social conditions become an integral part of each person’s biography.

In his novel *Moartea lui Siegfried [The Death of Siegfried]* (2015), Octavian Soviany engages with the pervasive socio-historical phenomenon of serfdom, exploring its implications for the formation of society in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Southeast Europe. The protagonist’s lament - “I probably looked like a madman at boyar Mihalache, while I was forcing myself to understand that I am only a poor peasant boy, a servant of a clerk from the Calici neighborhood, and I have no way to play for so much money” (Soviany 2015, 34) - underscores the rigid hierarchy that subordinates the peasant class. Money emerges as the sole arbiter of social relations, dictating the characters’ fates. The boyar Mihalache, derisively compared to a “calf from Podul Calicilor,” exploits a card game to ensnare the young man into servitude. This process of enslavement, marked by a stigmatizing sign akin to those used on livestock - “He

told me I would now have to bear on my body the sign with which he marked his horses and cattle, for I had become his slave, and I would remain so until death" (35) - evokes ancient practices of branding and dehumanization. The protagonist's reduction to a slave, equated with draft animals on Mihalache's estate, highlights the commodification of human life within the socio-economic structures of the period. Erving Goffman's *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963) elucidates this dynamic through the intersection of two conditions: "the plight of the discredited," whose stigma is visibly marked, and "the discreditable," whose stigma remains concealable yet pervasive (Goffman 1963, 4). This framework applies to Soviany's protagonist, who is simultaneously discredited by the physical mark of enslavement – likened to livestock branding – and discreditable, bearing the enduring shame of his marginalized status as a peasant-turned-slave within his community throughout his life.

In Soviany's novel, characters are not depicted in black and white but solely in black, representing a narrative that explores extreme and borderline situations, such as the community of Jews and the Holocaust during World War II. The text contains an implicit critique through the augmentation of evil – presented as a natural, inescapable aspect – by imagining a condemnable character, ultimately judged through the act of reading. Kurt, the antisemite, does not receive a direct reply from Friedrich but a remark designed to deceive: "Such hollow phrases are good for the ignorant, in reality the Jews are one of the most valuable assets of the Reich – like any wealth, it must be managed wisely and prudently" (355). The exploitation and marginalization of a community are unquestionable elements tied to Nazi persecutions. Friedrich explains the distinction between "poor Jews" and "wealthy Jews," exposing how persecution and marginalization are stratified and manipulated according to economic and social differences within the Jewish community. He emphasizes that exploitation is not only ideological or moral but also strategic: the poor Jews are used as cheap, resilient, and adaptable labor, while the wealthy ones become targets and sources of capital, mobilized for the war effort or financial resources. This stratification underscores that exploitation extends beyond ideological motives, becoming a strategic element embedded within social and economic hierarchies, further emphasizing the complex layers of marginalization – both in the novel's narrative and in broader historical contexts – where the zemiperiphery acts as a liminal space for the negotiation and reinforcement of social boundaries. The description confirms the brutality of persecution and suggests a pragmatic behind the antisemitic measures, where discrimination becomes a tool for control and economic accumulation. Friedrich's awareness of the Jews' increasing realization of a lack of future in Germany underscores their union in the face of oppression and imminent emigration; it also highlights how subsequent

emigration regulations serve a dual purpose: controlling the flow of emigrants and maximizing material gains for the state. The protagonist's claim of obedience driven by the desire for social ascent reveals an ambivalence that reflects an internal struggle under social and moral pressure – maintaining a certain image for acceptance or hiding true feelings. Deep contempt for subservience and social conformism reflects an identity crisis and an awareness of the compromises made for survival or benefits: "Therefore, I forced myself to visit ladies with intellectual pretensions who read philosophy books or participate in upper-class gatherings, sometimes even managing to mimic a veneer of sociability" (383).

The protagonist's concluding reflection articulates a stark nihilism that challenges the fundamental illusions of social, class, or status distinctions. He perceives these differences as transient constructs – illusions that dissolve in the face of the unyielding reality of mortality and the inevitable end that awaits all human beings. The metaphor of "worms" becomes a potent symbol of this universal dissolution, representing the unavoidable process of decay that reduces all social distinctions to insignificance. This imagery underscores a core philosophical insight: regardless of one's position in society, the trajectory ultimately converges towards the same fate of exploitation and annihilation. The worms, as a symbol of natural entropy, serve to deconstruct notions of social justice or moral progress, revealing them as ephemeral illusions perpetuated by human vanity. Furthermore, the imagery of "the glass of French cognac" introduces a layer of irony, highlighting the superficiality of notions of refinement, superiority, and control. The act of savoring a luxurious drink becomes a poignant symbol of human complacency – an attempt to project power and distinction in a transient world destined for decay. The protagonist's reflection that "worms are the same in Berlin and Bucharest, working just as efficiently everywhere, and in two or three years, from this hand which holds the glass of French cognac to my mouth, only some bony, disgusting remains will be left" (363) poignantly encapsulates the universality of decay and the futility of social distinctions rooted in material and cultural superiority. In the end, all that persists is the inescapable biological truth of mortality, reducing both the opulence and the societal hierarchy to mere impermanent appearances.

The time machine and the production of knowledge. Instead of conclusions

Historical fiction has proposed a multifaceted relationship with the epochs it incorporates into the literary endeavor. As the "spatial turn" was discussed in the later half of XXth century, today it seems that we are witnessing a new phase - the "historical turn." The engagement with the past is mediated

through literature, with a clearly defined purpose: the production of knowledge. Bringing characters, events, settings, and major occurrences into the present equates to a form of learning, but also a means of reconnecting with grand history. Every period traversed by historical fiction – regardless of the forms it takes – has maintained a direct connection with political, social, and economic phenomena: from the realization of national aspirations in the 19th century to issues related to language, social movements, revolts, revolutions, economic reforms, and the reintegration of key moments along Romania’s historical trajectory.

Fiction shapes our collective memory, personifies key events and periods, reveals the deeper roots of contemporary crises, unsettles neat chronologies, challenges the historical record, exposes its lies and gaps, recovers marginalized stories, and conjures others to replace those that have been entirely lost. Not only contemplating the past but also simulating an encounter with it, historical fiction transforms the reader into a kind of time machine (Manshel 2023, 242), summarizing its utility for the reader as well.

This study involved clarifying the concepts from which the discussed historical fictions evolved, proposing a model that positions the Romanian space as a “zemiperipheral” node of transnational cultural flows. This model integrates Lukács’s (1962) classical theory of historical prose, historiographical metafiction (Hutcheon 1988), the concept of “zemiperiphery” (Shapiro 2014), hyperconnectivity (Deckard, Niblett & Shapiro 2024) and heterobiography (Boldrini), to observe how these function within central and peripheral spaces. The model, based on contradictions in relation to history, allegorical recourse, and selective fictionalization, recontextualizes collective memory within a global framework. Thus, we have found that the “zemiperiphery” functions as an onto-epistemic mediation vector. The analysis proceeded from theorization toward the examination of specific historical fictions, such as those written by Răzvan Rădulescu, Constantin Țoiu, Doina Ruști, Constanța Vintilă-Ghițulescu, Filip Florian, and Octavian Soviany. Another conclusion emerging from the analyses is that Romanian historical fiction, conceived as a “contemporary literary mode” (Manshel 2023, 17), articulates a neo-hermetic aesthetic (Braga 1995) that transcends postmodernity and narrative univocality. It stratifies historical references with allegorical and intertextual tropes, turning “zemiperipheral” spaces into *loci* of transculturation – thus creating dynamic epistemic archives that engage the reader in a transnational interpretive dialectic. The third conclusion conceptualizes hyperconnectivity as a porous narrative topology. Post-1990 Romanian historical fiction employs history as a

series of what can be described as “interchangeable units” (Deckard, Niblett & Shapiro 2024, 92), crafting porous narrative frameworks that integrate elements of realism, the speculative, and allegory. The “contemporary literary model” developed by Romanian historical fiction over the past thirty-five years is characterized by two primary components: firstly, an evolutionary trajectory that eschews a definitive postmodern phase marked by distinct features, instead favoring a gradual dilution of benchmarks proposed by Hutcheon. Secondly, there is a notable reliance on traditional narrative tools to establish connections with a “new history” – a form of historiographical discourse that communicates across temporal boundaries and engages with multiple layers of epochs simultaneously. Central to this model is the “revisiting” of cultural spaces within Romanian literature, a process that often takes place in the *zempiperiferia* of cultural and political influences – areas or zones that are neither fully central nor entirely marginal but serve as liminal spaces where different centers of power intersect and mediate the cultural discourse. Additionally, this framework is shaped by the reader’s experience, who appears to engage with a “time machine” during the act of reading historical fiction. This act effectively enables the production of knowledge for the contemporary reader, serving as a mechanism that bolsters the coherence of literature’s role in the present-day cultural and intellectual landscape.

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THE POST-COMMUNIST ROMANIAN NOVEL – NAVIGATING THE POLITICAL AND SOCIOGRAPHIC DIMENSIONS

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ABSTRACT. *The Post-Communist Romanian Novel – Navigating the Political and Sociographic Dimensions.* The transition from communism to capitalism in Eastern Europe has been profoundly destabilising, reshaping economic, social, political, and ideological structures. This upheaval not only amplified the uneven development of the Soviet era but also replicated its harshness through neoliberal economic shock therapy, underscoring systemic inequalities between Western centres and Eastern peripheries. Drawing on Wallerstein’s world-systems theory, this relationship symbolises an unequal structural power relationship, with the periphery’s cultural and economic output subjugated to the demands of the centre (WReC, 2015). In literature, these dynamics have triggered a significant genre shift, particularly in the Romanian novel. The memorial and biographical forms increasingly dominate, marking a dissolution of traditional novelistic structures in favour of fragmented, introspective, and hybrid narratives. These forms align with broader trends of precariousness and cultural commodification, mirroring the destabilising effects of transition (Adriana Stan, 2020). Before Romania’s 2007 EU accession, post-communist

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novels primarily adopted a historiographical approach to document systemic trauma (Vasile Ernu, Lucian Dan Teodorovici, Dan Lungu). Post-accession, these works shifted to a commodified exploration of (post)communist memory, with narratives addressing economic disparities and minority identities (Tatiana Țîbuleac, Liliana Nechita, Adrian Schiop). This shift reflects the master-slave dynamic of centre-periphery relations, where the West's exoticisation of communist experiences reinforces systemic inequalities. The dissolution of the Romanian novel into memorial and biographical forms symbolises a dual response: a critique of transitional instability and a capitulation to Western frameworks of cultural consumption.

Keywords: *(post)communist memory, nostalgia, transition, the post-communist Romanian novel, sociographic dimensions, world-systems theory.*

REZUMAT. Romanul postcomunist în România – reconfigurări ale politicului și paliere sociografice. Tranziția de la comunism la capitalism în Europa de Est a fost profund destabilizatoare, privitor la impactarea structurilor economice, sociale, politice și ideologice. Această bulversare de tranziție sistemică și-a replicat duritatea prin terapia de șoc neoliberală, subliniind inegalitățile dintre centrele occidentale și periferiile estice. Pornind de la teoria sistemelor-lume a lui Wallerstein, această relație simbolizează un raport de putere structural inegală, arătând cum producția culturală și economică a periferiei e subjugată cerințelor centrului (WReC, 2015). În literatura română, aceste dinamici au declanșat schimbări semnificative, în special în roman. Resuscitarea biografismului și autenticismului domină din ce în ce mai mult, marcând o disoluție a structurilor românești tradiționale în favoarea narațiunilor fragmentate, introspective și hibride. Aceste forme se aliniază tendințelor mai largi de precaritate și comodificare culturală, reflectând efectele destabilizatoare ale tranziției (Adriana Stan, 2020). Înainte de aderarea României la UE în 2007, romanele douămiiste au adoptat în principal o direcție istoriografică pentru a documenta trauma sistemică (Vasile Ernu, Lucian Dan Teodorovici, Dan Lungu). După aderare, poate fi observată o comodificare a memoriei (post)comuniste, fiind preferate narațiuni care abordează disparitățile economice și identitățile minoritare (Tatiana Țîbuleac, Liliana Nechita, Adrian Schiop). Această schimbare reflectă dinamica stăpân-sclav a relațiilor centru-periferie, în care exotizarea de către Occident a experiențelor comuniste consolidează inegalitățile sistemice.

Cuvinte-cheie: *memoria (post)comunistă, nostalgia, tranziție, romanul românesc postcomunist, dimensiuni sociografice, teoria sistemelor-lume.*

Introduction

“Why did Neoliberalism Triumph and Endure in the Post-Communist World?” is one of the central questions explored by Hilary Appel and Mitchell A. Orenstein in their article of the same name. The authors observe that, across the former communist bloc, there was an extraordinary eagerness to adopt the new neoliberal capitalist order—an enthusiasm largely unmatched in societies without a totalitarian past (Appel and Orenstein 2016, 313). This attitude can be explained, on the one hand, by the revolutionary fervour and the collective hope for systemic transformation that followed the collapse of communism and, on the other hand, by the growing economic competition from East Asia and the ideological consolidation of neoliberalism itself. These factors exerted considerable pressure on Eastern European countries to rapidly integrate into the dominant global structures emerging in the age of globalisation (327).

The phenomenon has become almost obsessive—not only in terms of its chronic persistence and far-reaching consequences but also within academic discourse, where scholars from various disciplines interpret infrastructural transformations in their respective fields as symptomatic of globalisation. In this context, Marius Babias identifies three *topoi* of globalisation, demonstrating how it subversively and persistently reshapes the key dimensions through which a society is represented: the economic, the geopolitical, and the cultural. At the economic level, the first *topos* refers to the intensified logic of competition driven by global stock markets—an enthusiasm that conceals the failures of neoliberalism while simultaneously reinforcing Western political hegemony over Eastern Europe and perpetuating precarious labour conditions in the Global South (Babias 2024, 17–18). Secondly, the erosion of geographical boundaries in favour of a centralised global market—and the accompanying geopolitical restructuring of nation-states—has been justified through the instrumentalisation of ideals such as equality and fraternity, drawn from the French Revolution. These principles were invoked in support of dismantling hierarchies and eliminating differentiation; however, the outcome has been quite the opposite (Babias 2024, 18). On the cultural front, Babias notes that the increasing dominance of certain forms of the visual—such as commercial imagery and media representations—over other modes of cultural expression has fundamentally altered the role of art and culture, which are now subordinated to the global market and compelled to respond to its demands (20). This dominance refers not to the visual nature of art itself but to the growing influence of visual forms driven by the market logic, which shape and often limit cultural production.

It is true that literature no longer functions solely under the banner of direct political engagement as it did in communism; rather, it operates within a tension shaped by the infrastructures of the global market. Nevertheless, it retains the capacity to reactivate dormant cultural and social conflicts through aesthetic and narrative strategies. In this light, it seems essential to renew the dialogue between the political and the aesthetic—a relationship long interrogated by thinkers such as Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Slavoj Žižek. These theorists have rightly questioned how one might avoid reinforcing political conflicts or legitimising oppressive ideological positions (such as fascism) through aesthetic means which, once absorbed into the artistic field, risk being absolved of critique or responsibility (Kornbluh 2019, 2–3). This concern is taken further by theorists such as Jacques Rancière, for whom the artistic act is inherently political, insofar as it imposes an ethics upon social realities, granting visibility to those voices that are typically marginalised or ignored (3). This is why I find Anna Kornbluh’s preferred framework particularly compelling—namely, the concept of mediation, which she recuperates from the Marxist tradition and rearticulates as a tool for a dialectic specific to aesthetics. More precisely, her intervention moves beyond Rancière’s comparatively passive model, which merely highlights ruptures within the shared social order by rendering them perceptible. In contrast, Kornbluh offers a projective model in which the identification of tension is insufficient unless accompanied by a search for formal mechanisms to resolve it—through figuration, design, and construction—all of which she situates under the rubric of mediation (Kornbluh 2019, 6).

Last but not least, in light of the ongoing revalorisation of the political as a constant feature of both social and aesthetic structures—yet one that must be continuously redefined in relation to context—I turn to Fredric Jameson’s perspective. According to Jameson, the contemporary orientation of ideological analysis, that is, the way in which we interpret the cultural reverberations of ideology, dissolves traditional dichotomies between the political in its institutional form and the political as expressed aesthetically. Whereas the former was once confined to official discourse, and the latter relegated to the realm of art and culture, Jameson contends that all symbolic activity is political. Every form of social or cultural practice carries an ideological subtext, whether explicit or latent (Jameson 2009, 349–350). Even at the risk of conflating a transitive, classical conception of politics with a subversive, implicit one, such an analysis enables a form of symbolic resistance—literary discourse being a case in point—against the reification and privatisation of contemporary life. The only viable path through which the individual might liberate themselves from the constraints of late modern society lies in relinquishing the belief that anything

stands outside the social and historical apparatus. Even the most intimate or private gesture is shaped by practices naturalised at the macrostructural level, and the very impulse to attribute meaning to it is, in itself, political: “The only effective liberation from such constraint begins with the recognition that there is nothing that is not social and historical – indeed, that everything is «in the last analysis» political” (2002, 4).

Building on the methodological framework outlined above, this paper examines the evolution of the Romanian and Bessarabian post-communist novel before and after the pivotal year of 2007—marking Romania’s accession to the European Union. More specifically, I argue that the contemporary novel in both Romania and Bessarabia, prior to 2007, tends to favour narrative discourses centred on nostalgia, understood as a response to the fervent anti-communism of the neo-Western period and to the uneven and ultimately failed transition from communism to capitalist democracy in the local context. After 2007, while this nostalgic tendency remains detectable, it is increasingly accompanied—if not replaced—by the commodification of (post)communist memory. In this later phase, narratives foregrounding economic inequality emerge either in alternation with or alongside a heightened interest in marginalised and minority identities. This shift signals a sociographic rather than mnemonic or historical investment in the political, with literary attention turning toward themes such as the Romani and queer communities, Romania–Moldova geopolitical relations, gender hierarchies, mass migration, and the representational politics of the body. From this perspective, the alignment of Rancière’s position—emphasising the re-legitimation of unheard voices through the redistribution of the sensible (Rancière 2000, 12)—with Kornbluh’s focus on the literary-aesthetic mediation of such voices offers a productive theoretical framework. Kornbluh’s approach is particularly attentive to the formal mechanisms through which literature addresses these dynamics, including the narrative privileging of the first-person voice via autofiction or by assigning such a voice to a fictional character. This convergence opens the way for a broader discussion on the significance of reparative writing as a political and aesthetic strategy.

Thus, the contemporary novel operates within a dual dynamic: on the one hand, it internalises the instability inherent in the post-communist transition, particularly as it manifests in economic and social spheres; on the other, it becomes enmeshed in a process of (symbolic) capital accumulation by aligning itself with the logic of the Western cultural market. Within this market, the narrativisation of (post)communist experience is not approached as documentary testimony but rather consumed as a form of exoticism—despite the thematic heterogeneity advanced by the authors themselves. For this reason, before turning to the primary texts under analysis, I will first offer a brief contextualisation

of (Romanian) post-communism, considering its economic and sociological dimensions, alongside the transformations undergone by literature and its institutional frameworks.

Postcommunism in Eastern Europe. Economic and social-mental aspects

The transition from communism to capitalism in Eastern Europe has been characterised by profound economic, social, political, and cultural transformations. These shifts were not merely destabilising because they dismantled discredited communist structures but because they fractured previously established developmental models, seeking to replace them with distorted frameworks largely incompatible with the socio-material legacies of the communist era. The dehumanising violence of the former regime was matched—and in some respects even surpassed—by the neoliberal reconfiguration that sought to impose market democracy through a form of economic shock therapy (WReC 2015, 119). Within this context of structural dissonance between transitional objectives and the material and historical conditions of former communist societies, Grigore Pop-Eleches and Joshua A. Tucker identify three dimensions through which the legacy of both communism and the transition itself can be differentiated. Firstly, they observe that in several post-communist states, including Romania, the collapse of communism took on a highly symbolic—even mythologised—character, insofar as it embodied a belief in protest as a sufficient and legitimate means of influencing political change. Secondly, the transition also contributed to a social cleavage—not necessarily along generational lines, but rather between perceived “winners” and “losers” of the post-communist era. This division emerged between those who continued to defend the values or perceived securities of communism and a younger, post-transition generation more attuned to the promises of capitalist democracy. Finally, a distinct temporality has come to define the collective experience of these historical phases. While communist memory is typically relegated to a closed and conclusively “past” episode, the experience of transition is perceived as dynamic, fragmented, and continually shifting. It is seen less as a completed stage and more as an ongoing process, whose meaning is plural and subjectively inflected at the individual level (Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2011, 380).

In this context, Juliet Johnson identifies two principal theoretical orientations concerning the interpretation of the post-communist experience. On one side stand agency-centred approaches, which maintain that the legacies of the past can be effectively overcome, provided that the appropriate institutional

and policy mechanisms are in place. On the other side are structure-based theories, which view such optimism as overly radical and potentially hazardous, arguing instead that enduring structural constraints significantly limit the scope of transformation: “Agency-centered theorists express optimism that correct policy choices can overcome the legacies of the past, while structure-based theorists believe the legacies trump choice and bar radical change” (Johnson 2001, 254). Accordingly, agency-centred theories tend to be favoured by neoclassical economists, who assign a central role to economic elites in driving a society’s developmental trajectory. In contrast, structure-based approaches are typically advanced by scholars working within evolutionary or sociological frameworks, where institutional change is understood to follow a path-dependent logic shaped by historical patterns of development (254). Although Romania’s adoption of neoliberal capitalist ideology was initially more measured than that of the Baltic States or Poland, this was due to Romanian leaders’ early attempts during the neo-Western period to reconcile elements of the traditional developmentalist model—namely, a strong state with an active economic role—with market-orientated transitional measures (neo-developmentalism). However, under mounting pressure from international economic actors, Romania abruptly embraced neoliberalism in the late 1990s, subjected to similarly stringent and disheartening transition policies (Ban 2014, 154–155). In terms of economic relations, a semi-peripheral state such as Romania finds itself at a distinct disadvantage compared to peripheral states, as it occupies an intermediate position—caught between the influence exerted by core states and the monopoly it must maintain over more disadvantaged states to remain viable (Wallerstein 2004, 29–30). This predicament is further compounded by the partial nature of such relationships, as exemplified by Romania’s ties with the Republic of Moldova, thus complicating its enduring state of transition.

In tandem with these economic challenges, a socio-psychological phenomenon emerged during the post-communist transition: anti-communism became the prevailing ideology. This stance was chiefly advanced through moral arguments designed to irrevocably expunge the communist legacy by identifying and emphasising faults that would justify and reinforce such a resentful perspective (Poenaru 2017, 141). In the absence of a coherent plan for the future to address the irregularities of a society in economic, political, cultural, and ideological disarray, the propagation of anti-communism functioned as a pernicious strategy to sidestep the real issues facing transitional society by focusing exclusively on a (distant) past. As Florin Poenaru observes, “Anticommunism had nothing to say about the present of the transition. While being occupied with transitional justice (directed against former communists),

anticommunism overlooked the injustices caused by the transition to the most vulnerable segments of society” (141-142, my translation). Furthermore, the adoption of transitional neoliberalism “inspired the change of history in the former Eastern Bloc” (Ban 2014, 88), since, as Cornel Ban argues, it reinforced the hierarchical control exerted by the state, combined with private capitalism, over the working class—stripped of its socioeconomic rights and further weakened by diminished employment opportunities under this new dynamic (89). Thus, anti-communism distilled these economic transformations into clearly delineated political class interests, with the objective—through the criminalisation of the communist experience—of legitimising processes of “re-appropriation, restitution, and privatisation, driven not solely by an ideological conviction in the merits of private property but also by tangible material class interests” (Poenaru 2017, 143).

Concurrently, many of the economic deficiencies encountered during the transition period were rooted in the socialist system itself, which had left a significant proportion of the population economically illiterate. As a result, large sections of society were ill-equipped to grasp either the micro- or macroeconomic context, being unfamiliar with the instruments and mechanisms characteristic of a modern economy (Murgescu 2010, 465). Furthermore, the surge in consumption after 1990—facilitated by the disintegration of state authority (466)—together with the consolidation of a “predatory economy,” centred on the emergence of new economic and political elites through primitive capital accumulation, contributed to the marginalisation and even dissolution of the proletariat. This was largely due to the ascendance of a new privileged class drawn from the former ranks of party officials and members of Ceaușescu’s Securitate (466–467). Moreover, the destabilising effect was compounded by the emergence of contradictory positions in post-communist Romania: on the one hand, severe criticism of the new capitalist class as corrupt, and on the other, unwavering support for the market economy and privatisation—policies which, in practice, had served to benefit this very class (Pasti 2006, 200). Vladimir Pasti interprets this paradox as stemming from the simultaneous internalisation of both Marxist and Leninist doctrines. More precisely, this dynamic entailed framing capitalism as an inevitable good, yet one that must be enforced through coercive means—via unpopular reforms and the marginalisation of particular social groups. Within this logic, a politically legitimised “reformist” elite claimed the right to control, and even repress, the population, while simultaneously exhibiting pronounced hostility towards the new capitalists, who were at times perceived as adversaries of their own system (202–203). In this context, the Romanian intelligentsia constructed and sustained an ideology largely divorced from global economic realities, advancing three central tenets: (1) the glorification

of the “small owner”; (2) the disregard of the role played by large capital and international corporations in modern capitalism; and (3) the portrayal of capital solely in negative terms, rather than recognising it as a global economic phenomenon (211).

To conclude this section—where I have sought to contextualise conditions beyond the aesthetic, precisely because my interest lies in a political reading of the novels analysed in the subsequent chapters—it is important to emphasise that the failure of the transition cannot be attributed to a form of colonialism exercised by the USSR over the countries of the former communist bloc. Rather, this notion serves as a convenient justification employed by neoliberal capitalism to legitimise its unsuccessful reforms. As Boris Buden elucidates, it is inaccurate to speak of colonialism in the former communist states, given the absence of a distinct colonial centre; notably, even Russia was among the countries advocating for the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Buden 2020, 43). As previously discussed, the root causes reside in the inherent contradictions of the transition process, which pursued primarily political rather than economic objectives, thereby complicating the adaptation of Eastern European nations to a neoliberal market economy. This challenge was compounded by their marginal position “with the forms of communication and lifestyle of advanced capitalism” (44) and by systemic infrastructures that proved incompatible with Western intervention—a dynamic that also reverberated within the literary sphere.

From this perspective, the observations outlined by Andrew Baruch Wachtel prove particularly insightful, as he identifies three principal limitations faced by post-communist authors, structured along thematic, ideological, social, and formal lines. On the thematic front, I return to Mihail Iovănel’s earlier observation regarding writers educated under communism: while the literary field was officially shaped by the partisan constraints of socialist realism, it also included forms of opposition, substitution, and strategies for circumventing censorship. Once the political framework that promoted socialist realism collapsed, authors who had developed their voices—whether within, against, or alongside this official model—were compelled to devise new thematic approaches that could not be exhausted simply by the regime’s disappearance. At the social level, there is a loss of the symbolic, almost messianic role that writers once held; following communism’s fall, they became a less prominent social class. Finally, from a formal standpoint, post-communist writers grapple with questioning the novel’s suitability as a form to represent post-communist realities, given the instability of social conditions and the absence of stable reference points within the neoliberal world into which they were abruptly thrust. For these writers, the fictional realm seeks a gravitational centre

grounded in representations of the real; yet, within an alienating, fragmented, and disorienting reality, the laws governing imagined worlds become similarly compromised (Wachtel 2006, 166).

Thus, when Iovănel discusses the literary forms explored in the post-communist era, he frames them as part of an ongoing struggle to confront “the destructured cultural market of post-communism, which is in the process of neoliberalisation” (Iovănel 2021, 275, my translation). The distinction between communism and post-communism is sharply drawn: under the totalitarian regime, points of resistance were largely imposed by the dogmatic nature of the system, enforced centrally through censorship, whereas in post-communism, writers must identify these points of resistance independently and adapt them to new social realities—often without the financial backing previously provided by the state (273). Nevertheless, despite this anarchic positioning—which attempts to mitigate the fragmented backdrop of the transition, the principal site for the aggregation of the precariat—the postcommunist prose of the early 2000s becomes permeated by a discourse that aligns with neoliberal ideology, notably through its conformity with the dominant anti-communist narrative (Stan 2020, 4).

Naturally, this tendency arose from the fact that intellectuals who had identified as dissidents during the communist period found themselves largely overshadowed by authors and critics advocating (neo)liberalism, often simultaneously amplifying conservative agendas to their fullest extent (Poenaru 2017, 146–147). The centrality of the concept of ‘memory’ within anti-communist discourse carried a dual function, constructed along two axes: one emotional, tied to the victims of communism; the other moral, somewhat consequent upon the former, aimed at establishing a didactic framework intended to prevent the repetition of past errors. In this context, I consider it crucial to highlight Marius Babias’s observation that, during the neo-Western period, the cultural sphere has progressively shifted towards the right, promoting ostensibly democratic values designed to consolidate neoliberal capitalist democracy as the sole legitimate political form in which the individual can truly be free, especially when contrasted with the former communist regimes. This politics simultaneously seeks to sensitise society through the continual invocation of a demonised past on every possible occasion (Babias 2024, 40).

This distribution was thus designed to render anti-communism permanent (Poenaru 2017, 150–151), functioning as a salvific practice alongside neoliberal ideology, which presents itself as the best of all possible worlds—often without the cognisant subjects fully perceiving these underlying ideological manipulations. As Mark Fisher, following Žižek, explains, this evasion of transitive discourse represents one of the perversities of neoliberal capitalism: even when individuals

recognise this dynamic and attempt self-distancing, they ultimately reproduce it endlessly through their actions (Fisher 2009, 46). Such discourse challenges the reductive treatment of communism and cultural memory as little more than a handful of clichés, thereby allowing for a more nuanced re-examination of recent history: “Therefore, the understanding of the communist past was reduced to a few easily identifiable and reiterable clichés, to a few commonplaces that produced, through repetition and successive citation, effects with the epistemic character of truth” (Poenaru 2017, 150, my translation). It is only in the latter half of the 2000s that prose discourse undergoes restructuring, re-centring fictional scenarios as mechanisms for revisiting the past (Stan 2020, 5). The most effective means of achieving this is through characters enabling what Alex Goldiș terms mnemonic pluriperspectivism, following Astrid Erll’s framework (Goldiș 2020, 385). As Adriana Stan observes, following 1989, Romania witnessed a pronounced yearning for cultural realism. Films, literature, music, and television began to depict life “as it is,” reflecting the lifting of communist censorship. Literature turned towards truth and authenticity, even at the expense of fiction and lyricism, marking a significant departure from previous trends (Stan 2021, 3). Yet, although Romanian literary realism experienced a notable moment at the turn of the millennium, it proved a short-lived phenomenon and failed to firmly establish itself within the local cultural landscape, which remained shaped by the legacies of socialist realism and the ideological ambiguities of the period. After 2008, literature largely returned to fiction, with critical realism persisting only in isolated projects. While limited in scope, these works continued to offer a trenchant critique of the economic and social consequences of the transition (10), thus underpinning the sociographic orientation of the post-2007 novel, as I will demonstrate below.

The Contemporary Novel Pre-2007: Communist Nostalgia – The Decompression of the Neoliberal Shock and the Facilitation of Capitalist Discourse within the Unconscious of Form

Building upon the theoretical considerations and the contextualisation of post-communism—economic, socio-mental, and literary—outlined in the preceding section, I argue that one of the foundational premises for any discussion of communist nostalgia is that the phenomenon itself functions as a decompression of the neoliberal shock experienced by the countries of the former communist bloc. In line with this idea, the Romanian literature of the 2000s published prior to 2007 employs a bidirectional nostalgic discourse. On the one hand, it seeks to decentralise the predominantly anti-communist

discourse characteristic of the 1990s, beneath whose surface the inadequacies of the transition were concealed or minimised through their juxtaposition with the horrors of Soviet realities. On the other hand, nostalgia is refracted through the exoticisation of Eastern Europe by the West, coming to operate as a mechanism of naturalisation—and even internalisation—of capitalist neoliberalism. This refraction occurs via melancholic attitudes towards the past, which are projected and imposed by the West, always constructed in comparison with the East. The fragmented and fissured reality it proposes can only expose its landmarks through a dialectical relationship, thereby reinforcing its articulatory mechanisms.

In this regard, the context that established nostalgia as a reaction—initially socio-mental—in the countries of Eastern Europe, and specifically within the local sphere, was the onset of a professionally rooted alienation naturalised chiefly among the working class. This was primarily due to unemployment, compounded by precarious wages, deindustrialisation, and an education system detached from the vocational demands of the industrial sector, instead orientated towards business initiation and foreign language acquisition to facilitate integration with the West (Todorova 2010, 5–6). This dynamic, driven by the need to align with Western rhythms, did not originate solely in the post-communist period but also has its roots in the retroactive legacy of interrupted modernity within East European spaces. The transition from communism to neoliberalism presented a new opportunity for resynchronisation with the West, whose supposed tolerance in fact entailed a demand for universalisation, underpinned by a policy of inclusion of the former communist states, without which their survival would be untenable (Buden 2020, 82). Dominic Boyer insightfully observes that the valorisation of an image of Eastern primitiveness—educated only in relation to the prerogatives of Western neoliberal culture—already constitutes an attitude of marginalisation rather than inclusion (Boyer 2010, 22). The West feels compelled to issue this diagnosis of the slowed economic, political, and cultural development of former communist societies precisely to position itself as the future for these nations, infantilising them in the process as a historical justification for colonising, civilising, or dominating them—a post-imperial symptom (22–23).

At the literary level, these aspects have been formalised through an exploration of the biographical dimension, employed both as a means of authentication and as a means to lay bare an unjust reality. Thus, the socially fractured atmosphere of the 2000s is documented, where nostalgia functioned alternately as a platform for the revival of nationalism and as an encouragement of consumerist practices or integration into the European Union. The preferred actantial typology is that of the young person marked by profound existential crises, whose condition often corresponds with the squalid living conditions of

the capital or provincial areas—a tableau emerging from the new, bankrupt realities (Stan 2020, 3). Consequently, the novels I will analyse in this chapter are of interest not only thematically—since all address communist nostalgia, the divide between the Soviet and neoliberal worlds, and the responses of individuals or collectives to infrastructural changes wrought by transitional society—but also formally, as I find it compelling how the chosen narrative procedures reflect on and represent processes of memory.

As noted in the introductory section, this approach is underpinned by the theoretical frameworks advanced by Anna Kornbluh and Fredric Jameson, who harmonise psychoanalytic coordinates with formal analyses as mechanisms for restoring political representations within the symbolic structures of social life (Kornbluh 2019, 140). In this context, social structure is not external to effects but rather immanent to them; this does not necessarily entail a strict transitivity but, on the contrary, must be continuously decoded within the implicit meanings of the discursive forms employed (Jameson 2002, 9). This emphasis on procedural aspects also reflects Jacques Lacan’s modification of the Saussurean relation between signifier and signified, disrupting their equivalence. For the French psychoanalyst, the primacy of the signifier is crucial, as it possesses the capacity to organise the unconscious, whose form may retroactively intervene in the subject’s meaning-making processes (Kornbluh 2019, 145). The novels I propose to analyse in this section are therefore: *Născut în URSS* [*Born in USSR*, 2006, my translation] by Vasile Ernu—a testimonial novel with a monologic form; *Circul nostru vă prezintă*: [*Our Circus Presents*, 2001, my translation] by Lucian Dan Teodorovici—a novel that dialogues with the narrative voice within an alienating context, ultimately restoring it to the hegemonic narrator; and *Raiul găinilor* [*The Paradise of the Chickens*, 2004, my translation] by Dan Lungu—a polyphonic, heterodox novel. I will consider them in turn.

Camouflaged behind a narrative voice that is often serene and naïve (Iovănel 2021, 43-44), Vasile Ernu does not hesitate to emphasise that the glorification of Soviet childhood functions as a driving force that exposes the shortcomings of the new post-communist order, which employs similar discursive forms to manipulate the masses (Goldiş 2020, 387), thus revealing the new form of repression that has supplanted the communist one: “If the world I lived in was based on political repression, the world I entered is based on economic repression. They are two sides of the same coin. Both are forms of repression and control” (Ernu 2020, 243, my translation). The context of the novel’s publication is also significant, as it does not simply respond to the anti-communist discourse of the 1990s but emerges as a cultural reflex following President Traian Băsescu’s 2006 condemnation of communism. Ernu thus feels justified in criticising the paternalistic anti-communism that had become quite

entrenched in recent years, despite the fragility of the arguments on which it was founded (Iovănel 2021, 44). Formally, with regard to the monologic nature of this testimonial and mnemonic novel, *Născut în URSS* [*Born in USSR*, 2006, my translation], Ernu's narrative voice is hybrid. On one hand, the analyst's discourse predominates—explained by Jameson through Lacan's schema as a position legitimised by an interdependent relation between subject and object of desire, yet balanced by a dialectical distance, where the analyst seeks to distinguish between the object of desire itself and the immediacies of the subject's experience of desire, suggesting a politically demanding and egoistic equivalent (Jameson 2008, 117-118). This voice prevails throughout the volume as it calmly inventories the cultural specificities of the Soviet world (music, films, books, etc.). On the other hand, there is an affinity for the discourse of the hysteric—namely, a mode of enunciation concerned with representing symptoms and points of tension that provoke anarchic attitudes against a perceived inadequate authority (117). This latter voice is unveiled at the novel's conclusion, denouncing systemic metamorphoses and categorising individuals into three types: the Cynic, the Opportunist (who would readily revert to communism if necessary), and the Sceptic—the most vulnerable figure under the neoliberal order (Ernu 2020, 239-241). The monologic narrative structure of *Born in USSR* serves as a crucial site of psychoanalytic mediation (Anna Kornbluh), articulating the fractured subjectivities shaped by post-communist neoliberal trauma. The narrative voice oscillates between the analytic position—aiming to dissect and make sense of collective memory—and the hysteric position—expressing resistance and symptomatic anxiety towards the imposed socio-political order. This formal interplay reveals how trauma is not simply recounted but mediated through the form itself, as the narrator negotiates tensions between past and present, repression and economic control. Through this hybrid discourse, the novel enacts a decompression of neoliberal shock, demonstrating how the unconscious of form reflects the complexities of memory and ideological contestation in transitional Eastern Europe.

With regard to Lucian Dan Teodorovici, *Circul nostru vă prezintă*: [*Our Circus Presents*, 2001, my translation] formally explores a form of internal dialogisation. Although the dominant discursive position is held by a first-person narrator, this voice lends itself to other actants, whose positions are subsequently interrogated through the lens of the narrator-character, who either validates or rejects them. What strikes me as particularly noteworthy in this novel is that, despite the absence of a specific chronotope, the motley community of apartment-block neighbours, the narrative vector consistently orientated towards the periphery and identities of the precariat—the predominant typology of the disillusioned subject—allows one to intuit a society in (post)transition.

This is marked by the usual clichés: increasing prostitution rates and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases; begging as a new cultural practice in transitional Romania, where children are exploited by parents to beg; economic instability portrayed as an alienating and disruptive force in social order; and so forth. Linking these social markers, which form the structural fabric of the novel, with formal analysis, I argue that Teodorovici's work can be firmly situated within Jameson's ideological critique concerning the representation of history. The theorist contends that cultural discourse always contains both a synchronic dimension—seen as a closed unity—and a diachronic one, the historical narrative flow. He explains that synchronic sequences, often read as a plurality of narratives associated with multiple individuals, ultimately convey a subsidiary diachronic historical narrative when they communicate among themselves, sometimes implicitly (Jameson 2002, 13). In this respect, the opaque or absent chronotope in *Our Circus Presents*: permits this void to be filled by the protagonist's identity crisis—an hysterical subject—which converges with the collective crisis of the characters he interacts with, projecting the shape of history and transition into the implicit form and alienating atmosphere of the novel.

The entire prose experiment centres on the protagonist's repeated inability to commit suicide, despite daily attempts. This creates space for each character to narrate their story, fostering the illusion that they have saved him from death. The internal dialogisation of the novel unfolds through the sharing of the narrative voice. On one side is the hanged man, whom the narrator rescues and whose suicidal impulse fascinates him, even as he knows the man will be saved by the station staff. On the other side, the dialogical construction occurs via the relationship with the former theologian, who shifts to economic studies in order to afford the sexual services provided by prostitutes. His discourse mobilises three key themes: desacralisation of society—not necessarily in a religious sense but as a sign of a pathological spirituality; the commodification of sexual acts; and the normalisation or obsession with suicide as an artistic act. Internal dialogisation functions as long as the narrator permits it within the text's symbolic economy, ultimately invalidating both discourses in turn. A telling moment is the novel's final scene, where the dissolution of dialogical formalisation and the restoration of monological order is signalled by the contrast between the narrator's continuous, clear laughter and the fragmented, intermittent laughter of the hanged man, which accompanies, in a muted fashion, the central narrative voice: "A few moments later, in this so quiet overnight triage, only our laughter was heard. Mine, a prolonged burst, for which, if necessary, I could find no explanation. His, a companion laugh, tortured, faltering in repeated fits of coughing" (Teodorovici 2020, 194, my translation).

I conclude this section by casting a brief glance at the polyphonic novel, constructed as a mechanism for the democratisation of actantial voices, which Bakhtin defines as a narrative universe governed by “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses” (Bakhtin 1984, 6). In the post-2000 Romanian novel, these principles are deployed in a particular way, reflecting the centripetal forces of capitalist structures. Drawing from Dostoevsky’s oeuvre, the Russian theorist explains that in a polyphonic narrative, characters are not mere discursive objects of authorial positioning; rather, they autonomously assert their own consciousnesses within the novel, liberated from the hegemony of the omniscient narrator, thereby subjectivising their appearances within the story (7). An additional ideological observation Bakhtin makes, following Otto Kaus, is that narrative polyphony is characteristic of the capitalist world-system, which cannot find a more conducive systemic order for its coagulation. This arises because capitalism claims credit for dispersing the social unity characteristic of other forms of representing reality, which, now fragmented, can no longer respond to a single, individual voice. Instead, it becomes polyvocal and plural against the backdrop of intensified class struggles and ideological dysfunctions that formerly operated in a monologic fashion with a clearly defined vectorial direction (19-20). This is the very source of the hybridisation between hysterical and analytic discourses that are dispersed within the multifaceted narrative universe. The novel’s internal dialogisation functions as a psychoanalytic mechanism that mediates the fragmented and alienated post-communist subject. The shifting narrative voices, controlled yet allowing marginal perspectives to surface, mirror the hysterical subject’s struggle to represent and process social trauma under neoliberalism. The formal tension between multiplicity and the eventual restoration of a monologic order reflects a dynamic unconscious negotiation: the desire for dialogue and inclusion contends with dominant ideological forces that silence or absorb dissent. This dialogical form thus mediates the historical and psychic fractures of post-communist society, embodying the decompression of the neoliberal shock within the narrative’s symbolic structure.

A pertinent example is Dan Lungu’s *Raiul găinilor* [*The Paradise of the Chickens*, 2004, my translation], where I found it symptomatic how polyphony is here both remixed and, to some extent, heretical. Although diffuse, the narrative voice continues to direct the storytelling, sliding smoothly into the pluralised actantial universe. This narrative partitioning, as deployed by Lungu, operates on two levels: first, the narrator lends his voice to all characters wishing to appropriate it, acting as the organiser of all conversations, thereby imparting a sense of paternalistic tenderness. According to this underlying stance, the actants cannot attain discursive autonomy without him; hence the

notion of a heretical/remixed polyphony where narrative hegemony remains concealed. Democratisation of the narrative discourse occurs through actantial interpolations, behind which the narrator dilutes his superior position by inserting into his own discourse certain verbal tics or phrases specific to a particular character, faithfully reproducing and addressing them through quotation marks and the name of the respective actant in parentheses: “After a while, the ‘skinny ones’ (Mrs Stegaru) would come out and continue, with an increased mischievous glee, the stone-throwing into the foul water or some other improvised game” (Lungu 2012, 45, my translation).

Second, narrative sharing also occurs internally whenever a character recounts a story, such as Milica’s visit to the Colonel’s house or the stories about the communist era marked by the humanisation of the Ceaușescu figure by the character Mitu. Thus, a subjectivisation of collective memory takes place, framed informally and restored by those who lived it more or less directly, often with characters allowing themselves to interfere with others’ stories if their coordinates have changed since the last telling. Furthermore, the narrator clearly empathises with the nostalgic communist discourse, despite maintaining a balance between depicting the shortcomings of the last decade of the Ceaușescu period and the problem of transition, intensified by the awareness and sharpening of class struggle. The latter is best expressed through the hatred shared by all characters towards the Colonel, whose story is diffuse and who never receives the narrator’s direct voice. At the opposite pole stands Relu Covalciuc, the most privileged actantial position in the novel, granted the greatest expressive space within the narrative economy, including moments of introspection filtered through free indirect style, such as his dream sequence spanning several pages, which functions both as a legitimating instrument for the nostalgic discourse and as direct irony aimed at the transition. This is yet another reason why polyphony in some post-2000 Romanian novels does not resonate with the strict theoretical sense theorised by Bakhtin, since even the characters are not equal amongst themselves and cannot therefore claim an egalitarian status with the central narrative position. The novel employs a remixed polyphony that enacts a complex psychoanalytic mediation of post-communist memory and trauma. While the narrator retains control, the plural voices of characters reveal the fragmented, contested nature of collective subjectivity under capitalism’s centrifugal pressures. This hybrid narrative form embodies the tension between the hegemonic narrative voice and marginalised perspectives, reflecting the ongoing struggle for discursive autonomy in a society marked by class conflict and ideological dysfunction. Through this polyphonic yet hierarchical structure, the novel formalises the mediation of unconscious social processes, illustrating how trauma and memory are negotiated within and through the literary form itself.

The Post-2007 Novel: Reintegrating the Political through Sociographic Perspectives in Contemporary Literature

With the exhaustion of the nostalgic discourse—and by this, I do not mean its disappearance but rather its decentralisation after 2007 (Romania's accession to the European Union)—the contemporary post-2000 novel in both Romania and Moldova undergoes a significant reconfiguration. There is a marked shift in the way the past is reclaimed, towards the commodification of memory. By this, I refer to the transformation of personal and collective recollections into cultural products with an exchange value in local and transnational markets, where their appeal often lies in their perceived authenticity or exoticism. Authors no longer approach this at an absolutist level but rather mobilise the frames of communist trauma and the shortcomings of transition to sharpen the sociographic dimension of their writing, reflecting the alienation wrought by capitalism. Thematically, the exploration of marginality types intensifies, with increased representation of characters from communities discriminated against or exoticised based on gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, locality, and so forth. In this post-2007 context, the commodification of memory and the turn towards marginality become intertwined phenomena: the market valorisation of certain historical and identity-based narratives encourages writers to present both the past and social otherness as part of a marketable repertoire. Thus, while the nostalgia-centred phase engaged with capitalism primarily through the lens of loss and longing for the pre-1989 order, the later configuration responds to it by reframing memory and marginality into products for cultural consumption, simultaneously shaped by and resisting the very market forces that enable their circulation.

This tendency is also discussed by Alexandre Gefen in the context of contemporary French literature, who dispels speculation about its demise into 'postliterature'. Instead, he proposes a discussion on the therapeutic values of such discourse within a neo-humanist framework, seeking to (re)functionalise literature precisely through its capacity to articulate certain contemporary social realities that other discourses cannot encapsulate (Gefen 2017, 9–10). Gefen's stance resonates with the 'resocialisation' of literature — a paradigm he terms 'clinical' — in which literature becomes a mouthpiece for society's forgotten and marginalised, enabling a redefinition of both the individual and the collective, an expression of the political in Rancière's sense (11). Formally, although the aforementioned elements could be achieved through an objective narrative using appropriate devices such as free indirect discourse, contemporary Romanian literature post-EU accession shows a clear predilection for dialogising the self, manifested either through first-person novels or autofiction. The latter

aligns most closely with the idea of a shared sensibility, as it dissolves the hegemonic narrator's position, and alongside the characters, the narrative voice becomes vulnerable, non-canonical, and often a victim of invisibility. Consequently, this frequently involves the use of violent and visceral language registers.

In this regard, I propose an analysis of three novels: *Grădina de sticlă* [*The Glass Garden*, 2018, my translation] by Tatiana Țibuleac, *Cireșe amare* [*Bitter Cherries*, 2019, my translation] by Liliana Nechita, and *Soldații: Poveste din Ferentari* [*Soldiers: A Story from Ferentari*, 2014, my translation] by Adrian Schiop. In these texts, the invocation of communist or transitional experiences is either gradually assimilated into more urgent contemporary issues or employed as a formal pretext to reinforce systemic deadlock within the local context, filtered through the repression of communism rearticulated from the perspective of the oppressed. This contextual preference justifies the continued centrality of such positions today. What these novels have in common is their treatment of marginality, defined through two articulated vectors in a chronological framework that enacts two operations from the knowing subject: awareness and reactivity. Thus, the peripheral status of the subject is initially experienced as an uncertainty of identity, theorised by Janet Marie Bennett as *encapsulated marginality*, and subsequently as a necessary mechanism for defining individual and collective identity, termed *constructive marginality* (Bennett 2014, 274). This does not preclude the possibility of failure in this configuration process. At this critical juncture, there emerges a pressing need for responsibility and understanding of otherness.

In Tatiana Țibuleac's *Grădina de sticlă* [*The Glass Garden* 2018, my translation], the subjectivisation of the narrative discourse is complemented by diaristic insertions penned by Lastocika in her own handwriting, alternating with the main body of the novel's text. The choice of first-person narration aligns with the portrayal of the protagonist's marginality within the two forms theorised by Janet Bennett, namely *encapsulated marginality* and *constructive marginality*. Lastocika's identity is fractured by her orphanhood, a crisis further compounded by her development in an environment dominated by marginalised women — targets of abuse by a subversive or quasi-invisible masculine patriarchy that dictates their fates, confining them to a precarious universe deprived of opportunities (Vîrban 2024, 118). From a formal perspective, it is noteworthy that throughout the narrative, the discursivisation of Lastocika's voice — divided between the handwritten fragments and the main narrative text — implies a discursive hybridisation. On the one hand, the analyst's discourse is configured through the guise of diary entries, which recalibrate the object of desire: the desubjectivisation of writing as a form of resistance only intensifies the formal unconscious that underlines the protagonist's alienation and uprootedness:

"I no longer have dreams. I dream dreams written by a foreign hand." (Țîbuleac 2022, 43, my translation). On the other hand, this clashes with the "hysterical"² discourse propelled by the protagonist's revolt against her parents who abandoned her without explanation, producing a sensation of exoticisation that she experiences from Romanians upon migrating to Bucharest to study (27). In this latter instance, the object of desire is liberation from the trauma of orphanhood and the re-signification of the master signifier, which is no longer defined by the fate of Eastern European people within oppressive systems but by personal memory — far more destabilising than the grand narrative of history (157). As Lastocika increasingly internalises the world she enters, framed by a community of women who reproduce patriarchal structures, including sexist attitudes, the first-person narrative voice, isolated in the handwritten passages, becomes impersonalised, reflecting poverty, exploitation, selfishness, and hierarchies. Marginality, in all its forms, is traced from moments of solidarity in crises (such as Ekaterina's abortion or Lastocika's rape) to attitudes such as the monstrous codification of Tona for being a lesbian, the exoticisation of Moldovans by Romanians (as experienced by Lastocika in Bucharest), as well as material causes like poverty or emergencies specific to dysfunctional families (Lastocika's failed marriage and her child's health problems). In this respect, the backdrop of perestroika functions merely as a pretext intended to create the framework for these marginal typologies (Vîrban 2024, 117–118), offering relevant sociographic dimensions regarding the protagonist's biographical, historical, dialectical, and teleological evolution within the symbolic economy of the narrative. Her writing combines a panorama of Soviet-era Chișinău with the visibility of a voice detached from the grand narrative of history, which simultaneously decentralises and pluralises. In this regard, literary discourse, like political discourse, seismographically maps the levels of individual and collective sensibilisation projected onto the real (Rancière 2000, 62). Furthermore, the exoticisation of Lastocika by Romanian society following her migration to Bucharest can also be read as a formal indication of the evolving relationship between the two literary systems after 1989. Andreea Mironescu observes that most literary critics have noted an obsession in Bessarabian literature with synchronising itself to Romania, driven by a fear of being left behind after the collapse of the communist regime. This has generated a pressing need for the Republic of Moldova's cultural field

² The term is employed by Jameson, drawing on Jacques Lacan, though without retaining its clinical connotations. When discussing hysterical discourse, Jameson refers to the disruption of the signifying chain, which produces a schizoid subject in contemporary society—one capable only of existing through fragmentation and a lack of cohesion. This condition stems from an inability to organise temporal perspectives—past, present, and future—resulting in a forced existence lived solely through the immediacy of the present moment.

to seek validation from Romania, regarded as the central authority within these dynamics (Mironescu 2016, 23). From the perspective of the theoretical frameworks defined by Kornbluh, Tatiana Țibuleac's novel employs a fragmented, diaristic first-person narration to vividly capture the protagonist's encapsulated and constructive marginality within post-Soviet and patriarchal contexts. The hybrid narrative voice, divided between handwritten diary fragments and the main text, reflects the protagonist's fractured identity shaped by orphanhood, abuse, and social invisibility. This formal duality intensifies the novel's exploration of trauma and alienation while exposing how memory and personal suffering are commodified and socially marginalised. Ultimately, Țibuleac's work foregrounds the intimate interplay between individual trauma and broader systemic oppression, revealing the complexity of identity formation in transitional Eastern European societies.

Regarding Liliana Nechita's *Cireșe amare* [*Bitter Cherries*, 2019, my translation], the volume harmonises the hysterical discourse with the monologic formalisation typical of the autobiographical testimonial novel analysed in the previous section. What I want to emphasise, however, is the effect of this approach within a writing more interested in sociographic layers; Nechita's novel becomes the site of a paradox. The text critiques the effects of migration and the ensuing identity short-circuiting, which the narrator experiences as a consequence of this phenomenon, firstly through alienation and culturally internalised forms of abuse in the Italian context, and secondly through the uprooting articulated by her separation from her children following her departure abroad. Yet, the discourse slides into a nationalist dimension, a re-legitimation of the Romanian space and traditional values, precisely because alterity has disappointed: "*I am once again proud to be Romanian. God is at the table with us. And do you know what's very strange? Only when I no longer had a church, I missed it. For me, that is the Resurrection!*" (Nechita 2019, 41, my translation). What becomes truly problematic in this volume is the overemphasis on class struggle as the central issue in the fight against the capitalist world-system, while other struggles (ethnic, gender-related, etc.) are minimised, even subsumed under the materialist framework, with the idea of racism itself being reduced to these concerns (170). Hence, the figure of the emigrant is centralised as the most marginal among the marginalised (177). The above observations are not intended to undermine the author's claim to the authenticity of her experience but to show that the political unconscious of the autobiographical form, in this particular case, articulates a discourse where the figure of the poor emigrant competes with, and marginalises, other axes of oppression. A final example in this regard is that the narrator also recounts her experience as a woman oppressed by masculine domination in the Italian space, yet the gender difference criterion

remains implicit, as she internalises her vulnerability primarily through the material conditions of the emigrant: the need for accommodation during her stay and financial constraints, which dictated her self-exile, suppressing any other types of trauma. As Mihnea Bâlici notes, the novel depicts how poverty, unemployment, and the decline of industry in Romania's small towns compel individuals to emigrate in search of better opportunities, even when they previously held a relatively secure social status (Bâlici 2024, 22). Concurrently, Liliana Nechita, while critical of social conditions and migration myths, nonetheless succumbs to conservative and nationalist perspectives shaped by the Romanian ideological climate dominated by anti-communism and neoliberalism. Consequently, rather than advocating a left-wing internationalist approach, she tends to endorse nationalist and isolationist policies (30–31). Liliana Nechita's novel articulates a paradoxical discourse where the autobiographical voice merges hysterical and testimonial modes to critique migration's alienating effects while simultaneously reaffirming nationalist sentiments. The novel's sociographic focus reveals the emigrant's marginality as primarily class-based, with other axes of oppression—such as gender and ethnicity—subsumed under economic hardship. Through this lens, Nechita's narrative highlights the tensions between material vulnerability and cultural identity in post-2007 Romania, exposing the limits and contradictions of political consciousness shaped by displacement, loss, and the persistence of traditional values amid global capitalism.

I conclude this section by reserving a discussion for autofictional discourse, articulated both as reparative writing and as political engagement. Throughout the evolution of the genre, its theoretical framing has become increasingly difficult due to its dynamism and constant shifts in defining coordinates (Baillargeon 2019, 4), a fact that is relevant in the context of the analysed novel, *Soldiers: A Story from Ferentari* by Adrian Schiop. Although its conceptual fluidity and floating nature marginalise it from critical and theoretical interest, autofiction's success with the general public is undeniable (2). Thus, one of the genre's particularities is a kind of formal subversiveness, which refuses academic integration. I say this because, most often, when a discourse enters and becomes centralised within institutional frameworks, it risks becoming so abstracted that it no longer produces the intended effects regarding the tensioning of societal layers. In this sense, the difficulties in defining autofiction, beyond general frameworks (hybridisation of biography and fiction, use of the first person, fragmentariness, and dispersed temporalities, etc.), become primarily a form of legitimising the genre as political writing, since it defies dogmatic forms of first-person narration theorised over time. Secondly, by highlighting the traumatic experiences specific to a certain knowing subject, it undermines social structures (3) that have enabled the traumatic event (patriarchy, heteronormativity, etc.).

In the context of Adrian Schiop's novel, the narrative's continuous anchoring in an intermediate space — between the Ferentari neighbourhood and Bucharest — with the protagonist and Alberto constantly oscillating between the two worlds, represents a narrative strategy to delineate a symbolic space of marginality. This space is formed both economically and in order to destigmatise the homosexual couple (Vancea 2017, 25–31), forms of racism against the Romani community, and certain cultural clichés (the scientific legitimisation of Adi's PhD on *manele* — a musical genre that hybridises Oriental forms and is often considered subcultural in Romania because many performers are claimed by the Romani community; the relationship between two characters from different classes, where the socially outraged one appears to dominate Adi — a condition indispensable for integration into Ferentari, etc.). In this sense, the spatiality suspended between two distinct universes reveals a bi-directional exoticization woven into the narrative: on one hand, the narrator-character acknowledges his own unconscious tendency to exoticize the neighborhood compared to other parts of Bucharest, since he survives under a different cultural sign, considered inferior to that of the capital: *"Going through cheap pubs is part of my job, I'm doing a PhD on manele and that's why I stay in this neighborhood — to stay close to the object of my work, because Ferentari is the last neighborhood in Bucharest where manele still rules, and people don't look at you weird if you listen to it"* (Schiop 2017, 15, my translation). On the other hand, the inhabitants of Ferentari fetishise the Bucharest community based on its financial stability/superiority, despite the strong economic divisions within the neighbourhood itself.

Another form of cleavage revealed by autofictional discourse is the lack of adherence between the knowing subject — Adi — and the object of desire — Alberto, both in terms of sexual orientation and as a form of temporal lag within capitalist structures. Regarding homosexuality, an important aspect of the dysfunctional relationship between the two characters, beyond class difference, is rendered by Adi's observation. He notes that there is a distinct appropriation of homosexuality in the city centre, where it is divided between its local, regional manifestation (where the protagonist fits) and its attempted Western reproduction. On the other side, in Ferentari, homosexuality, without certain eccentricities, paradoxically signals an internalised homophobia, as in Alberto's case, who identifies it as a form of amplifying his power and masculinity. In this respect, one sociographic layer identified by Adi is that Alberto's aggressive and violent attitude stems from sexual abuse suffered in prison, which he, as a hysterical subject, re-signifies as a phantasmatic sexual performance, with three warning signals: 1) the lack of protection for minors in prisons and correctional homes; 2) the reintegration of prisoners into society; 3) the exacerbated conservatism of Romani families amid precarious inclusion policies. Last but not

least, the problem of temporal dissonance between the two characters lies in Alberto's maladaptation to post-transition society, both economically and socio-culturally, being constructed rather as an anachronistic subject. This is the bridge through which Adi unveils the systemic shock and destabilisation reflected on individual and collective levels, set against the backdrop of the 1990s. Thus, the autofictional discursivity of Adi's experience in the Ferentari neighbourhood, as well as his toxic relationship with Alberto, is justified by an ethical motivation to give voice to a marginal subject by blurring the boundaries and hierarchies between subject (the narrative voice — Adi) and object (Alberto), thereby redistributing visibility and audibility within the text. Adrian Schiop's novel deploys autofictional techniques to navigate the complex spatial and social margins of Bucharest's Ferentari neighbourhood. The novel's hybrid narrative reveals layered exoticisations, internalised homophobia, and systemic violence through the protagonist's fractured relationship with Alberto, symbolising temporal and cultural dissonances shaped by post-communist transition. Schiop's work challenges hegemonic narratives by making visible the intersecting oppressions of class, ethnicity, and sexuality, and by destabilising dominant forms of subjectivity through a vulnerable, politically engaged voice. This autofictional discourse thus functions as both a therapeutic articulation of trauma and a critical intervention into contemporary Romanian social realities.

The comparison between the novels written before and after 2007 reveals a profound transformation in the psychoanalytic mediation of narrative form, shaped by the shifting socio-political landscape and the commodification of memory. Earlier post-1989 literature often foregrounds nostalgia and trauma through a deeply introspective, sometimes melancholic engagement with personal and collective loss, using narrative forms that internalise and ritualise psychic wounds. The narration tends to focus on identity fragmentation and memory as sites of trauma that resist assimilation into capitalist structures. However, after Romania's EU accession in 2007, there is a noticeable shift towards the externalisation and commodification of memory, as personal and historical recollections become cultural products shaped by market logics. This evolution prompts a more dialogic and socially engaged narrative form, where psychoanalytic elements are intertwined with sociographic concerns—particularly marginality in its multiple dimensions. The post-2007 novels adopt autofiction and first-person narration not only as sites of individual psychic negotiation but also as platforms for political visibility and social critique. Thus, the psychoanalytic mediation of form transitions from a primarily inward, trauma-centred process to a dynamic interaction between subjectivity and social otherness, reflecting how memory and identity are continuously reshaped within capitalist and post-communist realities.

Conclusions

The ideas outlined throughout this article are not meant to be absolute but rather are constructed through an inductive approach based on a series of specific examples (a characterological profile of the Romanian contemporary novel published before and after 2007) in order to allow for a certain manner of generalising the aspects that define the evolution of contemporary literature, both formally and thematically. Starting from a methodological and conceptual platform informed by the theorisation of Fredric Jameson (the political unconscious), Anna Kornbluh (the psychoanalytic mediation of form), and Jacques Rancière (the distribution of the sensible), complemented by the analysis of the selected textual sample, my aim has been to elucidate what has generated the transition from communism to neoliberal capitalist democracy in the context of the contemporary novel. This dynamic has led to a reconfiguration of thematic options, framed by a formal unconscious capable of expressing the tensions of social structures as they are transposed into literature.

The shift from a nostalgic, testimonial and documentary discourse characteristic of the pre-2007 period to the accessing of sociographic platforms, formalised through autofiction and first-person narratives after 2007, reflects precisely the kind of political engagement. Of course, the temporal boundary that separates these two periods is flexible, meaning that, for instance, the autobiographical novel structured around a monologic voice may persist after 2007, but it is reformulated within an expanded ideological framework. My observation in this respect is that contemporary literature undergoes a functional transformation in the transition from one temporal interval to another, moving beyond the nostalgic discourse constructed as a reaction to the anti-communism of the 1990s. Thus, the post-2000 novel, particularly after Romania's accession to the European Union, is instrumentalised as a mechanism for legitimising various marginalised identities, thereby contesting the dominant symbolic order through the subversiveness of its forms (autofiction, first-person narration mediated by free indirect style, etc.) and through the transitivity of its themes (discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation).

In the pre-2007 period, nostalgia was configured as a reparative function for the individual alienated by the deficiencies of the transition, with the revalorisation of the communist past serving as a means of exposing these shortcomings through various monologic formalisations (Vasile Ernu), internally dialogised monologues (Lucian Dan Teodorovici), or polyphonic structures (Dan Lungu). Later, following Romania's EU accession, the curative value of nostalgic discourse is diminished by the understanding of nostalgia as also a mode of rejecting alterity, a stance no longer aligned with the needs of contemporary

society. In this sense, literature repositions itself in dialogue with communist memory, now fractured by the personal histories of the knowing subject (Adrian Schiop, Tatiana Țîbuleac, and Liliana Nechita), with fiction, in all its variations, becoming an active sociographic instrument that critiques both the shortcomings of the transitional society and those of the neoliberal space: precarity, various forms of marginalisation, social division, economic instability, the increasing rate of emigration, and more. In conclusion, the shift in the signified (from nostalgic discourse to sociographic layers) and in the signifier (from autobiography and polyphonic narration to autofiction and self-dialogisation) does not imply an abandonment of the relationship between the political and the aesthetic, but rather its redefinition as a formal and symbolic tension, fostering a space in which the current social order can be interrogated. Literary discourse is thus negotiated between a (re)assessment of its ethical dimension (the visibility of the oppressed subject) and its circulation within the global logic of entertainment, which remains faithful to the capitalist world-system it seeks to subvert — with writing and reading now taking on a reparative function in the process of the self's (re)discovery and identity formation (Alexandre Gefen).

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THE CASE FOR ROMANIAN AUTOFICTION. LOVE & ANXIETY IN THE NEOLIBERAL WORLD IN RADU VANCU'S AND SAȘA ZARE'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT. *The Case for Romanian Autofiction. Love & Anxiety in the Neoliberal World in Radu Vancu's and Sașa Zare's Novels.* The origins of autofiction encapsulate this literary species in a postmodernist ethos. Nevertheless, the 2000s generation of Romanian writers developed an appetency for autofiction that exposed the questioning potentialities of self-narration towards the contemporary neoliberal *status-quo*. Being called a hybridization between metarealism and miserable realism (Mihai Iovănel) or an extension of the neoliberal novel (Adriana Stan), theories highlight its ambiguous, volatile, almost non-specific character. However, in the case of Romanian contemporary literature, two post-2000s novels engage in polemics regarding the way in which individuality, memory and trauma are revisited through autofiction, using metadiscourse, biography, and fictive discourse. Radu Vancu's *Transparența* (*Transparency*) and Sașa Zare's *Dezrădăcinare* (*Uprooting*) are exponential in understanding autofiction's main strategies of narration. This paper examines how autofiction evolved after the 2000s generation of self-narrators, trying to question how this literary species fits or challenges the neoliberal political context. Being easy to portray a relative cause for autofiction's focus on individual or social motifs, this paper will dwell into how the self and the interhuman erotic relationships are exposed in the prior mentioned novels. In the second part of the study, an in-depth analysis of *Transparența* will examine how sensibility, eroticism, and anxiety are handled in an introvert autofictional way (Florina Pîrjol), where the decentralisation of self is dealt with maximalist

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strategies. Finally, Sașa Zare's autofictional innovations will portray how the extrovert side evolved in the neoliberal context, proposing a new form of authenticity, where the self and queer eroticism are expressed towards an integrated communitarian audience.

Keywords: *autofiction, neoliberal novel, biofiction, post-2000's novel, eroticism, autobiography.*

REZUMAT. *Cazul autoficțiunii românești. Iubire & anxietate în lumea neoliberală în romanele lui Radu Vancu și al Sașei Zare.* Originile autoficțiunii prezintă această specie literară ca parte a unui ethos postmodernist. Cu toate acestea, generația 2000-istă de scriitori români a dezvoltat o apetență pentru autoficțiune care a pus la îndoială potențialitățile narațiunii de sine față de un *status-quo* contemporan, neoliberal. Numită drept o hibridizare între metarealism și realism mizerabilist (Mihai Iovănel) sau o extensie a romanului neoliberal (Adriana Stan), teoriile sale emergente au punctat caracterul ambiguu, volatil și lipsit de specificitate al autoficțiunii. Pe de altă parte, în cazul literaturii române contemporane, două romane post-2000-iste construiesc o polemică referitoare la modul în care individualitate, memoria și trauma sunt revizitate prin autoficțiune, folosind metadiscurs, discurs biografic și fictiv. *Transparența* de Radu Vancu și *Dezrădăcinare* de Sașa Zare sunt exponențiale pentru înțelegerea strategiilor autoficționare de narare. Această lucrare examinează evoluția autoficțiunii după generația 2000-istă, încercând să chestioneze modul în care această specie literară se mulează ori provoacă cadrul politic neoliberal. Fiind ușor de construit o cauză relativă pentru care autoficțiunea se concentrează pe motive individualiste sau sociale, această lucrare va investiga cum sinele și relațiile erotice interumane sunt expuse în romanele menționate. În cea de-a doua parte a studiului meu, o analiză mai îndeaproape a romanului *Transparența* va examina cum sensibilitatea, eroticul și anxietatea sunt jonglate la nivel introvertit (Florina Pîrjol), acolo unde descentralizarea sinelui este redată prin strategii manieriste. În sfârșit, inovațiile autoficționale ale Sașei Zare vor portretiza cum latura extrovertită a evoluat într-un cadru neoliberal, propunând o nouă formă de autenticism, unde sinele și erotica queer sunt exprimate către un public integrat narativ.

Cuvinte-cheie: *autoficțiune, roman neoliberal, ficțiune biografică, roman post-2000-ist, erotică, autobiografie.*

Autofiction in the spotlight

During the last thirty years, there have been many debates around what defines a literary text as autofictional. Theorists have tried to decide upon a set of criteria that could constitute the primary toolkit on recognizing an autofictional novel. However, this process has led to a multitude of definitions, categories,

and theories that proved to be inefficient in this endeavour. For some scholars, the growth and relevance of autofiction's narratological strategies, alongside the theoretical process of analysing this literary species proved the relevance and the richness of this subgenre (Effe and Lawlor 2022, 3). Furthermore, it has become a common practice to investigate the autofictional category by theorizing new concepts, exposing the limits of older ones and assuring a level of originality. Consequently, the debate around autofiction has become obfuscated by new terms that aim to impose themselves in the field.² Considering this, I claim that such terminological debates fail to advance new epistemological knowledge because of their obsession for reinventing the area. On this note, I consider that the term *autofiction* is sufficient for the literary species that I shall analyse from now on and I will use this concept not only because it has gained more popularity since its first use in the 1970s – firstly by Paul West in 1972 and, secondly, and within a more generally accepted version, by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977 (Kornbluh 2023, 62) – but also because I believe that an analysis regarding autofiction should focus on its narrative potential, rather than on a specific terminology. On this note, in the first part of my essay I shall respond to some observations made by Anna Kornbluh regarding autofiction, aiming to recover a different face of self-narration. At the same time, I will argue for a narrative-centred approach, while exposing the epistemological and political potential of autofiction in the context of the 21st neoliberal world-system.

Sharae Deckard and Stephen Shapiro observed and condemned a certain “boredom by the lack of novelty” (Deckard and Shapiro 2019, 3) regarding the concept of *neoliberalism*. Consequently, as in the case for autofiction mentioned above, a new set of concepts that aim to describe the contemporary socio-economical world emerged. In line with Fredric Jameson's *late capitalism*, Anna Kornbluh's recent theory coined the concept of *too late capitalism* (Kornbluh 2023, 20) in order to describe the historical segment of the capitalist world-system that comes after postmodernity. For Kornbluh, too late capitalism is “a contradictory moment where the overmuchness of lateness arrests itself” (20). The central consequence of today's economic system is *immediacy*. Kornbluh observes that any form of mediation is erased so that efficiency and capital circulation gain more speed. The absence of mediation from the economic logic of capitalist societies ensures a process of immediation in every cultural field: imaginary, aesthetic, visual, textual. Some features of too late capitalism are: obsessive presentism, lack of symbolic epistemology, a state of constant crisis, doubled by constant solutions served to the public, space-time compression, urgency and atomism. In this context, Kornbluh accuses autofiction to be an immediated literary style, through which authors choose to deny the

² For a detailed list see Cernat (2021, 215-234).

use of fiction in favour for lived, actual experience. Representation, symbolization, polyphony, diversity, and other narrative techniques, in Kornbluh's perspective, are abandoned so that a new literary style, self-centred, atomised around the author's life episodes can prevail.

In a more historical context, the author opposes this immanent attitude towards novelty to postmodernism's experimentalism (62). Metadiscourse, attention to the textual medium, to different narrative styles, all these strategies favoured a fruitful narratological growth that had epistemological implications regarding the way in which fiction is built. However, the 21st autofiction's evolution is considered to be a shortcut between actual life and value. Linking it with the economical circuit of capital accumulation, Kornbluh states that "the category of immediacy situates these antifictional energies in conjunction with the emissive proclivities of a circulation-forward economic phase, with the obfuscation of symbolic code that underwrites digital interfaces, and with the regime of the imaginary that ecstatically charges 'the voice of your own personality'" (61). However, it should be mentioned that the examples she chooses to portray are representatives of a certain category of autofictional authors that adopted this logic of hyper-representation: Karl Ove Knausgaard, Rachel Cusk, and Ocean Vuong. Building on this, Kornbluh not only reduces the imaginary of autofictional writing to a few examples, but she refuses to engage with any theory regarding this subgenre.

In this perspective, autofiction and first-person writing are nothing but results of a culture that atomizes the individual, creating a sense of auto-gratification, privatizing, and thus limiting the perspective and the potential of plural debates. Third-person writing, free indirect speech, on the other hand, are seen as more optimistic strategies that create layers of fiction, amplified by interest for imaginative scenarios and character diversity (67). Kornbluh connects today's appetite for autofiction with the popularization of the personal essay, the social media industry of self-exposure, all of them pointing to the erase of any form of mediation, hence, of symbolization.

Failing to integrate any clear definition of what autofiction is, Kornbluh risks teleological conclusions, blaming it for and reducing autofiction to a passion for the real that manifests through pure representation, without any level of fictionalization.³ However, I suggest a more complex understanding of

³ To be more specific, Kornbluh has at least three errors regarding the emergence of autofiction. Firstly, she considers this species as a reconfiguration of the autobiographical writing, when, in fact, as I claim, autofiction should not depend on its prefix, 'auto', but more likely on its root, 'fiction'. Hence, autofiction should be considered a fictional species, rather than a biographical one. Secondly, she fails to mention the hybrid nature of the species, more precisely the melange between biographical experience and fictional creation. This characteristic represents the key

the concept, given the fact that it could be a methodological error to address this literary species without keeping count of the sum of debates around autofiction.

Although it was constantly under discussion, one of the most generally accepted criteria that mark an autofictional novel is the hybridization of biographical and fictional scenes. An autofictional writer uses episodes from their lives but enriches them with imagined experiences to make sense of a traumatic reality. As Arnaud Schmitt puts it, autofiction can be understood as a baroque version of autobiography (Schmitt 2022, 83), but it remains, nevertheless, a fictional genre (84). The alternation between fictionality and non-fictionality is used primarily in relation with a traumatic experience suffered by the author. Trauma, in most of autofictional texts – and to be even more specific, in women's autofiction – represents a central motif (Jordan 2012, 79). Consequently, the theoretical approach to autofiction as an appendix of autobiographical writing is countered by a fictional-centred position, in which the hybridization of real-life events and imagined ones is seen as more important.

In the *Encyclopedia of Life Writing*, Johnnie Gratton brings up the psychoanalytical, Freudian shift from 'truth-value' to 'act-value' (Gratton 2001, 86). On this note, it is worth mentioning the importance of the fictional discourse in the narrative economy of autofictional novels. A reading of autofiction that searches for biographical data, as Kornbluh does, reduces autofiction to a detective reading out of which not much can be taken, and this position represents most of the times the position of a realist reader, interested much more in the private information about the author, than in the novel's capacity of proposing debates and ideas. But, as a melange between factual and fictional, autofiction breaks the barrier between real and imaginative, hence, the problem of referentiality becomes less important as one accepts that it is mediated by a literary style anyway. Schmitt discusses about this attention for the writing process: "This is not about verisimilitude, about making fiction look real; the technical core of what we can tentatively call *autobiographical novels*⁴ consists in distilling within the text some personal facts that the reader can identify as such, thanks to biographical data available in the paratextual world" (Schmitt 2010, 126.) Therefore, identity, in the case of autofiction, is constructed not as

element in understanding autofiction. Thirdly, even though she is entitled to observe the immediated character of this species, she fails to recollect the cultural background behind this emergence: the postmodernist death of the author represents the most eloquent example.

⁴ It is necessary to make a terminological clarification about what Arnaud Schmitt understands through 'autobiographical novels': this concept covers up the qualities of the autofictional novel, for the author does not make a precise difference between the terms. He coins the concept of 'self-narration', a concept that has the same function as what we call autofiction.

a diary made of facts, with a correlative in the referential world, but it manifests as an act of the written fictions. The identity, caught between self-narration and self-fabling, becomes an agent through which various narrations, some true, some imagined, reshape reality so that a certain life-episode can be thought not only at a self-centred level, but more complex, adding epistemological and ontological value to such a novel.

Considering this, a second characteristic of autofiction is the onomastic correspondence. Although this criterion is recurring in autofictional theories, there are exceptions.⁵ However, the identity between three narrative instances – author, narrator, protagonist – represents a strategy that blurs the border between real and fiction. Even more, this technique allows autofiction to function as a vehicle that explores identity. This correspondence not only burdens the author with a sense of responsibility regarding revealed private information, but it also implies the reader. The reader no longer responds to the story as they would to invention, but they integrate it closer to their proximity (Sirkanth 2019, 357). The onomastic identity has further implications in the reading process. Understanding autofiction as a performative species (Wagner-Egelhaaf 2022, 30), the narrative voice encourages the reader to “approach the text with two overarching schemata, either in combination or in quick oscillation, and in which they often experience moments of tension or uncertainty about the communicative intention (fictionality/factuality) and/or ontological status (fictive or real) of entities and elements” (Effe and Gibbons 2022, 65). This performative approach implies the reader and highlights that autofiction must be understood not as a mimetic representation of one’s daily life, but as a narrative construct that offers meditative rhetoric with ontological and political implications.

Furthermore, many theorists point out the importance of stylistic choice in narrative autofictions. Serge Doubrovsky, for example, pointed out the relevance of a tempestuous writing, which could surprise through its spontaneity. A Romanian theorist, Florina Pîrjol, observed that, following Doubrovsky’s claim, such a perspective towards style refuses any form of stylization of memory, characteristically more suited for autobiography than autofiction (Pîrjol 2014, 44). What’s more, this refusal for a cosmetic of style has influenced Arnaud Schmitt to call the ‘psychoanalytic angle’ (Schmitt 2010, 126) one of the three criteria that mark a novel autofictional. Schmitt argues that the psychoanalytic interventions could be understood through the lacanian theories according to which the self is constructed based on multiple fictions (Schmitt 2010, 127). This perspective maintains the idea that an autofiction is not just a representation of an individual, but at the same time an interpretation and invention of the self. Furthermore, due to the integrating hermeneutics of author-narrator-protagonist,

⁵ One example in this sense is Philippe Forest.

the story becomes universalist, opening to a more diverse thematic interpretation. The writer isn't practising just a form of therapy but asks questions about the way in which the self is built not only through concrete experience, but through fiction as well.

At a narrative level, this observation highlights what Marie-Laure Ryan evokes by talking about nonfictional stories. She stresses that, while the data from a fictional novel is *a priori* correct, for there is no referential world to be re-presented, but an imaginary, yet potential world, in the case of novels that take our world as referential, the information offered can be either true or false, always blurred by our incapacity to present our reality truthfully (Ryan 2014, 34). Ryan analyses non-fictional stories. However, autofiction, as a *métissage* between autobiography and fiction, situates itself on the threshold between truthful narration and relative representation of reality.⁶ The question of ontological truth comes up in the case of autofiction for, although the novel is based on a known individual – the author on the cover – their experiences and interiority are placed under debate by the difficulty of deciding what is fiction and what isn't.

Finally, one last detail that must be mentioned is a certain innovation in the field of autofiction. Although it is a commonly known fact that this species deals with metafictional techniques, they are not taken as a definitive criterion to make a novel autofictional (Schmitt 2022, 90). However, in an essay dedicated to feminine autofiction, Yanbing Er points out that it is not only the fictional and non-fictional elements that are entangled in the construction of autofiction, but theoretical ones as well (Er 2018, 317). As I shall demonstrate in the case of Romanian autofiction, the majority of these novels engage in a process of self-fictionalization and theorization as well. For them, building up an auto-theory of writing and self-positioning in this theory helps them make sense of their trauma and offers a different perspective towards the sociological context in which they are placed.

The Case for Romanian Autofiction

In the last twenty years, autofiction has been recognized as the trademark for the 2000s Romanian prose writers (Schiop 2024). Obviously, this claim is a generalisation of an entire generation, to be more precise, the millennial

⁶ The same can be said about the historiographic novel. Aiming to reveal the blind spots of history and to dismantle the 'canonized' truth, the historiographic novel – as theorized by Linda Hutcheon – speaks about macro-narrations, while autofiction does the same thing, but at a micro-level. Even more, it can be argued that autofiction makes use of a certain plastic, malleable, characteristic of history, in which the past, either historical or personal, is re-functionalised in order to make sense of the present.

generation, of prose authors. Nevertheless, it is certain that through this generation, during the first decade of the 21st century, autofiction has entered the Romanian literary field. Thus, this literary species sought to react to two lines of thought that elite actors of the cultural scene in Romania imposed in the last decades of the last century. To be more precise, the millennial cohort reacted to the postmodernist tradition of the 1980s, specifically to its overuse of intertextuality, metadiscourse, hermeticism, as well as to 1990s “tiresome moralism and political decline” (Schiop 2024). Hence, more than once, 2000s Romanian autofiction has been described as a discovery of a new form of realism (Bâlici 2021, 76), a refusal of stylistic devices in favour for slang language (Pîrjol 2014, 153), and a total use of radical individualism (Stan 2020, 119). Furthermore, by the second decade of the century, autofiction was overshadowed by the emergence of a new form of third-person realism, either interested in fictional narration, or in a minimalist realism (Stan 2020, 123) (Rogozanu 2021, 74) (Goldiș 2023; 142). However, after the 2000s emergence of autofiction, there are some authors that wrote experimental autofictions, proving that its formal strategies are still in good use to question the socio-political *status-quo* of Romanian capitalist society. The novels proposed for analysis, both published in the last eight years, offer such a retrospective towards the neoliberal system that imposed itself in Romania more aggressively than other countries after 1989.

The process of mapping autofiction in the Romanian literary field was briefly considered by Romanian theorists. However, there are some observations that help us understand how autofiction was imported from its origin country, France, after the first decade of neoliberalism. Before dwelling in such a demonstration, it is worth mentioning that the notion of a literary world-system, as developed by the Warwick Research Collective (WReC 2015), proves to be efficient in exposing the transnational movements of autofiction from core (France) to a semi-peripheral literary field (Romania). Following the idea according to which the literary world-system is a combined, yet uneven ecosystem (WReC, 10) it can be argued that the distribution of autofiction mimics such a disproportioned development. It is sufficient to point out Mihai Iovănel’s brief observation from his *History of Romanian Literature. 1990-2020*, in which he mentions that autofiction appears during the first decade of the twenty-first century, imported from France, “halfway between metarealism and the *updated* realism of the 2000s” (Iovănel 2021, 429).

Interesting enough, most probably because of its short temporal existence in the literary field, Romanian autofiction did not prove that original forms and contents from semi-peripheral countries could be adopted by core

spaces, as the Warwick Research Collective claims (WReC, 55).⁷ The Morettian claim that literary forms travel from core to periphery (Moretti 2000, 58) is more suited to express the emergence of autofictional form in 2000s Romania. Hence, such an endeavour of mapping autofiction in the Romanian literary field must keep count of the formal strategies brought through France and, at the same time, the local material and local narrative voice (Moretti, 65). It is interesting to note that this new fictional species from the West will be the catalyst for the emergence of the so-called *miserabilist* literary trend. The Western form will comprise grunge content, utilising the freedom of expression to its fullest potential and eschewing any vestige of communist influence (Pîrjol 2014, 147-159). Further characteristics of this autofictional narrative voice include: a rediscovery of existential crisis, attention to Western pop-culture, a certain disengagement from society, given by the multiple disappointments that the first decade of capitalist economies revealed in such a short time. Both Pîrjol and Iovănel observed the recurrence of losers and marginalised characters during the first wave of 2000s autofictions. (Pîrjol, 156) (Iovănel, 430) The neoliberal consumerism led to a new form of alienation that was exploited by writing about precarious conditions, liminal spaces, as well as their interactions with the Other.

However, as I mentioned before, by the year 2010, with the effects of 2008-2011 global economic crisis, autofiction seems to have lost its potential. Even more, Adriana Stan observed that autofiction missed its point of questioning the neoliberal *status-quo* by failing to comment “upon relations of capital” (Stan, 117). Thus, she considers autofiction a species of the neoliberal novel not necessary by linking them with the historical context – a genre that appeared in the neoliberal West – but through the way in which the neoliberal illusion of individual freedom and self-expression mimics the autofictional process of melting biographical experiences with fictional narrations (Stan, 123). Hence, the emergence of autofiction, new forms of realism, and popular use of minimalism seemed to be an *athanor* for maintaining a neoliberal positioning, closely linked with the already mentioned personal essay. It is worth mentioning a similar process in the case of Romanian poetry. As Ovio Olaru notices, the 2000s generation of poets – Dan Sociu, Elena Vlădăreanu and

⁷ In this regard, it can be also pointed out that the Romanian literary translation infrastructure lacks tactics for exporting and representing itself at an international level. Although there are some authors that were made visible and succeeded to reach a wide public – Mircea Cărtărescu is the most eloquent case – Romanian autofictional writers did not generally get the chance to gain visibility outside Romania. Adrian Schiop's novel, *Soldații. Poveste din Ferentari* [*Soldiers. A Bucharest Story*] was translated in several languages, yet there was no critical acclaim. However, the short existence of autofictional writing remains the main cause for this lack of bivalent movement between core and (semi)-periphery.

Marius Ianuș, to name just a few – consists in a antithetic process of self-exposure and building a poetic *persona*. Consequently, the poetic millennial generation has its roots in “the theory of authenticity of a brutal autobiographism” (Olaru 2017, 21). Questioning how autofiction failed to destabilise the hegemonic literary structures, Stan raised three problems. First, autofiction, as a minor literature, was “unable to transcend its authorial narcissism for better aesthetic goals” (Stan, 119). Then, Stan observes, autofiction was too vaguely theorized to be differentiated from autobiography. Finally, “the identity topics within which the concept was confined were too narrow to accommodate the full range of the ideological stances displayed by the new fiction” (Stan). At a distance of more than twenty years from the entrance of autofiction in the Romanian field, I would like to reconsider some of these issues. I will try to explain that Romanian autofiction is an exponential genre for understanding the 2000ss and post-2000ss neoliberal *ethos*, with all its implications in a semi-peripheral literary field.

Firstly, regarding its minor character, it is worth mentioning that queer autofictions such as Adrian Schiop’s *Soldații. Poveste din Ferentari* [*Soldiers. A Bucharest Story*] and Sașa Zare’s *Dezrădăcinare* [*Uprooting*] were critically acclaimed. The fact that both have been reedited in new collections or publishing houses confirms their importance in contemporary debates regarding gender identity, liminal spaces, and the manners in which human agents are exposed, exploited, and marginalized in the larger network of the world-system⁸.

Secondly, returning to Stan’s observation according to which the genre was vaguely theorized as a branch of autobiographical writing, I want to point out that autofiction can be placed in the story-narrative category. Florina Pîrjol explains the causality between autobiographies and autofictions, but other critics, such as Alexandru Matei, consider that autofiction is individualized by its intrinsic narrative structure: “autofiction does not have just nerve and rhythm, but it has, most certainly, a storyline” (Matei 2006). A poststructuralist critic such as Vincent Colonna has emphasized that an autofiction should not allow a “figurative or metaphorical value, nor encourage a referential reading that would decipher indirect confidences in the text” (Collona 1989, 10). Arnaud Schmitt claimed that, although it can be called a *baroque autobiography*, autofiction descends from fictional narratives.

Lastly, if we accept autofiction as a fictional species, its thematic and conceptual affordances become richer and diverse. The overall picture of 2000s autofiction proves that this genre is not bound to self-centred narratives but

⁸ We can add that the second edition of *Dezrădăcinare* is enriched with critical assessments from younger and older voices of Romanian literary critics and with an author’s afterword, which gives information about this novel’s writing process.

incorporates new various debates: gender identity (*Dezrădăcinare*, *Soldații. Poveste din Ferentari*), feminist polemics, reacting to a patriarchal *status-quo* (*Est-falia* by Ștefania Mihalache, *Fisă de înregistrare* by Ioana Baetica and, again, *Dezrădăcinare*), mapping provincial spaces (*Soldații* – the portrait of a marginalized neighbourhood; *Transparența* – a provincial city stylistically hyperbolized; *pe bune/ pe invers* and *Pizdeț* – precarious student-life). To those, there are as well problematics regarding known thematics of world literature: memory, identity, eros, and family.

In this context, Radu Vancu's *Transparența* and Sașa Zare's *Dezrădăcinare* can offer a more detailed insight into how trauma is handled by an affected subjectivity. Following Florina Pîrjol's dichotomy of introverted and extroverted autofictional writers (Pîrjol, 120), I argue that Vancu's novel offers an introverted manner of self-fictionalization, in which ample narrative constructs are meant to create a new existential ontology, while Zare's novel uses extroverted strategies of building communities, with a more socio-political implication that is meant to critic the patriarchal structures. In both cases, love and anxiety are leitmotifs that the authors use to react to their traumatic experiences. Even more, these two novels offer an example on how autofiction evolved from its millennial practice, developing two separate tendencies of self-fictionalization. Radu Vancu's novel, although published in 2018, evokes the post-dictatorship years, with their inherent post-romantic ethos. Sașa Zare, on the other hand, explores a more recent chronotope, that gives voice to a new form of self-writing, a socio-biographic one, inspired by Annie Ernaux and in line with Édouard Louis manner of auto-fictionalization. Their novels are worth comparing not just because they tackle similar motifs, but because they offer a diachronic view over the formal changes of autofiction.

Introverted autofiction: Radu Vancu's *Transparența*

In his prose debut, Radu Vancu reiterates Mircea Cărtărescu's narrative strategies, albeit in miniature form. Vancu's *Transparența* is characterised by maximalist tendencies, a mystical cartography, and erudition, and is constructed as a totalising, baroque project with polemical self-fabricating ambitions. Although the book has been criticized with reluctance and received with relative indifference⁹, it consolidates the writer's self-fictional project, a project manifested first and foremost through poetry. The use of biographical material in this

⁹ It is worth emphasizing that, despite the reputation and symbolic capital gathered by Radu Vancu through his volumes of poetry, criticism, and journals, *Transparența* received no nominations or publicity.

manner, as exemplified in *Transparența*, does not result in an excessive amount of biographical information; rather, it is characterised by a stylistic and imaginative engagement with the subject. Consequently, an analysis of the novel must consider the fact that the intimist material was, at the time of the novel's publication, utilised primarily by the poet (with more than nine volumes of poetry), rather than the prose writer. By consolidating his public persona through the three diaries (*Zodia Cancerului* [*Cancer's Zodiac*], *Răul* [*Evil*] and *Boala și Războiul* [*Sickness and War*]), the writer gradually blurred the boundary between public and private. Therefore, if the author's biographical dimension has already made a significant impact on their poetry, diary, and on media platforms (from personal posts to podcasts), it is proposed that the analysis of an autofictional novel such as *Transparența* will provide insight into the fictional methods of the narrative self. The issue of referentiality in the case of such a novel should be considered secondary, with the focus instead being placed upon an analysis centred on the auto-fictionalising dimensions of the narrative.

Transparența is a homodiegetic novel, which tells the tragic love story between the narrator-protagonist and his beloved Mega. Against the backdrop of the story, Vancu creates the panorama of a decadent, free, post-communist Sibiu, which he fantasizes through a historical auxiliary narrative that recounts the birth of Hermannstadt. The literature students' erudite idyll - the text is replete with literary references - is complemented by their passion for pop-rock culture and music. Moreover, the dynamics of the relationship unfold spatially around the Graalaj bar, owned by Karina, which hosts an erudite group of friends, prone to drunkenness and frivolity. The bohemian landscape is counterbalanced by the relationship between the narrator and Mega's father, a former Security member who has quickly adapted to the capitalist system. The end of the novel is built around this chameleonic individual who makes a fanatical speech about the power of money. Vancu is building here a whole moralizing stake that is related to the new danger of the Romanian neoliberal world: money. Apocalyptically, the church in which the speech is being given collapses on the participants and on *el captain*, one of the few survivors being the narrator. Mega dies tragically, and the narrator becomes a witness, whose duty it is to tell the love story. Thanks to guanine nanocrystals, the narrator becomes somatically transparent at moments of extreme emotions (panic, anxiety, ecstasy).

The autofictional dimension of the novel is rendered in a strange key. While the unnamed¹⁰ narrator can be related to the author Radu Vancu thanks to his recognized biographical notes (Sibiu as his hometown, a graduate of the Faculty of Letters, whose youth took place in the 90s-2000s and whose father

¹⁰ There is one exception: in a post-mortem letter to Mega, the narrator signs himself 'R.' (Vancu, 158).

committed suicide by hanging himself), one of the friends of the protagonist and Mega is a character named Vancu, an intellectual poet whose master is Mircea Ivănescu and who will end up committing suicide in the Romanian Academy building. The criterion of nominal identity is dynamited by the author, resorting to the split of identity between an alter-ego, Radu Vancu, and an enunciative instance that fulfils the autofictional criterion. In this framework, the author Vancu puts into practice the psychologizing dimension that autofiction inherently presupposes. The author-narrator-character describes Vancu by taking stock of the knot of people in the Graalaj: "Rather short, fat, with a crown of hair adorning his ears under his bald head, Vancu was the ideal archetype of the provincial poet who feels too big for such a small town" (Vancu, 118-119). By accusing him of arrogance and ridicule, the narrator expels Vancu's alter-ego into a self-portrait critical of his own identity.

Here, a new sensibility is observed. In Vancu's case, the auctorial instance separates the defective ego from the hypersensitive one. Basically, the author-narrator-character eliminates his negative aspects, self-fictionalizing himself into a bearable Radu Vancu, devoid of extravagant lyricism and overly dramatic gestures. Thus, this potential Vancu, the narrator, gives himself the freedom to write and feel retrospectively, shaping the history of Sibiu and its relationship with Mega according to his traumatic needs. Moreover, the line that opens the volume ensures the existence of the autofictional pact and the tendency to oscillate between the real and the fantastic. By saying to Mega, "You know, I don't believe in the reality of the world," (7) the narrator inserts the ontological conditions of autofiction: disbelief in the reality of the world opens the possibility of referential and at the same time phantasmatic narrative. Throughout the novel, the ontology that the author attempts to construct in baroque notes mirrors the formalist autofictional condition, in which the referential and the non-referential are intertwined: "Nothing is what it seems. [...] But, if it is true that nothing is what it seems, then the reverse of the sentence must also be true: everything is what it does not seem. Or even better: what does not seem is everything" (156). The oscillating autofiction between the real and the imagined applies a sense of *mise en doute* (Jordan, 82), where the auctorial ego wishes to camouflage any overt biographical tendencies at the expense of internalized exploration and reconstruction of the self.

In this context, the very idea of becoming transparent is used on an ontological level, adapted to a new corporeal mentality. Any feeling taken to the extreme challenges the protagonist in the process of becoming transparent. Thus, the explosive emotional manifestation is probed by leaving the stage. Narrating his first episode of transparency triggered by rage, the narrator emphasizes the 'damned' character he finds himself in: "I realized then that this

is what all my victories would look like – lonely, terrifying, in a ragged light that only rats and monstrosities like me can enjoy” (Vancu, 79). The fictionalized elements are constructed in such a way as to deflect the autofiction from the biographical element. At the expense of the truth value specific to the diary, the action value gains ground with the stylistic value. The pretentious vocabulary and the phraseological architectonics reveal a baroque stylistics, at times textualist, which supports the processes of fictionalization and enrichment of the mundane reality. At its core, Vancu attempts to ground a new personalist philosophy for the 21st century. By fracturing the linear chronology, fragmenting the narrative through unnumbered chapters, inserting a historical narrative about the founding of Sibiu, Vancu constructs a narrative palimpsest through which the new existentialist ontology of the individual in the contemporary world is deciphered.

Writing becomes therapeutic in this context with the aim of treating the shock suffered, although it is invented. Self-fictionalizing, the author-narrator reconstructs an episode of his life, which he situates in a specific setting: Sibiu. Vancu offers the city a specific aura through fantasizing. The city thus takes on a new decadent value, which, instead of being reborn in the context of a Romania freed from dictatorship, decays: “... all splendid and rotten, all only beauty and decay, grandeur and baroque and conceits built of flour bricks, bricked walls and mold. If ever there could be anything as contradictory as a manifesto for decadence, Sibiu would be the perfect illustration” (93). Thus, Sibiu is given a bohemian aura based on contradictions that allow the space to be homogenized only in affective nodal points: the Graalaj – the Dantean hell of drunkenness and youth – and the central Gothic church – an *axis mundi* destined to collapse.

In the end, Vancu’s autofiction is built on a stylistic and ideational architecture of great scope - at the risk of falling into textualism, pathos and pretentiousness - proposing a new understanding of paradise. By magnetizing it, the project of a possible ideal world takes the form of ruin: “Only what is destroyed can be paradise, fuck off. There is no paradise that is not a ruin...” (426). *Transparența* succeeds through the project of remembrance, in offering an alternative, dialogical, living, and, at the same time, apocalyptic memory, expressing the crisis of a neoliberal world and the chance of a rediscovered but altered individualistic depth. At the social level, the apocalypse cast over the neoliberal discourse becomes a theistic but valid allegory. On the individual level, Vancu actualizes through the metaphor of transparency a new ontological formula, anchored not so much in an ideologically isolated meditation as in a thought of corporeality connected to psychological trauma.

Extroverted Autofiction – Sașa Zare's *Dezrădăcinare*

In spite of the 2000s effervescence, few of the writers launched at that time have kept a stable place in the canon of local literature. Now, twenty years on, the so-called 'survivors' of the millenarian generation are more visible, a sign that Paul Cernat's labelling of the new literature as 'pubescent' (Cernat, 2008) was not exactly wrong. Mihai Iovănel also mentions the fact that the 'maintenance parameters' (Iovănel, 408) of a literary direction were established only then, a sign that a certain maturity of the new literary context would follow, abandoning the influences of communism. Although only a debut, *Dezrădăcinare* has rightly been placed at the forefront of a new phase in autofiction, but also in LGBTQ+ literature.

Sașa Zare's autofiction innovates on all levels – thematically, stylistically, ideologically, psychologically – without breaking brutally with what was before her. Zare rejects the alignment with her predecessors, but without arrogantly judging or demolishing them. Instead, her narrative projects a counter-mainstream community of readers, more politically aware, left wing oriented, which still remains far too little visible in the local space. The individualism of her autofiction shields the author from rude attacks, anarchist-grunge as Iovănel would say (Iovănel and Bâlici 2022), which would perhaps have been expected from an adolescent attitude. The ethos that Sașa Zare proposes is an empathic one, relying on flexibility, understanding and altruism, which will mark this new stage of autofiction, especially from a feminist and intersectional perspective, as it also appears in the writings of Christine Angot.

Dezrădăcinare is both a novel that exposes the construction of a narrative and an autofictional narrative about exile, gender issues, and toxic intergenerational relationships. The structure of the volume assigns two dimensions to the narrative of the Ego. The first, the one furthest from the reader, the main one, which makes up the protagonist's entire narrative, is the story of Sașa Vlas from childhood through her college years. The reader is confronted with two variants of writing an autobiographical novel, the first in the third person and the second in the first person. Both are aimed at narrating, in reparative form, the life and traumas of Sașa Vlas, the writer Sașa and, of course, the author Sașa Zare. The second level, closer to the reader, is that of the writer of this meta-novel, a writer who manifests herself through the diary, through discussions in therapy, and then by direct address to the reader. The central narration is that of the fictionalized character – Sașa Vlas –, and the stylistics of the text, which remains in the first person, creates a striking *mise en abyme* effect. For the same reason, the confessional-reparatory effect is more marked, due to the constant attempt of appropriation of the reader by the protagonist (Iovănel and Bâlici).

The basic elements of autofiction are openly present: the triple onomastic identification, the presence of biographical elements – the scenes exposing the mother-daughter relationship are so incisively narrated that the referential character cannot be ignored, or the scene of sexual abuse, the Chișinău-Cluj transition – the confessional and psychoanalytic character – “When I think of my mother, it fascinates me how she was able to master an adult life as wide as an empire with her temper of a choleric, angry, furious, overly sincere, clinging and always restless child, a mother who never admitted her faults and fought to the end to show you that you were the one to blame” (Zare, 176).

In terms of the narrative strategies, *Dezrădăcinare* can be considered the most complex example of autofiction in which autobiography, fiction-narrative, and theory intertwine. She develops, if not a system, at least a critical consciousness that emerges around each narrative sequence. Starting from the mother-daughter relationship, in which the narrator intervenes to shape the parameters of influence between the two, to the writer’s status in the Romanian literary world, Sașa Zare undertakes a theoretical excursus that revolves around the biographical narrative. The first pages of the novel are highly suggestive. The literary project is analysed from the very beginning: “I think I’ve started writing a novel. Or a novel. Or a short prose. I’m writing it in the third person. Maybe the third person is the right distance between me and Moldova now, a distance to encompass (in my arms) a nine-year cut, a distance-coagulant” (23).

The first-person narration in the second part of the novel follows a long meditation on gender identity, not on dysfunctional relationship or transnational trauma: “Homophobia is something we can’t escape, and it swallows too much of our joy anyway, don’t let it stop you. Stop thinking about it, don’t put up barriers, you write. Write anyway, write anything, write everything. And write.” From this point on, biography and fiction will be charged with a pregnant theoretical side. Such an internalization of the stakes of writing becomes an engine of reaction to referential reality. If Ana-Maria Stoica called the first part of the novel a ‘mock-test’ (Stoica 2023, 111), against the backdrop of the meta-autofiction left abandoned, I think it can also be seen as an incubator of creation, in which trauma, vulnerability, awareness of narrative force are internalized to later implode in the form of a complex, flexible, and militant autofiction.

Although autofiction implies a narrative of the self, in the case of Zare, the heterography has the role of forming a plural zone, where the writer and the reader can meet. Vulnerability as a writer is not only manifested in terms of the traumas announced by the protagonist, but also in terms of her own writing and interaction with the social. At the points where the narrator addresses the reader, this happens by formulating anxieties about reception. In the first part the fear of an aggressive audience is expressed, “I’m afraid that people will use

my text for their homophobic arguments [...] But anyway many people always take out of context, distort, if they want to make green out of red, they will..." (Zare, 130). Later on, the protagonist will accept anyway that any form of rendering the truth cannot avoid a clipping, a disclaimer is necessary, whereby the narrator assumes a *mea culpa*: "In the tradition of romanticizing and aestheticizing suffering, we might think that this is what love is like, lift me up into the clouds, smash me to the ground, etc. Or we might think that Alice and Răzvan are evil people who are mentally torturing an innocent teenage girl. What I'm trying to do here, and I don't know if I'm succeeding, is to distance myself a little bit from each of these narratives" (332).

In the extroverts' milieu, Sașa Zare innovates not so much in the thematics as in the way the stakes are posited. The difficulty of establishing a clear identity remains the challenge that dominates the entire novel: "And if everything is fiction, if life itself is a novel, then, by a very logical phenomenon of reciprocity, only the novel will be able to speak about life..." (145). And if the novel will be labyrinthine, exposing the multiplicity of forms and the uncertainty of a gaze that claims to be all-encompassing, the autofiction proves that identity can never be expressed totally and truthfully. The role of fiction in *Dezrădăcinare* is to dynamite clear categories, to ensure the presentism and authenticity of a plural, uncertain experience where healing is never completed.

Conclusions

In this essay I tried to show how autofiction can address the neoliberal context in a semi-peripheral literary space. Trying to rethink autofiction as a fictional genre, I built up a morphology of autofiction, pointing out the main characteristics that defines it. Hence, I argued that by thinking of autofiction as a fictional and performative genre, this category of narrative structure has a wider potential for emancipatory and critical observation in the neoliberal world-system. Afterwords, I mapped the emergence of autofiction in Romania, offering both theoretical and sociological arguments with which I claim that autofiction represents one of the literary species that can best talk and ask questions about our semi-peripheral context of the world-system network. Even more, I pointed out that the entrance of autofiction in Romania followed the Morettian scheme, in which a Western form was refined with local content and narrative voice.

With the analysis of two recently published autofictions I wanted to show how originality and new autofictional strategies, yet unknown in the wider context of the world-system, emerged in this semi-peripheral space. Taking

a closer look at *Transparența*, I showed how a new ontological theory can be constructed with corporeal aims and with ample processes of fictionalisation. Finally, analysing *Dezrădăcinare*, I evoked how autofiction can imply performative strategies of writing by addressing the reader and aiming to create revolutionary communities built up on true traumas and imaginative, fictional, potential. In a more political perspective, Vancu's novel gives voice to a neoliberal, centrist *status-quo*, while offering a harsh critique of any political attempt towards an anarcho-capitalist attitude, as is the case of *el captain*. Sașa Zare, however, goes even further with her political critique, by denouncing any form of neoliberal hypostasis. Hence, through her novel, a radical left-wing discourse aims to explore an emancipatory potential. At this level, autofiction gains the power of exposing and exploring the truth of the contemporary socio-economical context. This understanding of autofiction not only refuses rigid interpretations where biographical data represents the main point of interest, but opens up the possibility for imagining new solutions for our neoliberal atomized societies.

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CULTURAL TRAUMA AND CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S WRITING. THE CASE OF SAȘA ZARE'S SOMATIC SCRIPTOTHERAPY

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ABSTRACT. *Cultural Trauma and Contemporary Women's Writing. The Case of Sașa Zare's Somatic Scriptotherapy.* Situated at the crossroads of Literary Studies, Trauma Studies, and Memory Studies, this paper examines the conceptualization of "cultural trauma" within trauma theory and its representation in Sașa Zare's contemporary writing (*Dezrădăcinare [Uprooting]*) (2022), while also addressing the emergence of a new genre informed by these concerns. The aim of this study is threefold. First, I analyze the contested concept of cultural trauma and its relationship to both clinical studies and women's writing. Second, I extend Suzette A. Henke's notion of "scriptotherapy" into somatic scriptotherapy and investigate the emergence of a new genre within contemporary women's literature. Third, I explore the cultural and traumatic representations of motherhood, alongside the somatic dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship in *Dezrădăcinare* by Sașa Zare. The principal conclusions of this paper may be summarized as follows. First, *Dezrădăcinare* demonstrates that the expansion of writing into the exploration of traumatic stressors and processes of individual transformation requires a broader conceptualization of trauma, such as that advanced by theories of cultural trauma. Second, it reveals that the interrelation of procedural memory, therapeutic

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reenactment, and traumatic outcomes in contemporary women's writing necessitates the articulation of a new genre. Finally, it shows how different forms of clinical trauma, such as enmeshment, attachment, and developmental trauma, are inextricably bound to the embodiment of motherhood and to the bodily entanglement of the mother–daughter relation.

Keywords: *cultural trauma, somatic scriptotherapy, contemporary women's writing, Dezrădăcinare, Eastern European literature, procedural memory, enmeshment trauma, developmental trauma, attachment trauma.*

REZUMAT. Trauma culturală și literatura contemporană feminină. Analiza critică a scriiturii somatice în opera Sașei Zare. Situat la intersecția dintre studiile literare, studiile despre traumă (Trauma Studies) și studiile despre memorie (Memory Studies), acest articol examinează conceptualizarea „traumei culturale” în cadrul Trauma Studies și reprezentarea sa în *Dezrădăcinare* (2022) de Sașa Zare, abordând totodată emergența unui nou gen literar modelat de aceste preocupări. Demersul de față are trei obiective majore. În primul rând, analizez conceptul controversat de traumă culturală și relația sa atât cu studiile clinice, cât și cu scrierile feminine. În al doilea rând, extind noțiunea de „scriptotherapy” propusă de Suzette A. Henke în *somatic scriptotherapy* și investighez apariția unui nou gen în literatura feminină contemporană. În al treilea rând, explorez reprezentările culturale și traumatice ale maternității, alături de dinamica somatică a relației mamă–fiică în *Dezrădăcinare* (2022) de Sașa Zare. Concluziile principale ale acestui studiu pot fi rezumate astfel. În primul rând, *Dezrădăcinare* demonstrează că extinderea scrisului către explorarea factorilor traumatici și a proceselor de transformare individuală reclamă o conceptualizare mai amplă a traumei, precum cea avansată de teoriile traumei culturale. În al doilea rând, evidențiază că legăturile dintre memoria procedurală, reactualizarea terapeutică și consecințele traumatice în scrierile feminine contemporane necesită articularea unui nou gen. În cele din urmă, ilustrează cum diferite forme de traumă clinică, precum *enmeshment*, *attachment*, și *developmental trauma*, sunt inextricabil legate de maternitatea privită ca embodiment și de interdependența corporală a relației mamă–fiică.

Cuvinte-cheie: *traumă culturală, scriptoterapie somatică, literatura contemporană scrisă de femei, Dezrădăcinare, literatura est-europeană, memorie procedurală, enmeshment trauma, developmental trauma, attachment trauma.*

Critical discourse today is more than ever charged with shaping fiction into a medium that bears responsibility and aids in the development of curative strategies for self-construction and self-repair, working alongside non-formal educational tools such as social media, video platforms, and streaming services.

At the core of these media and self-help discourses is the notion that not only can any change, crisis, or individual or collective event act as a traumatic stressor with potential traumatic effects on the self, but that their representation (Alexander 2004, 10) is also central to shaping these outcomes, both in the everyday narratives individuals construct about themselves and in aesthetic processes of meaning-making.

Situated at the crossroads of Literary, Trauma, and Memory Studies, this paper explores the conceptualization of “cultural trauma” within Trauma Studies and its representation in contemporary women’s writing, as well as the emergence of a new genre informed by these concerns. Given that trauma constitutes a significant element of the fabric of contemporary women’s literature across both Western and Eastern Europe (and beyond), its factors are multiple and glocal, as outlined in the first part of this paper. The second part will introduce the concept of somatic “scriptotherapy” (Henke 1998, xii–xiii), informed by Suzette A. Henke’s theory, which I have extended to designate what I regard as a new genre within contemporary women’s writing that engages with memory and trauma. The final section analyzes the somatic aspects of the mother–daughter relationship in Sașa Zare’s *Dezrădăcinare* [*Uprooting*] (2022).

The aim of this paper is threefold. First, I examine the controversial concept of cultural trauma and its relationship with both clinical studies and women’s writing. Second, by extending the concept of “scriptotherapy” into somatic scriptotherapy, I investigate the connections between memory, the cultural capital of trauma, and the emergence of a new genre within contemporary women’s writing. Third, given that trauma theory has been constructed with a primary focus on Holocaust survivors and their families (Pabel 2023, 2), Trauma Studies does not fully account for the experiences of individuals in post-communist Eastern Europe². My research therefore seeks to address this gap by examining an overlooked dimension within Trauma Studies: the cultural and traumatic representations of motherhood and the somatic dynamics of the mother–daughter relationship in contemporary literature written by women in post-communist countries, as exemplified by *Dezrădăcinare* by Sașa Zare, a hybrid text situated at the intersection of fiction and nonfiction.

Contemporary women’s writing in Eastern European literature is also largely shaped by a “conflictual «private» mother-daughter relationship” (Fell

² However, two works are particularly noteworthy as precursors to this research. On the one hand, there is a study focusing on the experiences of women in post-communist countries, namely *Genre and the (Post-)Communist Woman: Analyzing Transformations of the Central and Eastern European Female Ideal* (2014) by Florentina Andreescu and Michael J. Shapiro. On the other hand, there is an article by Elena Adam and Simona Mitroiu, *Remembering the Past: Representations of Women’s Trauma in Post-1989 Romanian Cinema* (2016).

2003, 11) and a predominantly negative perception of motherhood. As both Alison Fell and Marianne Hirsch observe, mother–daughter relations are marked by profound ambivalence, as maturing daughters (and writers) “negotiate the fluctuations of symbiosis and separation” (Hirsch 1989, 20) in their relationships with their mothers, in an ongoing quest for self-definition, and the avoidance of the fear of “becoming one’s mother” (*matrophobia*) (Rich 1976, 235). The text I will analyze as a case study foregrounds the theme of separation, evident even in its title, as *Uprooting* represents the most accurate rendering of *Dezrădăcinare*. However, this instance is not unique within Eastern European literature. In terms of the literary exploration of motherhood and the mother–daughter relationship in contemporary narratives set in post-communism, communism, or alternating between the two, one might also cite novels such as *Mătes piens* [*Soviet Milk*] (2015) by Nora Ikstena, *Grădina de sticlă* [*The Glass Garden*] (2018) by Tatiana Țibuleac, *Părinți* [*Parents*] (2020) by Diana Bădică, and *Tăcerea vine prima* [*The Silence Comes First*] (2024) by Ioana Stăncescu.

Feminist Criticism and the Clinical and Cultural Dimension of Trauma

One primary reason why trauma has been a constant focus in women’s writing from the late 20th century onward, and has become increasingly prominent in recent years not only in central and Western cultures, but also in lesser-known literatures, such as those of post-communist countries in Eastern Europe, is the rise of feminist criticism, which developed alongside the *psychology of women*, in the United States in the 1960s (Brown 2017, 502). Feminist criticism, together with critical social movements, not only brought attention to a wide spectrum of interpersonal traumas, which subsequently became a focus of study within trauma psychology (Brown 2017, 503), but also played a pivotal role in advancing the understanding of interpersonal trauma, both in clinical and cultural contexts (502). This legacy is perpetuated today not only in that activism and research on trauma, across both the social and human sciences as well as the clinical domain, continue to inform one another, but also in that women’s writing provides a space in which the dialogue between these domains becomes visible. In this context, the cultural representation of trauma shifts beyond the framework of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which has dominated clinical research since the 1980s (Walker 2017, 69) to emphasize instead the individual processes through which memory constructs, manifests, and reactivates not the traumatic event itself, but the unfolding of the traumatic process.

A second reason why women’s literature today intensively explores the traumatic dimension of existence, shaped by personal, familial, cultural, and societal experiences, is that the clinical concept of trauma had expanded by the

end of the 20th century (Britt, and Hammet 2024, 920) to encompass a broader range of individual experiences. Until the 19th century, trauma was largely explained through physical causes that were used to justify its psychological manifestations. Beginning with the publication of the first *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) by the American Psychiatric Association in 1952, in the aftermath of the Second World War, traumatic symptomatology came to be regarded as “a reaction to an event, rather than an expression of an inborn defect or vulnerability” (Figley, Ellis, Reuther, and Gold 2017, 5). It was only with the appearance of DSM-III in 1980 that posttraumatic stress-disorder (PTSD) was officially recognized as a diagnosis, premised on the assumption that trauma constituted “an event beyond ordinary human experience” (Figley, Ellis, Reuther, and Gold 2017, 5) that could have adverse effects on virtually anyone. Despite this apparent broadening of the concept of trauma, from its early association with a wound, to its alignment with an external event, and ultimately to its synonymy with PTSD, sexual violation was not explicitly acknowledged as a category of traumatic event until DSM-V (2013), even though childhood sexual abuse had long been one of the most studied and clinically treated forms of trauma (Figley, Ellis, Reuther, and Gold 2017, 6).

Following the expansion of trauma beyond its clinical dimension in the 1990s, alongside the publication of one of the foundational works in the field of cultural trauma, namely *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) by Cathy Caruth, within the now interdisciplinary field of Trauma Studies, the emphasis no longer rests exclusively on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as in clinical studies, but rather on the notions of change, crisis, and process. Trauma is therefore no longer synonymous with events “beyond ordinary human experience” (Figley, Ellis, Reuther, and Gold 2017, 5), but is embedded in everyday life, with traumatic stressors potentially emerging from experiences such as grief, poverty, emotional abuse, divorce, job loss, interpersonal conflict, displacement, revolution, accidents, bankruptcy, terrorist attacks, or dismissal from work (Caruth 1995, 159).

The broadening of the term, however, produces a double-edged effect. On the one hand, by encompassing a wide array of experiences, many of which lack grounding in clinical studies, it risks becoming a “concept creep” (Britt, and Hammet 2024, 916), that is, a term rendered semantically diluted through overextension and generalization. On the other hand, this very terminological relaxation, and the consequent flexible application of the concept of trauma, enables insights derived from the human and social sciences, beyond the scope of psychological research, to resonate within the clinical domain. As Lucy Britt and Wilson H. Hammett observe, this shift reflects a broader dynamic. On the one hand, as the cultural conception of trauma expanded in the late 20th century,

clinicians began to restrict the diagnostic definition of PTSD; on the other hand, under the influence of feminist scholarship, new categories of “complex PTSD” were introduced, including sustained exposure to an abusive relationship (Britt, and Hammet 2024, 920).

According to Caruth, cultural trauma develops gradually over time in response to personal or societal transformations (Caruth 1995, 160), often in subtle ways, which makes it correspondingly more difficult to identify and to substantiate with empirical data. I therefore contend that contemporary women’s writing provides a broader and more nuanced articulation of the cultural representation of trauma than the empirical data generated by clinical studies. Furthermore, this literary articulation not only mediates the dialogue between cultural and clinical perspectives, but also reinforces and extends feminist scholarship in the 21st century.

Cultural Representation of Trauma, and Somatic Scriptotherapy

As Cathy Caruth observes, literature, alongside sociology, history, psychoanalysis, and psychiatry, is called upon “to explain, to cure, and to show why it is that we can no longer simply explain or simply cure” (Caruth 1995, 4). Within this framework, contemporary women’s writing (among other forms of cultural production) intersects with and reinforces a broader cultural understanding of trauma. Although trauma as represented in contemporary women’s writing may be approached through a clinical framework, its central concern does not lie in reconstructing the traumatic event itself or in delineating a traumatic outcome through the profile of PTSD. Rather, the emphasis falls on the lived experience of trauma and on writing as a mode of constructing and remembering it, while simultaneously functioning as a therapeutic re-enactment undertaken by a subject in a state of ongoing transformation. Even though Caruth has been criticized for neglecting the narrative dimension, for aestheticizing trauma, and for emphasizing the failure of trauma to be represented (Wulf, and Weilnböck 2008, 230), I argue that contemporary women’s writing may serve as empirical evidence in support of the theory of cultural trauma. Moreover, it has the potential to inform clinical research and to provide insights that may contribute to the development of curative strategies for self-care.

Advanced by proponents of life writing, one of today’s most prominent literary genre, the claim that the literary depiction of crisis and trauma tends to foster formal innovation and disrupt traditional modes of realist narration (Pellicer-Ortín 2025, 107) entails two important implications. First, it highlights the flexibility of literary form in response to social factors, as well as literature’s need and capacity to adapt formally to the contemporary world. Second, by

translating individual experiences of crisis or trauma into a universal and universalizable register, and by engaging in “discussions about identity across various aspects of contemporary public life” (Pellicer-Ortín 2025, 108), life writing turns into a “marketable commodity” (108), aligning with the dissemination of cultural trauma.

Dezrădăcinare [Uprooting] (2022) by Sașa Zare may be read as traversing multiple genres, such as novel, autotheory, and therapeutic journal (Iovănel, and Bâlici 2022). Nevertheless, for the purposes of this analysis, I situate it at the boundary between fiction and nonfiction, within the framework of “scriptotherapy”. This genre is closely related to life writing, insofar as both concepts pertain to a general practice of writing aimed at reflecting upon and working through personal experiences, and in that they can be “biographical, novelistic, historical or explicitly self-referential and therefore autobiographical” (Pellicer-Ortín 2025, 105). I draw on Suzette A. Henke’s concept of “scriptotherapy” to refer to “the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic re-enactment” (Henke 1998, xii–xiii). This definition suggests that literature may function as a therapeutic means of reconstituting the self not only in the aftermath of trauma, vulnerability, or crisis (Kuznetski, Battisti, and Pellicer-Ortín. 2025, 4), but also in the course of articulating, constructing, and representing trauma through the act of writing.

I add to this definition certain features of life writing, such as a subject that is “always in a process of change” (Pellicer-Ortín 2025, 104), and the genre’s capacity “to communicate intricate inner experiences and/or moments of crisis” (104), typically articulated in a first-person, non-linear narrative, structured by temporal layering and fluid movements across time, wherein past and present are granted equal narrative weight. Given that both the process of change and the aforementioned internal experiences are inherently sensory, I refine and delimit the subgenre into what I term “somatic scriptotherapy”, in which not only the (re)construction of bodily experience constitutes the central focus, but also “procedural memory” (or the memory of the body), which, according to Peter Levine, encompasses the memory of sensory experience, defensive responses, and self-protection, constituting the “deepest strata of memory” (Levine 2015, 39).

Procedural memory, on the one hand, and the ways in which the body is perceived, positioned, and experienced in relation to others, on the other, are central to the genre I propose, as these processes intersect with both the act of writing, therapeutic re-enactment, and the cultural representation of motherhood, and the mother–daughter dynamic. Within trauma psychology, the conceptual focus has gradually shifted away from trauma’s original meaning as a wound, associated primarily with physical effects, toward an emphasis on the traumatic

event and its less visible psychological consequences. Yet, with the subsequent expansion of the concept of trauma and its integration into broader frameworks, embodiment, understood as the dynamic interdependence of mind and body, has become increasingly foregrounded in representations of interpersonal trauma in contemporary women writing.

Characteristic of the subgenre of somatic scriptotherapy is a body that participates in the process of identity construction: a first-person, experiential body, a body-as-memory that both connects and differentiates past and present, thereby generating a non-linear narrative structured through temporal layering. This is a reflexive body that accompanies the narratorial voice in the act of writing and in the production of an individual memory inscribed with collective and cultural dimensions, functioning as a counter-memory that resists the homogenizing imperatives of globalization and the surge of artificial intelligence, as well as the authoritarian politics of an ascendant far right, for which bodies are instrumentalized as sites of regulation and oppression. Within this framework, somatic scriptotherapy emerges in the current economic and political conjuncture both as a reaction against forces of uniformization, and as an alternative archive of individual (and thus cultural) memory, one that preserves not only affective, but also procedural memory.

Embodying the Mother: Trauma and Maternal Representation in *Dezrădăcinare* by Sașa Zare

Dezrădăcinare is one of the most acclaimed books published in 2022 in Romania, written in Romanian by an author from the Republic of Moldova, who publishes under the pseudonym Sașa Zare. *Dezrădăcinare* brings to light a range of intersecting realities: queer relationships, feminist activism, and displacement, all deeply intertwined with the representation of traumatic bonds between mother and daughter. While the book initially sets out to tell the breakup story of Sașa, the first-person narrator, with her girlfriend, it gradually turns into a fragmented narrative composed of journal entries, therapy sessions, reconstructed dialogues, and memories. Taken together, these fragments articulate a profound rupture: the separation from the mother; the displacement and dislocation from her homeland, Moldova, as Sașa relocates to Cluj-Napoca, Romania; and, ultimately, the alienation from her native language. These fractures coalesce around an identity in perpetual motion and negotiation, structured by the interplay between the immediacy of lived experience, and the enduring, at times intrusive, presence of memory. As the narrator herself observes: “In the contemporary world there is no such thing as a fixed identity; the self is nothing but a

disordered, restless, fractured *mélange*, constantly in transformation" (Zare 2022, 93) (m. t.)³.

The cultural representation of trauma in contemporary literature authored by women frequently intersects and is intertwined with depictions of motherhood and the mother–daughter relationship. Mothers in literature often become objects of discourse for their daughters, as demonstrated by Marianne Hirsch and Alison S. Fell in their seminal feminist studies on motherhood. As such, the emergence of maternal subjectivity in contemporary Western literature (and, we might add, in Eastern European literature) entails two related dynamics. According to Marianne Hirsch, on the one hand, it involves giving voice to the mother; on the other, it can entail her "marginalization", reducing her voice to that of the daughter and placing her in a position of dependence relative to her (Hirsch 1989, 16). *Dezrădăcinare* is no exception. In an effort to heal following her separation from her girlfriend, Sașa retraces her relationship with her mother, a path linking body and writing and employing a psychoanalytic approach akin to that of Hélène Cixous in *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975), through which the narrator translates corporeal memories into language. As a pioneering contribution to Romanian-language somatic scriptotherapy, Zare's work configures the mother as institutionalized via an excessive bodily entanglement with her daughter.

In *Dezrădăcinare*, procedural memory is anchored in a space of self-reflection and manifests both in the therapist's office, during psychotherapeutic sessions, and in the structured practice of reflective writing. The authority of narrative is evident in the way Sașa negotiates her most intimate self, "repositioning the deepest parts" (Zare 2022, 191) of her identity, and attempts to displace her mother as the "voice of the mind" (175)⁴. In the act of narration, she recalls and works through fragmented images and experiences, which are then reorganized and interpreted within the context of her therapy sessions with her psychotherapist. The reconstruction of traumatic experiences, along with the cultural representation of trauma and motherhood, originates in therapeutic practice and extends into writing, in what we term somatic scriptotherapy, wherein the narration of one's life story serves to illuminate and construct the formation of trauma.

While most critical studies on motherhood concentrate on Western literature, it is important to recognize that, under the influence of late 20th century feminism, when motherhood increasingly became a matter of personal choice,

³ The cited work is originally written in Romanian. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the novel are my own ["Cred că în lumea contemporană nu există niciun fel de identitate fixă, eu l e doar un melanj dezordonat, neliniștit, fărâmițat, în transformare mereu"] (93).

⁴ "repoziționează cele mai adânci părți" (191); "voce a minții" (175).

and in parallel with medical and legal developments that facilitated a more “fluid” understanding of maternity and family (Fell 2003, 74), women’s writing in post-communist Eastern Europe in the 21st century likewise engages with the theme of motherhood. These texts often approach motherhood from the perspective of daughters, who negotiate their relationships with their mothers in a quest for self-definition.

For Saşa, subsequently relocating from Chişinău for the student city of Cluj-Napoca signifies a rupture from the mother-as-body, home, and homeland. The corporeal and affective detachment from a mother who regards her child, and later her teenage and adult daughter, primarily as a bodily extension provides Saşa with the critical distance necessary to interrogate, analyze, and eventually come to terms with her mother. Although multiple traumatic experiences emerge throughout this process, I will highlight three clinically recognized types of trauma as follows: developmental, attachment, and enmeshment trauma. These traumas are narrated progressively, emphasizing the formation and unfolding of trauma itself rather than its effects (as in clinical PTSD) or the extraordinary events that produced them, reflecting a broader, everyday understanding of trauma, as conceptualized within cultural trauma theory. In this context, the primary traumatic stressor is not sexual abuse or physical violence *per se*, although a childhood sexual episode is recounted by Saşa, but rather, within the mother-daughter dyad, it lies in the mother’s aspiration for her daughter to achieve and possess what she herself was denied under an oppressive communist system. Consequently, deprivation, poverty, restrictions on career and personal freedoms, and the policing of women’s bodies produced a possessive dynamic that both structured and constrained the mother-daughter relationship.

Saşa navigates a deeply rooted negative mother–daughter relationship while striving not to demonize her mother and seeking reconciliation; for this reason, the somatic scriptotherapy of Saşa Zare can be read as an attempt to come to terms with the mother. Saşa aims to perceive her mother beyond the fixed structures imposed by the institution of motherhood, and to understand her through the lived experiences of individual women, viewing motherhood as a practice rather than a prescribed role: “I so wish, mother, that we could dismantle the cult of the mother, that I could give your life back to you” (Zare 2022, 417)⁵. She does not separate from her mother as a living individual, but from her mother as an institution, a woman subordinated to societal expectations, for whom motherhood constitutes her sole social role, a role from which Saşa wishes to liberate her: “I wish that kinship structures could be released from

⁵ “Mi-aş dori atât de tare, mămică, să desfiinţăm cultul mamei, să pot să-ţi dau viaţa înapoi” (417).

the constraints of the traditional family. That you could have a community of friends now and a large house in which to enjoy life with them" (Zare 2022, 417)⁶.

For reconciliation to be conceivable in a future beyond Sașa's anticipation, the excavation of the past is intimately connected to procedural memory and, by extension, to the conceptualization of the body as a site to be read, interpreted, and discovered through writing. Yet, this examination of the body, understood in terms of affect, and temporality, reveals its persistent dependence on the mother's body, manifesting in Sașa's enduring sense that her own body constitutes little more than an extension of her mother's, as exemplified in the following passage:

It felt as if it were a foot or a hand of her mother's, and every time they met, Sveta naturally caught her own body part between her fingers and examined it: if it had slimmed down, if it had gotten fatter, if it had hair, if not, if it smelled, how it smelled, if it had gotten uglier, if that piece of flesh fit in with the rest of the world or if something was wrong there. Is it normal enough? Sașa imagined that was what was going through Sveta's mind while she was breaking her intimacy with her fist, and Sașa had to redraw it every time (Zare 2022, 39) (m. t)⁷.

When boundaries between family members are blurred, and the mother treats the daughter's self and body as her own, compromising the child's autonomy and preventing her from developing a separate sense of self, and bodily agency, specialists refer to this as enmeshment trauma, a condition in which differentiation and separation are impossible. Those subject to enmeshment often experience a lack of individuated selfhood and a sense of mutual indispensability, which, as exemplified by Sașa, can manifest in maladaptive interpersonal behaviors, and an "undeveloped self" (Baroncelli, Lodder, van der Lee, Bachrach 2025, 1-2).

There is no track of an abusive relationship, neither emotionally, nor corporally not even a symptom of PTSD. However, the closeness of their bodies and the dependence of the daughter on her mother's body unfolds in the process of

⁶ "Mi-aș dori ca formele de rudenie să fie scoase din blocajul familiei tradiționale. Ca tu să ai o comunitate de prietene acum și o casă mare, în care să huzurești împreună cu ele" (417).

⁷ "Da' sutien nu porți? Parcă ți se văd țâțele./ Și în timp ce o întreba asta, mâna Svetei s-a întins peste cană, peste solniță, peste mormanul cu plăcinte, peste farfuria Sașei și i-a atins sânul stâng, i l-a cuprins cu palma, și-a apăsât degetele pe el, precis, medical. (...) Se simțea de parcă ar fi fost un picior sau o mână a maică-sii și de câte ori se întâlneau, Sveta își prindea cu naturalețe între degete propria parte a corpului și o analiza: dacă a slăbit, dacă s-a îngrășat, dacă are păr, dacă nu, dacă miroase, cum miroase, dacă s-a mai urîțit, dacă bucata aia de carne se încadrează în rândul lumii sau e ceva greșit acolo. E destul de normală?, își imagina Sașa că era în capul Svetei, în timp ce îi rupea intimitatea cu pumnul și fata trebuia să și-o deseneze la loc de fiecare dată" (39).

narration and reconstruction of mother-daughter relationship as a result of emotional and physical neglect that stems out of Saşa's childhood stories, as illustrated in the following excerpts: *"I clung to my mother's big body"* (Zare, 2022, 27); or *"(...) always tied to one another, never apart, never far, always holding hands, I am hers, she is mine, we share the madness like a piece of bread with onion and butter"* (18–19)⁸.

Although Saşa also depicts her mother as a shelter, a refuge, and a home in the passages above, the excavation of the past, the reactivation of the child's bodily memory, and the alternation between past and present reveal the mother's affective neglect. This neglect, embedded in the routines of everyday life, unfolds gradually and is reconstructed through the act of writing, not as an extraordinary event "beyond ordinary human experience" (Figley, Ellis, Reuther, and Gold 2017, 5), but as a cumulative and continuous stressor that, according to specialists, can be classified as developmental trauma. Writing this trauma highlights not only the role of procedural memory in its evocation, but also the centrality of the body: it is through the body that readers can perceive, in Saşa Zare's somatic scriptotherapy, that developmental trauma does not arise from events, as in clinical trauma, but from sustained everyday exposure to affective neglect, and "from the lack of a secure attachment relationship" (Cruz, Lichten, Berg, George 2022, 3).

Alongside developmental trauma, attachment trauma is expressed in the disruption of attachment processes and the persistent undermining of physical and emotional stability within the family unit, which is also made evident in the bodily interactions between Saşa and her mother, as seen in the following excerpt: *"When my mother came closer and closer, large, beautifully smelling, I ran to her. I stuck to her, I wrapped my arms around her whole belly. How much I missed you, mommy!"* (31)⁹. The scene evokes the mother's return home and the daughter's joy at seeing her after an extended period of solitude; however, it is neither singular nor isolated throughout Zare's book. Nor is it the only episode relevant to the discussion of attachment trauma. While attachment trauma remains a relatively recent concept in clinical studies and lacks a fixed definition (Zagaria, Baggio, Rodella, Leto 2024, 1-16), Saşa Zare's somatic writing suggests two possible reasons for this. First, clinical research often emphasizes events rather than the everyday life of the traumatized individual. Second, clinical

⁸ "M-am agăţat de corpul mare al mamei" (27). "(...) mereu una legată de alta, niciodată fără, niciodată departe, mereu ne ținem de mână, sunt a ei, e a mea, împărțim nebunia la două ca pe o bucată de pâine cu ceapă și unt." (18-19)

⁹ "Când mama a ajuns tot mai aproape, mare, frumos mirositoare, am fugit la ea. M-am lipit, i-am luat toată burta în brațe. Ce dor mi-a fost de matală, mămică!" (31).

studies frequently focus on the consequences of trauma, rather than on the narrative itself as a form of re-enactment.

Together, these two forms of trauma, the developmental effects of chronic affective neglect and the relational disturbances of insecure attachment, along with enmeshment trauma, intersect in the embodied experience and mother–daughter relationship that Saša Zare reconstructs through writing.

Conclusions

First, *Dezrădăcinare* demonstrates that the expansion of writing into the exploration of traumatic stressors and processes of individual transformation requires a broader conceptualization of trauma, such as that advanced by theories of cultural trauma. Second, it reveals that the interrelation of procedural memory, therapeutic reenactment, and traumatic outcomes in contemporary women's writing necessitates the articulation of a new genre capable of encompassing and unfolding these dynamics. Finally, the text exemplifies how displacement and separation, understood as potential traumatic stressors within cultural trauma, together with various forms of clinical trauma, including enmeshment, attachment, and developmental trauma, are inextricably linked to the corporeal embodiment of the mother, as well as to the dynamics of mother–daughter bodily dependency.

In Saša Zare's writing, cultural and clinical understandings of trauma converge to configure a subject in perpetual transformation, a condition that shapes not only the formal characteristics of the text, conceived here as a form akin to life writing which I term *somatic scriptotherapy*, but also provides empirical support for both therapeutic strategies in clinical contexts and theories of cultural trauma. This is one reason why *somatic scriptotherapy* is crucial for reading *Dezrădăcinare*, while also possessing potential for further theoretical expansion.

One of the functions of this genre is not merely to illuminate trauma-coping mechanisms, but also to narrativize, and thereby render intelligible, the processes through which the body undertakes healing and implements curative strategies within and through the act of writing. In this sense, body and narrative converge in *somatic scriptotherapy*, foregrounding the ethical and cultural functions of literature by emphasizing the somatic dimension of human interaction and interpersonal trauma. While clinical studies since the 1990s have predominantly focused on post-traumatic stress disorder and the psychological consequences of traumatic events, Saša Zare's work demonstrates that writing – conceived both as a practice of constructing and mediating procedural memory and as

a mode of shaping how the body is perceived, positioned, and experienced in relation to others – is central to the unfolding of trauma and to the cultural representation of motherhood as an institution open to critique, as well as to the corporeally intertwined mother–daughter relationship.

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PLATFORMISING STORYTELLING: SHORT FICTION, NEOLIBERAL IMMEDIACY, AND TWITCH STREAMING IN ROMANIA

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ABSTRACT. *Platformising Storytelling: Short Fiction, Neoliberal Immediacy, and Twitch Streaming in Romania.* In light of the neoliberal ascent of platform capitalism, storytelling is undergoing an unmatched metamorphosis noticeable even in semi-peripheral cultures, including Romania's. From a methodological standpoint, we examine these literary and cultural transformations by situating a particular case study within the ideological frameworks of neoliberal capitalism as it manifests on streaming platforms. Our case study focuses on reallyrux's Twitch and YouTube series "Cine-i janghina?" ("Who's the Asshole?"), where audiences submit allegedly autobiographical short stories based on preestablished themes, focused on multi-sided conflicts. The host reads and discusses the stories in live streams, playfully evaluating their style while suggesting that the

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show enhances her audience's literary knowledge, thus positioning the series as both participatory entertainment and an informal workshop. Consequently, the study's aim is three-fold: first, to analyse the interrelationship between the literary and the digital, in particular, platform-based content; second, to investigate the revitalisation of the short story genre through participatory digital practices in the context of the prevalent trend of creative writing workshops in Romania; and third, to assess the immediacy-driven nature of post-millennial storytelling and its broader ideological implications. By exploring the intersection of platform media, participatory culture, and literary production, this paper sheds light on the evolving boundaries of storytelling in the age of platform capitalism.

Keywords: *short story, autobiography, social media, Twitch, Youtube, platform capitalism, neoliberalism, semi-periphery, East-Central Europe.*

REZUMAT. Platformizarea povestirii: proză scurtă, imediatețe neoliberală și streaming de Twitch în România. În lumina ascensiunii neoliberale a capitalismului de platformă, narațiunea trece printr-o metamorfoză de neegalat, vizibilă chiar și în culturile semi-periferice, precum cea românească. Din punct de vedere metodologic, vom examina aceste transformări literare și culturale prin plasarea unui studiu de caz particular în cadrele ideologice ale capitalismului neoliberal așa cum se manifestă pe platformele de streaming. Studiul nostru de caz abordează emisiunea de pe Twitch și YouTube a lui reallyrux, „Cine-i janghina?”, unde spectatorii trimit scurte povestiri așa-zis autobiografice, având la bază teme prestabilite, axate pe conflicte plurivalente. Gazda citește și discută poveștile în cadrul live stream-urilor, evaluând în glumă stilul lor și sugerând în același timp că emisiunea îmbunătățește cunoștințele literare ale publicului, situând-o astfel atât ca divertisment participativ, cât și ca atelier informal. În consecință, scopul studiului nostru este triplu: în primul rând, să analizeze relația mutuală a literarului și digitalului, mai exact, a conținutului bazat pe platforme; în al doilea rând, să investigheze revitalizarea genului prozei scurte în contextul tendinței predominante a atelierelor de scriere creativă din România și a practicilor digitale participative; și, în al treilea rând, să evalueze natura imediateții povestirii post-mileniale și implicațiile sale ideologice mai ample. Prin explorarea intersecției dintre platformele media, cultura participativă și producția literară, această lucrare deslușește modul în care limitele narațiunii se dezvoltă în era capitalismului de platformă.

Cuvinte-cheie: *proză scurtă, autobiografie, social media, Twitch, Youtube, capitalism de platformă, neoliberalism, semi-periferie, Europa Centrală și de Est.*

Introduction

In contemporary debates on the digital sphere, it is impossible to overlook the public personas who have come to dominate the platform industry, establishing themselves as the leading forces in online political influence. As such, Elon Musk, (self-)referred to as a “Free Speech Absolutist” (Marcetic 2022), has emerged as a central figure within the technological oligarchy associated with the current U.S. President Donald Trump. He now epitomizes the height of digital right-wing politics, as he “has transformed Twitter in record time into a global amplifier” of such rhetoric (Amlinger and Nachtwey 2025). As Ștefan Baghiu recently claims, “[p]olitics isn’t just performed on platforms anymore – it’s being written, directed, and monetised by them” (2025, 1). In the Romanian political landscape, Musk’s recently rebranded platform, X, serves as a space for far-right sovereigntist politicians, such as the prominent representative of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), George Simion, to express their support for him and the broader Trumpist agenda, “hoping that Trump’s presidency will weaken the EU and its domestic allies therewith” (Rogozanu 2025).

Furthermore, digital platforms have proven themselves to be highly potent ideological tools during last year’s Romanian presidential election, bringing unexpected notoriety to a candidate that was otherwise unknown to the public. It is indisputable that Călin Georgescu, whose close affiliations with Romania’s interwar fascist political faction have since become widely recognised, would not have emerged as the dark horse of the 2024 election without an aggressive high-impact campaign carried out on platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube. Through these channels, orchestrating a deliberate spectacle of performative “anti-establishment” anger, he and his wife disseminated a New Age type of mysticism, as Elena Trifan (2025) notes, and an unyielding nationalist agenda to audiences largely unaware of his underlying ideological foundations and misled by the platforms’ “[s]mart power with a liberal, friendly appearance” (Han 2017, 15), especially when contrasted with older, overtly politicised and antagonised media such as television, which are nearing their downturn (Gripsrud 2004).

However, platforms are neither ideologically neutral nor exclusively dominated by far-right content. Rather, they offer a venue for diverse ideological currents to emerge, including a growing trend of progressive discourse, which this article seeks to examine. Consequently, engaging with the broader political context is essential to our analysis. A case in point is reallyrux’s Twitch and YouTube channels, which advance a perspective centred on social commentary, advocating for social inclusion, LGBTQIA+ rights, and a specific strand of feminism which we will delve into in the third part of our article. Furthermore,

given our study's literary focus, we highlight how reallyrux actively promotes the writing of short stories that reflect queer, ethnic, and class-conscious narratives, among other intersecting concerns, intentionally positioning her content in opposition to the ways Romanian politicians have leveraged digital platforms for political purposes. To cite the "About" section of her Twitch channel, her main streaming series, "Cine-i janghina?," is described as "a show inspired by AITA, the popular Reddit thread, but with a twist: I read real stories sent by members of the community and deliver the final verdict – whether they, or the other people involved in the story, are the 'janghina' (the asshole) of the situation" (reallyrux "About," our translation). By placing reallyrux's channel within the broader Twitch streaming landscape in Romania, we aim to contextualise its ideological orientation and briefly address its interactions with other streamers inclined to progressive rhetorics. In the context of the 2024 election, reallyrux, alongside the aforementioned streamers, has openly articulated her critique of dominant nationalist-populist agendas. Although reallyrux primarily positions herself as a Twitch content creator, often encouraging her YouTube audience to join her weekly Twitch livestreams, this article focuses on her YouTube series due to its greater accessibility and its curated nature, featuring only the most engaging stories selected by her team as highlights from the Twitch streams. This preference is further justified by YouTube's broader popularity among Romanian audiences compared to Twitch's smaller communities. Accordingly, the entire YouTube series, comprising 179 episodes at the time of writing, forms the corpus of our case study.

Although the political sphere has served as the primary site for the consolidation of platform power globally, the Romanian context reveals a parallel dynamic wherein the digitalisation of everyday life, accelerated during the Covid-19 pandemic, facilitated platform expansion. As Emanuel Copilaș argues, Romania's transition from oligarchic to digital capitalism was catalysed by the pandemic, with technocratic elites exploiting state incapacity to reposition digital infrastructures as both inevitable and superior: "[m]aking use of the restrictions brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, technocratic capitalism is rapidly converting itself into digital capitalism" (Copilaș 2021, 93). In this context, key sectors such as education, administration, and healthcare underwent accelerated digitalisation, with concomitant attempts at privatisation framed as crisis management. Cultural and political life similarly shifted onto platforms, a trend that not only persisted but intensified post-pandemic. Twitch, for instance, which had already attained international prominence, gained traction in Romania during this period, importing global streaming practices and fostering a notable group of politically engaged streamers. This shift enabled the Romanian Twitch and YouTube streaming community to evolve beyond its gaming-centric roots (Jarret

2008; Burgess and Green 2009; Taylor 2018; Woodcock and Johnson 2019), which had already solidified its popularity within the Romanian online landscape, and to integrate ideologically informed social commentary into its mainstream framework.

Since such neoliberal digital transformations inform our methodological approach, we must first establish the definition of neoliberalism that guides our discussion. In this article, neoliberalism is understood, in Harvey's (2005) key, as an economic and cultural project that promotes individual freedom, free trade, and ostensibly self-regulating free markets through privatisation, deregulation, and an emphasis on the rule of law, while simultaneously concealing the restoration of class power. Following Slobodian (2018, 4), it also entails the institutional "encasement" of markets, designing structures not to liberate them but to shield capitalism from democratic pressures, to discipline perceived irrationalities in human behaviour, and to sustain a global order of competing states where borders serve as a functional economic role. As far as the local setting is concerned, a defining feature of Romanian neoliberalism, according to Cornel Ban (2014, 216), is that it only became a practical reality after neoliberal economic theories circulated among the political class in the aftermath of the 1989 revolution, effectively foreclosing local social and economic alternatives to the transition crisis. As a result, the political elite placed significant emphasis on attracting external capital, making Romania's neoliberal trajectory one characterised by dependency on its Western counterparts. As Ban notes,

[t]he conditionalities imposed by international financial institutions, the absence of a sufficiently developed national bourgeoisie, and the difficulties of neo-developmental experiments in countries such as Romania facilitated the translation of these ideas into practice (2014, 216, our translation).

Thus, Romanian neoliberalism remains underdeveloped, insufficiently regulated compared to other contexts, and prone to generating recurrent crises. Its dependency also extends into the cultural sphere, including the digital ecosystem, which is the focus of this study. Labour, in Romania's semiperipheral position, has thus been increasingly dematerialised and subsumed into freelancing, including monetised streaming practices, where storytelling and political discourse alike are commodified products of "neoliberalisation" (Deckard and Shapiro 2019, 15), symptomatic of a gigification tendency within the "neoliberal world-culture." Apart from the labour behind streaming, the content itself reflects, as we emphasise, Romania's relatively nascent neoliberal dynamics, dependent on (and shaped by) Western trends and tailored for local tastes.

While Emanuel Copilaș initiates a discussion on digital capitalism, more recent articles by Ștefan Baghiu refer to our contemporary era as platform capitalism. In this context, Baghiu examines how platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and even TikTok have emerged as new spaces for literary criticism. He argues that post-millennial literary criticism has been shaped by the demands of digital cultural and symbolic capital, what he terms “the clout,” and by an algorithmised, “clickbait” mentality (Baghiu 2024, 157). According to Baghiu, literature is increasingly commodified through the pacification of criticism, with the critic’s “I” functioning as a form of self-promotion. As a result, literary criticism has largely abandoned its institutionalised structures, with digital literary magazines now serving as primary platforms for critical expression. However, Baghiu observes that what initially seemed to be the “de-radicalisation” of criticism is, in fact, counterbalanced by a heightened “radicalisation” of political involvement, which has become more coherent than ever before (Baghiu 2024, 172). Previously, in a related discussion, Adriana Stan introduces the concept of “digicriticism” to describe the transition from print-based literary criticism to a digital discourse shaped by market forces and consumer-driven engagement. She highlights that “the digital expanding of literary culture into the public domain involves both the literary object, usually a book, and the commentary or review meant to help sell it” (Stan 2022, 271). This shift, she argues, has fostered “an artificial, hothouse climate of diffuse and equalising celebration” (Stan 2022, 272), reflecting the broader impact of digital media on literary culture.

Adriana Stan’s contribution builds upon Alan Kirby’s concept of “digimodernism” (2009); however, neither her 2022 study nor Baghiu’s 2024 article directly engage with the transformation of literary production in an era wherein the prefix “digi-” becomes an unavoidable qualifier. Their approaches remain largely metacritical, reflecting on the state of literary criticism or critique more broadly. This focus is understandable: while there is an undeniable interdependence between the literary and the digital (evident in the online promotion of literary works, the pre-publication of excerpts in digital magazines, and the increasing use of platforms by publishing houses: e.g., short-form poetry posts on Instagram), literature has not been fully subsumed by platform capitalism. Whilst Baghiu thoughtfully notes that “traditional politics is outmatched in the age of platform capitalism” (2025, 3), we are led to question whether traditional poetics and paradigms for conceiving the literary have similarly begun to erode, slowly giving way to new valorisations of literature on digital platforms (appreciated increasingly for their entertainment and therapeutic functions) and to new modes of actualisation, namely emerging forms of writing shaped by the prevailing climate of the digital environment. In that sense, our study does not approach the literary sphere as a fixed, inactive product, but rather aims to

explore the inner machinations of its active transformation. In the midst of this transformation, Twitch has emerged as a space where a post-millennial community engages in an informal, non-institutional literary process, signalling the new development of a “constellation of social and cultural parameters that shape the predominant understanding and *use* of literature” (Tihanov 2019, 1).

Thus, our survey is driven by two main factors: first, the emergence of platforms as essential tools in the political venue, and second, the amplification of their presence in daily life due to the pandemic. Since digital platforms can be readily instrumentalised for ideological purposes, their underlying ideological structure cannot be overlooked, even in analyses that focus on literary circulation within digital ecosystems. Accordingly, one of our central arguments draws on Anna Kornbluh’s (2024) theorisation of contemporary culture as marked by a crisis of meaning, a condition she attributes to the hyper-circulatory logic of late capitalism. In the final section of this paper, we will engage more directly with her framework to explore how this dynamic informs the current conditions of literary production and reception. While research on platforms is extensive (Tarleton 2010; Srnicek 2017; Woodcock 2021), their exploration within the Romanian context remains relatively underdeveloped. Our focus is primarily literary and ideological, grounded in our background in literary studies. The question arises: what is the complex of conditions which triggered the enmeshment of platforms in the fibre of contemporary literature and, specifically, short fiction? In this regard, we observe a growing trend in what we term “the platformisation of storytelling.”

Short Story in the Platform Age: New Frontiers of Literary Entertainment

In his 2019 volume, Galin Tihanov notes that the transition to what he identifies as the third regime of relevance (following the first, which valorised Romantic aestheticism, and the second, oriented towards social agendas) signals a shift in which literature increasingly assumes roles of entertainment and therapeutic engagement. Accordingly, a broader global trend resonates with this observation, as illustrated by Alexandre Gefen’s mapping of contemporary therapeutic literature in France, which “can be extended beyond French literature to encompass world literature, as both core and (semi-) peripheral literary systems increasingly reflect the reparative role he identifies in his examples” (Vişan and Danieleescu 2025). Gefen contends that “literature is a good way to obtain a ‘certificate of existence’” (Gefen 2024, 46). Following this line of thought, online autobiographical storytelling, which is the focus of our analysis, emerges as a powerful means of asserting and rendering one’s existence visible.

Tihanov (2019, 24) contends that literature's validation as a therapeutic and entertaining medium increasingly intersects with a redefined paradigm of social relevance, evident in debates over identity politics and the curation of minority, national, and global canons. As this article demonstrates, digital short stories (or storytelling itself, disseminated via platforms like Twitch and YouTube)³ actively engage with identity politics, particularly through queer and feminist narratives, thereby fulfilling both ethical and civic functions. Although contemporary Romanian literature increasingly embraces an ethics of care, this section of the article turns to the digital sphere, which has emerged as a key arena within Romanian culture where literature's entertainment-driven function now predominates. To bridge the digital and the literary, we introduce the concept of the "platformisation of storytelling," a term that captures how the growing prominence of storytelling across digital platforms mirrors the rising engagement with contemporary short prose in the Romanian literary field. In particular, platforms such as Twitch and YouTube have become major entertainment hubs where short stories have found new audiences among media consumers.

In this context, Yesol Seo's notion of "storymetaloguing" becomes particularly relevant: she defines it as the continuous reinterpretation and expansion of meaning through audience interaction, resulting in layered narrative structures that span various media and platforms, including social media, interactive art, and video games (Seo 2024, 9). Within the digital entertainment paradigm, storytelling is thus marked by its immersive quality and the collaborative dynamics shaping both creative and interpretive practices. While Seo's concept originates in a broader sociological analysis of storytelling practices, our focus is specifically literary, examining how short story writing has entered a distinctly digital phase in an Eastern European context. Moreover, this transition has contributed to the growing popularity of digital storytelling, often outpacing traditional print-based short story production. Against the background of the contemporary cultural support for short prose, this section investigates a parallel phenomenon in order to capture the evolving dynamics of digital literary production.

³ It is important to clarify from the outset that for the purposes of this article we adopt a deliberately broad definition of the short story, one that encompasses not only conventional storytelling but also forms of auto-writing, life writing, fan-fiction, collaborative fiction, and autobiographical prose. Our primary criterion is not generic purity, but rather textual length and structure, specifically the kind of prose that lend itself to being read aloud within the temporal constraints of a live-streaming format.

I. “The Wave of Short Story”: Historical Underpinnings

The short story has historically occupied a pivotal yet structurally marginal position within Romanian literary production, its trajectory being deeply intertwined with the development of the novel. Romania’s post-1948 integration into the Soviet sphere inaugurated a period of ideological instrumentalisation, wherein the novel was institutionally privileged under the rubric of socialist realism. Nevertheless, initial collapse marked the 1950s, with a partial recovery only after the cultural “thaw” of the 1960s, what Terian terms “the second rise of the Romanian novel” (2019a, 64). Short prose, by contrast, remained peripheral, though the 1970s and early 1980s witnessed a partial re-legitimisation through major anthologies (Regman 1974; Ciobanu 1979; Iorgulescu 1981; George 1982; *Desant 83* 1983). These interventions carved out spaces for experimentation within a literary field that, while only marginally ideologically liberalised, remained dominated by the long-form narrative. Moreover, the so-called “postmodernist” generation of Romanian writers turned to the publication of short stories as a means of legitimising their rupture from earlier literary paradigms, ranging from interwar and socialist modernism to the socialist realism institutionalised during the Soviet period. Generally, their aesthetic choices were imbued with a distinct political agency: by advocating a rapid alignment with Western-style neoliberalism, Romanian postmodernists effectively precluded, as Adriana Stan argues (2021), the leftist critiques that had underpinned Western variants of postmodernism.

The post-1989 transitional period (1990–2000) saw a steep decline in local novel production, saturated instead by translations and an unresolved critical project of canonising the “communist novel” (Terian 2019a, 67; Iovănel 2021). For instance, Terian’s quantitative analysis of literary production in Romania in 2013 (2019b, 38), including both translated and original works, as well as literature for children and adults, indicates that, although poetry and novels dominated in terms of volume, short prose maintained a significant presence, with 585 titles classified as locally authored short fiction for adult readers. Although the 2010s brought a quantitative resurgence of the novel, the re-emergence of short prose as a fashionable form could go hand in hand with a broader cultural logic, reflecting the valorisation of fragmentariness, immediacy, and modular consumption symptomatic of internalised neoliberal ideas (Ban 2016). Given this context, the attention span of contemporary cultural consumers, symptomatic of broader transformations in reading habits (shaped by the frequent scrolling through TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook reels, where content is designed to be short, impactful, and to encourage continuous, passive engagement), further exemplifies how literary forms and literary understanding are increasingly conditioned by the socio-material and economic infrastructures. As Bogdan Crețu notes,

[s]hort prose has to grab the attention of Instagram and TikTok users and get them excited. More than ever, it's all about intensity, tension, and efficiency. It has discarded everything that could be perceived as superfluous, it has become "deliteraturised" (which is also a literary strategy), it has turned towards narrative pragmatism, taking on increasingly compressed forms, such as flash fiction. (2025, our translation)

Before addressing the platformisation of literary production, it is necessary to contextualise contemporary fiction within its recent historical arc, which echoes the development of a "wave of short story," to paraphrase Thomsen's formulation (2023, 91). Institutional interest in the short story was renewed with Marius Chivu's *Best of: proza scurtă a anilor 2000* (2013), continued with Cosmin Perța's *Pasageri* (2019), and further consolidated through Chivu's *Kiwi* series (2021). Meanwhile, Cristina Ispas and Victor Cobuz's *Retroversiuni* anthologies (2023; 2024; 2025) intervened critically in the gendered structures of literary production. Authors such as Lavinia Braniște, Simona Goșu, and Florin Lăzărescu, among others, consolidated the genre through autonomous volumes, while *Iocan* magazine functioned as an incubator for contemporary short prose voices. In 2023, the online literary platform *Nesemnate* added a layer of active (inter-platform) audience participation to the anthologisation of Romanian prose and poetry (Dumitru 2023). In its incipient stage, the platform exclusively offered a selection of anonymous short stories, encouraging its users (not only through its own website, but also through frequent Facebook posts) to guess the author of each text based on literary style. The popularity of *Nesemnate*, as well as its subsequent expansion to other literary modes, is demonstrative of a platformising tendency.

The recent proliferation of short story production correlates with the emergence of a creative writing culture in Romania, a phenomenon mirroring global trends of neoliberal self-optimisation through pedagogical and therapeutic workshops (Gog and Simionca 2020). While creative writing mentorship had long been institutionalised in Western contexts, Romania only formalised such practices in the 2010s, thereby distinguishing them from the earlier "cenaclu" (literary circle) model. The watershed moment arrived in 2012 with Florin Iaru and Marius Chivu's structured workshops, explicitly adapting Anglo-American pedagogical frameworks. This initiative catalysed a proliferation of programmes within cultural institutions and literary publications, consolidated by figures such as Dumitru Crudu (in Chișinău, Republic of Moldova) and Cosmin Perța.

Initiated in response to the post-socialist stagnation of literary production, these programmes aimed not only to democratise access, attracting participants from diverse socio-professional backgrounds, but also to address systemic deficits: a narrow literary market, precarious publication circuits, and the structural

impossibility of sustaining a livelihood through writing alone. The drive toward professionalisation, now refracted through market logics and self-optimisation discourses, paradoxically recalls the professional status writing acquired under the socialist regime, albeit within a system where literary production was subsumed to ideological apparatuses and materially supported by these apparatuses (Macrea-Toma 2009; Rogozanu 2024).

In parallel with the institutionalisation of creative writing within universities, independent workshops have proliferated. A paradigmatic example is Cristian Fulaş, who, following a series of paid workshops, published a volume of essays on contemporary Romanian writing practices (2025). While such initiatives diversify the field, they also risk entrenching outdated theoretical frameworks and normative ideologies of writing. Thus, Romania's creative writing culture reflects both the global circulation of pedagogical models and a context-specific effort to revitalise a historically underdeveloped sector of national culture.

II. A Platform-Mediated Comeback

The digital has come to parallel the mentorship practices recently established in Romania. For instance, our case study focuses on reallyrux's channels, which foster an online environment dedicated to the production of literary content, specifically, as we argue, short fiction, alongside practices of listening to readings, interpreting the material, and offering commentary on both literary style and the perceived talent (or lack thereof) of anonymous text submitters. Since the series' inception, reallyrux has uploaded 179 episodes on Youtube, as evident in the playlist "'Cine-i Janghina?' Show" (reallyrux 2023). The most recent thematic development, introduced through viewer-submitted stories, focuses on "retro" narratives drawn from the family histories of the audience. We highlight this shift because it marks a significant evolution: viewers are no longer solely composing autobiographical short fictions but are now also engaging in the fictionalisation of familial memories, thereby closely mirroring broader literary processes of narrative construction and re-imagination.

Before turning to the show's undertaking of memorialised and immediatised narratives, it is crucial to first map the thematic spectrum of the show and its place within broader digital communities. The host curates the storytelling process by providing specific prompts, thus channeling the collective narrative production towards socially resonant and affectively charged domains. The dominant thematic clusters include: affective and romantic conflict (narratives of infidelity, insecure masculinity, maternal enmeshment, weddings, love triangles,

rivalry, and experiences mediated by digital dating platforms such as Tinder and Bumble⁴); kinship tensions and familial dysfunction (including the figure of the “black sheep,” intergenerational conflicts, and intra-familial rivalries); student precarity and youth sociality (experiences related to housing insecurity, complaints about student-faculty conflicts, peer solidarity, partying, travelling, and friendship); engagements with spirituality and the supernatural (ghost stories, superstitions, accounts of religious rites such as funerals and masses for the dead, seasonal observances tied to Easter and Christmas traditions); and, finally, labour market alienation (stories of exploitation, precarity, and navigating the asymmetries of contemporary employment practices).

The categorisation of these narratives within the field of contemporary Romanian short fiction derives not merely from their formal attributes but also from their platform-specific modalities of circulation and reception. Designed to accommodate a single performative reading, these texts typically extend across five to seven Word pages, adhering to the principle of narrative economy, and are subjected to a curatorial mechanism prior to dissemination: reallyrux’s editorial team selects (and edits) submissions for grammatical coherence (to ensure oral legibility), formal adequacy, thematic relevance, and narrative appeal. This selection process replicates, in a platformised and oralised register, the functions historically associated with literary periodicals, thereby establishing a digital archive of storytelling. It is also worth noting that the channels’ editors remove or censor certain elements of the submissions which do not align with the ideological foundation of the series, including bigoted remarks and any sensitive information shared without the consent of those involved in the stories.

In terms of reception, it must be underlined that the host’s commentary consistently foregrounds stylistic analysis, often evaluating the presence or absence of literary tropes and implicitly measuring the narrative sophistication of the authors. Frequently, both the host and the audience speculate, half-seriously, on the prospective literary careers of particularly skilled contributors. Despite the ironic undertone, both host and audience treat these texts as conventional literary works, as exemplified by the episode “Romeo & Juliette Românesc” [“Romanian Romeo & Juliette”] (reallyrux 2024), which frames the narrative within a familiar canonical paradigm. Thus, the participatory culture fostered by the platform, while subversive of institutional hierarchies, paradoxically re-inscribes conventional aesthetic norms, attesting to the resilience of inherited categories of literary legitimacy even within the fluid infrastructures of platform storytelling.

⁴ For a sociological account of dating apps in Romania, see Pozsar, Dumitrescu, Piticaș, Constantinescu 2018.

Moreover, the autobiographical inflection of the submitted narratives reflects the broader global turn towards autofictional and testimonial modes (Stan 2023; Gilmore 2023), symptomatic in 2000s Romania of the reconfiguration of literary value around experiential authenticity and the minoritarian voice. However, this democratisation of narrative space is dialectically entangled with processes of anonymisation: while platforms seemingly enable the articulation of personal histories otherwise hindered from public discourse, they simultaneously necessitate the erasure of authorial identity, thus exposing the contradiction of contemporary cultural production wherein visibility and invisibility are co-constitutive.

It is noteworthy that reallyrux's content extends beyond texts produced within or specifically for the channel. For example, in a recent episode of "secret discret" [Discrete Secret], a companion series hosted by reallyrux, a nostalgic literary reference from the host's childhood (namely, Caprice Crane's book *Sunt aiurită și se ia!* [Stupid and Contagious], translated in 2007 in Romania by Ana Dragomirescu) prompted an immediate and measurable response from the audience. The referenced text quickly sold out on the resale platform Vinted, an occurrence visibly documented during the livestream itself, demonstrating the platform's capacity to catalyse literary consumption in real time. In response, reallyrux humorously suggested the creation of an informal reading circle, encouraging viewers to recirculate their copies after reading in order to maintain the text's accessibility and communal circulation (reallyrux 2025).

Within this framework, it becomes evident that the short fiction pieces featured in the series "Cine-i janghina?" function as deliberate literary entertainment products, designed to elicit both affective engagement and participatory culture among viewers. Furthermore, this environment facilitates the conceptual repositioning of literature not as a static artifact of the past, but as a culturally contingent discourse subject to ongoing rearticulations in response to the shifting epistemic frameworks and socio-cultural demands of a given historical moment.

Pink Twitch: Entertainment Feminism and Immediacy-Driven Literary Form

As previously indicated, the emergence of reallyrux's shows must be situated within a specific communitarian configuration that has characterised recent Romanian Twitch culture. The first creators to advance progressive social commentary and politically inclusive content within this environment were Silviu Istrate (known as Faiăr) and Alexandru Zlăvog, whose collaborative enterprise gained notable visibility during the pandemic and has continued to grow significantly since, culminating in their attainment of visibility even

among the political groups they had previously criticised. Notably, these politicians have since pejoratively labelled such streamers and influencers as “sexo-marxists,” a term deployed by Romanian conservatives to disparagingly conflate PC, cancel culture, and identity politics (Terian 2022, 112).

Subsequently, their associates, such as Sebastian Moroșanu (Elmurorosa) and Andrei Petroff (NicknamedPete), have also ascended into the ranks of Romania’s most-followed Twitch streamers, according to *TwitchTracker*. In contrast, reallyrux, currently positioned third in terms of follower count, attracting approximately 1,700 viewers per stream (*TwitchTracker*), has cultivated a distinct audience demographic. As acknowledged both by the streamer herself and as reflected in her reliance on viewer-submitted narratives, her community predominantly comprises women and queer/queer-friendly viewers. In light of these gendered dynamics, we propose, for heuristic purposes, a differentiation between a “Pink-side” and a “Blue-side” of Romanian Twitch. While this division is necessarily schematic and carries certain risks of oversimplification, it nevertheless proves analytically productive: it permits a sharper methodological focus on the gendered dimensions of streaming-based literary production, and enables a more nuanced exploration of storytelling practices and short prose writing among Romania’s post-millennial generation.

We deploy the heuristic categories of “Pink Twitch” and “Blue Twitch” to foreground the gendered logic of platform marketing, analogous to the differential branding strategies employed in the promotion of gendered consumer goods (such as personal hygiene products), where even visual cues like colour schemes are mobilised to signal gendered appeal. In this framework, “Blue Twitch” channels tend to cater to traditionally masculinised interests and modes of interaction: they prioritise video game and sports content, feature commentary on male-oriented digital subcultures (e.g., pick-up artistry or financial self-help), and are often mediated by hosts who cultivate a persona of unfiltered banter, frequently incorporating coarse or provocative language. By contrast, “Pink Twitch” channels center feminised domains of affect and consumption, offering content related to fashion, beauty, and interpersonal advice, often framed through a tone of friendliness, emotional attentiveness, and aesthetic softness, and, most importantly, “a space for women to talk about their own experiences, an atmosphere of affirmation and affiliated listening” (Gill 2007). This feminisation is reflected in the channels’ visual identity as well; for instance, reallyrux’s stream design prominently features a pink and purple interface. Notably, while a “Blue” channel can performatively pivot toward a more inclusive or feminised audience (Zlăvog’s “DM-uri दिली” [Demented DMs]), which features viewer-submitted messages from women, being a case in point, such shifts are significantly less feasible for “Pink” channels. The latter’s identity is

often premised on their function as safe, non-hostile environments for women and queer individuals, rendering cross-demographic repositioning both socially and discursively constrained.

In this section, building on the aforementioned gendered delineation, we seek to interrogate the ideological substratum structuring reallyrux's digital literary production. This inquiry culminates in our central argument: that the entanglement of the literary and the digital produces a cultural artifact, the platformised form of short story, that is fully embedded within, and symptomatic of, what Kornbluh identifies as "[t]he twenty-first-century concentration on circulation, with its premium on flow," conditioning "immediacy as cultural style that immanentizes presence, eclipses relay, and negates mediation" (2024). Accordingly, we propose a dual analytical orientation: first, toward the ways in which the feminism articulated through reallyrux's platform operates within, and is co-opted by, a neoliberal logic predicated on circulation and affective immediacy; and second, toward understanding the very form of the short story as a product shaped by the "disintermediated infrastructure of immediacy style" (Kornbluh 2024), foregrounding the ways in which literary production on digital platforms is conditioned by "too late-capitalist" modes of cultural and temporal compression and, moreover, structured by core-periphery dynamics intrinsic to the capitalist world-system, echoing Moretti's model of modern novel diffusion. Widely known, his statement argues that the world-literary production is characterised by "a compromise between foreign form and local materials" (Moretti 2000, 60), ultimately bringing forth a distinct local articulation. This model proves apposite in the case of reallyrux's show, which appropriates a U.S.-originated digital storytelling format and refunctions it within a Romanian cultural context, thus bringing forth a localised variant of the short story in sync with the global circulatory logic of the digital economy. Processes of delocalisation and relocalisation of such literary forms unfold at the speed of light in the digital sphere. Even within a system marked by combined and uneven development (WReC 2015), the digital works as a compensatory medium for literary production, enabling rapid alignment with transformations occurring in core cultures, such as the U.S.

For a critical theorist such as Kornbluh, video stream is the triumphant by-product of contemporary actualisations of capitalism. Since contemporary fiction increasingly evacuates fictionality itself, practices of auto-writing in the age of video streaming have come to exemplify this voiding dynamic by postulating the illusion of sense or fictionality. While Kornbluh identifies immediacy as a defining feature of contemporary cultural style, it is salient to emphasise that the experience of platform-based media, such as video streaming, is in fact mediated by highly complex technological infrastructures. What appears immediate is not the technology itself, but the experience it enables. This perceived immediacy is

precisely the result of sophisticated systems designed to obscure their own complexity, thereby the illusion of directness and spontaneity. These dynamics are not merely aesthetic but symptomatic of deeper ideological shifts in the function of storytelling under platform capitalism.

Short fiction, as repurposed through reallyrux's series (primarily functioning as entertainment and as a micro-industry of self-help) has reached a critical juncture, becoming an object of binge consumption due to its platformised, oralised delivery, as evidenced by the ritualised gestures of story-submitters, who routinely greet Twitch and YouTube audiences and encourage them to "enjoy their meal." The current configuration of the short story is marked by its acceleration: rapidly composed (given the weekly rhythm of new prompts), rapidly disseminated through live reading (in response to the continuous capitalist demand for fresh episodes), and rapidly circulated, with most texts occupying the spotlight of collective discussion for only five to twenty minutes before receding into anonymity. In the age of gigification, this phenomenon points to an unparalleled intensification in the production of storytelling, at least within the Romanian semiperipheral literary system. Here, self-expression becomes paramount, generating a ceaseless flow of personality-based entertainment, as "content creators wield their only asset: expression of their inner life. Your story is something to own" (Kornbluh 2024).

Additionally, the digital narrative, as a mere "listening experience," functions as an algorithmised space for the continuous consumption of customised content. In order for a text to be "published," it must conform to a shared framework: a focus on the highly relatable memorialisation of life experiences, followed by an ideological premise accompanying them. While the thematic dimension of the series has already been tackled in relation to the customised content, it is now essential to examine the ideological foundations underpinning the social commentary embedded within this content. Although many of reallyrux's interventions in her streams are framed through a leftist progressive lens, oriented toward identity politics, there is a more complex dimension at play.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, feminist and gender studies discourses entered the East-Central European cultural and academic spaces largely via the circuitous channels of NGO-isation, eventually achieving institutional consolidation throughout the 2000s (Cîrstocea 2022). In the digital era, queer-feminist discourses, both as isolated ideological formations and as activist praxis, have increasingly been subsumed by neoliberal currents. This trend reflects the broader structural dynamics of Romania's post-socialist transition. While it would be methodologically reductive to critique the ideological efficacy of an individual freelance content creator operating on Twitch and YouTube, it is nevertheless productive to briefly interrogate the modalities of feminism

articulated through reallyrux's platform. This allows us to sketch a preliminary cartography of leftist engagement within streaming communities, whose practices of social commentary have become increasingly central to the affective and ideological formation of their audiences.

In line with Rottenberg's account of neoliberal feminism, the discourse articulated online by reallyrux (a type of discourse shared, it should be noted, by other figures such as the aforementioned Faiăr and Zlăvog) pivots around an individualistic subjectivity "mobilised to convert continued gender inequality from a structural problem into an individual affair" (2018, 55), precisely the mechanism through which this strand of feminism reconfigures structural critique into personal responsibility. This strategic emphasis on visibility and commercial viability gives rise to a particular articulation of feminist discourse within reallyrux's content, one that avoids (partly due to constraints provisioned by the platforms' politics) overtly radical or oppositional rhetoric in favour of an accessible language of individual empowerment embedded within normative expressions of femininity. While this femininity is frequently framed through the aesthetics of self-care and beautification (understood in relatively conventional and commodified terms), it is nonetheless intersected by themes such as bodily autonomy, reproductive rights, and resistance to gender-based violence and systemic misogyny. As such, reallyrux's channels align with what can be termed "entertainment feminism," a discursive mode also evident in mainstream cultural productions such as Greta Gerwig's 2023 *Barbie* (Byrnes, Loreck and May 2024). This form of feminism prioritises mass accessibility which, while conducive to monetisation, also operates pedagogically as an entry point into broader feminist imaginaries.

Rather than dismissing this orientation as ideologically diluted, it may be more productive to interpret it as a form of gateway feminism (See Keller and Ringrose 2015; Rivers 2017, 72-73) or even "feminist pedagogy" (Hannell 2024, 115), one that facilitates engagement with feminist ideas in a manner calibrated to the discursive expectations and cultural fluency of the intended audience. Crucially, reallyrux's channel does not position itself as a site of theoretical critique or ideological instruction; its efficacy lies in its ability to mobilise support for feminist causes (both discursively and materially) without alienating its audience through abstraction or polemics. In this respect, it does not align with the vision of a "feminism for the 99%," as proposed by Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser (2019); rather, it functions more as an introductory framework for popularising feminist ideas and practices grounded in identity politics. As such, it should also be noted that certain live streams are organised explicitly for the purpose of raising charitable donations, most often directed towards queer and feminist NGOs. Although reallyrux's

Twitch and YouTube series are not explicitly framed as introductory feminist primers, they nonetheless contribute to fostering an understanding of feminist ideas among the post-millennial generation.

Nonetheless, central to this configuration is the valorisation of individual identity construction and its manifold expressions, which are celebrated above all else. In her 2013 article, Nancy Fraser advocates for a reorientation of feminism toward its foundational aim of confronting systemic inequalities, rather than reinforcing narratives of individual achievement at the expense of collective empowerment. She argues that feminism has been appropriated by the neoliberal global order, thereby marginalising concerns about economic inequality. Fraser thus calls for renewed efforts to challenge the structural dynamics of capitalism. While reallyrux's channel centres predominantly on individual experience and expression, rendering it less directly aligned with Fraser's critique, it is noteworthy that recurring, albeit secondary, comments highlight capitalism as a fundamental issue warranting critical attention.

Although reallyrux's degree of political engagement remains relatively moderate, these interventions nevertheless constitute a significant countercurrent within a socio-cultural landscape, including the digital, increasingly saturated by "anti-genderist and anti-feminist ideas" (Huțanu and Tite 2024, 102), red/blue pill ideologies, incel communities, and the fandom surrounding figures such as the Tate brothers. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that such platform-mediated articulations of feminism remain structurally consonant with the logic of the evolving global economic order, an order predicated on the continuous reproduction of systemic inequality.

Conclusion

This article has interrogated the intersecting trajectories of the literary and the digital, foregrounding the contemporary regime of relevance which, as delineated by Tihanov, valorises literature primarily for its entertaining and therapeutic functions. Recognising platforms as inherent spaces of spectacle, we have examined the manner in which they have appropriated the literary, subjecting it to the logic and imperatives of platform capitalism. Our analysis has focused on the emergent trend of short story production for streaming environments, with the Romanian Twitch and YouTube streamer reallyrux's series "Cine-i janghina?" serving as an exemplary case of "platformised storytelling." For methodological and analytical purposes, we proposed a provisional distinction between "Blue Twitch" and "Pink Twitch," the latter indicative of an increasing engagement with digital storytelling and auto-writing, wherein the memorialisation

and fictionalisation of the self function as strategies for rendering subjectivity a commodifiable asset within the frameworks of contemporary platform capitalism.

From a historical standpoint, we contend that the current proliferation of short story production, evident in the surge of creative writing workshops and streaming content in contemporary Romanian culture, signals a digital reanimation of a form that could incorporate to a certain extent the literary in its traditional, institutionally sedimented configurations. Following Tihanov, we argue that the post-millennial conjuncture inaugurates a new understanding of the literary, producing a rupture with previous models of literary poetics and autonomy. Ideologically, we maintain that the platform-mediated short story has been refunctionalised to serve the imperatives of neoliberal circulation and consumption, aligning seamlessly with the temporalities and affective economies of a “too late capitalist” order.

In the wake of sustained Marxist interventions in contemporary world literature studies (for instance, Moretti 2000; WReC 2015), it has become increasingly untenable to conceive of literary forms as autonomous from the turbulence of the capitalist world-system. Rather, forms must be understood as structurally enmeshed within its shifting totalities. The phenomenon under consideration thus exemplifies the literary’s capacity for formal modulation under a regime of relevance shaped by the platformisation of cultural production, marked by a systemic commodification of algorithmic circulation, and the temporal compression of aesthetic and ideological turnover. In the Romanian context, this may well herald a recalibration of literary culture, where the authority of print institutions is increasingly unsettled by digital-native practices, and where new modes of storytelling begin to redefine both the horizons of readership and authorship and the very terms of literary value in a postcanonical landscape.

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HYDROCOLONIAL MEMORY, GENDERED TRAUMA AND QUEER ERASURE IN KOLEKA PUTUMA'S *COLLECTIVE AMNESIA*

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ABSTRACT. *Hydrocolonial Memory, Gendered Trauma and Queer Erasure in Koleka Putuma's Collective Amnesia.* This article contributes to the thematic direction of this volume by foregrounding post-liberal critical positions and adopting a methodological framework that can be described as post-semiotic in essence—one that prioritizes affect, materiality, and embodied memory over representational paradigms. Koleka Putuma's *Collective Amnesia* explores the complex intersections of memory, identity, and trauma within the socio-political landscape of post-apartheid South Africa. Central to this poetry collection is the motif of water, employed both as a symbol of colonial violence and as a transformative space for reclaiming marginalized identities—particularly those of Black womxn and queer individuals. Through the lenses of hydrocolonialism, ecofeminism, and postmemory, this study examines how Putuma challenges dominant narratives of race, gender, and sexuality, revealing the fluidity of identity and the persistence of historical trauma across generations. Moreover, the collection confronts the systemic erasure of queer identities by disrupting heteronormative and patriarchal frameworks embedded in religious and cultural discourses. By moving beyond traditional semiotic readings and instead emphasizing embodied, affective, and ecological dimensions of trauma and resistance, this analysis engages with critical post-liberal methodologies that remain underexplored in current literary scholarship. By situating *Collective Amnesia* within broader conversations on queer erasure and memory politics, this article not only highlights Putuma's poetic activism as a powerful call for

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visibility, resistance, and healing, but also affirms the necessity of reading contemporary literature through critical frameworks that exceed representational politics. In doing so, it aligns with the volume's concern for rethinking theoretical orthodoxies and making space for neglected critical vocabularies and epistemologies.

Keywords: *memory, trauma, queer erasure, hydrocolonialism, post-apartheid South Africa, Koleka Putuma, poetry, identity.*

REZUMAT. *Memorie hidrocolonială, gendered trauma și queer erasure în Collective Amnesia de Koleka Putuma.* Lucrarea de față se înscrie în tematica volumului prin aducerea în discuție a unor poziții critice post-liberale adesea ignorate în cadrul studiilor literare actuale și prin utilizarea unei metodologii care poate fi caracterizată drept post-semiotică în esența sa—una care privilegiază afectul, materialitatea și memoria corporală în detrimentul abordărilor centrate strict pe reprezentare. Lucrarea analizează volumul de poezie *Collective Amnesia* al Kolekăi Putuma prin prisma hidrocolonialismului, traumei de gen și a ștergerii identităților queer în contextul de post-apartheid din Africa de Sud. Motivul acvatic este explorat ca simbol dual al violenței coloniale și al unui spațiu fluid și transformator pentru identități marginalizate și periferice, în special pentru femeile de culoare și persoanele queer. Studiul aplică cadre teoretice de hidrocolonialism, ecofeminism și postmemorie pentru a evidenția modul în care Putuma confruntă normele heteronormative și patriarhale, contestând ștergerea identităților queer și oferind o platformă poetică pentru vizibilitate și vindecare. În același timp, analiza propune o lectură dincolo de grilele semiotice convenționale, insistând asupra dimensiunii afective, ecologice și corporale a traumei și rezistenței, în consonanță cu direcții teoretice post-liberale încă insuficient explorate în critica literară contemporană. Articolul evidențiază potențialul radical al operei lirice a Kolekăi Putuma de a rescrie narațiunile dominante privind rasa, genul și sexualitatea în peisajul cultural și politic sud-african contemporan, contribuind deschiderea către epistemologii marginalizate.

Cuvinte-cheie: *hydrocolonialism, traumă de gen, ștergerea identității queer, Koleka Putuma, Africa de Sud, post-apartheid, poezie, identitate.*

Introduction

Koleka Putuma is recognized as one of South Africa's most compelling contemporary poets, known for her ability to interweave personal and collective histories within her poetic narratives, creating works that interrogate and challenge heteronormative and colonial conventional notions of identity,

memory, and politics. Her debut poetry collection, *Collective Amnesia* (2017), has received significant acclaim for its bold engagement with themes of race, gender, sexuality, trauma, and the politics of memory—the ways societies choose to remember or forget certain histories, shaping collective identity and power. The collection investigates the silences surrounding Black South African experiences, particularly those of Black womxn and queer individuals, within post-apartheid South Africa. By using poetry as an act of reclamation, Putuma crafts a body of work that resists historical erasure and offers a potent critique of patriarchal power structures. Critical scholarship on Putuma's work has expanded in recent years, including Burger's (2020) discussion of hydrocolonial memory, Sacks's (2024) exploration of digital culture in South-African poetry, and growing attention to South African queer poetics and hydrocolonial studies. These perspectives highlight the intersectional nature of Putuma's poetry, though many analyses have yet to fully integrate the dimensions of queerness and hydrocolonialism within a cohesive theoretical framework.

In this study, the thematic exploration of water in *Collective Amnesia* reveals its centrality and symbolic ramifications. Within the collection, water functions as both a site of trauma and a transformative medium for healing and remembrance. Water, in its varied manifestations—be it oceans, rivers, rain, or baptismal water—serves as an emblem of historical violence, colonial exploitation, and forced amnesia. This forced amnesia is symbolically linked to water through the act of erasure—bodies and histories lost at sea, the washing away of cultural memory, and the use of baptismal water to impose religious and ideological assimilation. Concurrently, it functions as a site of resistance and the formation of identity. This duality is most clearly exemplified in the poem "Water," which directly critiques the colonial histories embedded in water narratives while reclaiming water as a site of Black and queer identities.

This paper will examine how Putuma employs water imagery to explore some of the interconnected themes in *Collective Amnesia*: race, gender and sexuality, (post)memory, and hydrocolonialism. The analysis will demonstrate how Koleka Putuma's work challenges dominant historical narratives and provides an alternative/emergent discourse that foregrounds Black womxnhood and queerness. While Byrne's (2021) influential article provides an important ecofeminist and decolonial reading of water in Putuma's poetry, it primarily centers race and gender, leaving queer and hydrocolonial perspectives underexplored. This study seeks to fill this gap by arguing that water functions not only as a symbol of colonial violence and gendered exploitation but also as a crucial site for queerness, postmemory, and decolonial resistance, thereby expanding and complicating existing readings. Byrne's article offers a significant critical perspective on the role of water in Putuma's collection. The scholar

situates water within a broader tradition of South African womxn's poetry, employing feminist psychoanalysis, feminist new materialism, and decolonial theory to unpack its meaning. The analysis positions water as a deeply racialized and gendered element in Putuma's poetry, aligning with the ecofeminist idea that water and womxn's bodies are both sites of exploitation and resilience. However, it must be noted that Byrne's approach is not without its limitations. While she persuasively contends that the poem "Water" critiques colonialism and white supremacy, her reading does not engage with the poem's queer dimensions or consider water's capacity to disrupt heteronormative structures and discourses.

This study aims to build upon Byrne's insights by addressing these gaps, arguing that Putuma reclaims water as a space for collective resistance and self-definition by incorporating a hydrocolonial perspective alongside ecofeminist, queer, and postmemory frameworks.

Theoretical Framework

To explore the role of water in *Collective Amnesia*, this paper employs three central and intersecting theoretical perspectives: hydrocolonialism, ecofeminism, and postmemory theory. These frameworks are used in conjunction to illuminate how water operates as a medium through which colonial histories, gendered trauma, and intergenerational memory coalesce in the text.

The concept of hydrocolonialism, developed within postcolonial studies, explores how bodies of water have historically facilitated colonial expansion, exploitation, and racial violence. Drawing on Astrida Neimanis's (2017) posthuman feminist engagement with water—particularly her framing of "bodies of water"—this perspective connects the materiality of water to the histories and legacies of empire. The history of South Africa is linked with maritime colonialism, where oceans and rivers functioned as conduits for the transatlantic slave trade and sites of forced displacement. Putuma's "Water" offers a critical perspective on this legacy, exploring how water becomes a site of contestation where the echoes of colonial histories persist. The poem highlights how Black (queer) bodies have been both submerged and erased in historical narratives, and demands a reckoning with the ways in which water has been weaponized against marginalized communities.

Ecofeminism also informs this analysis, as it highlights the intersections between environmental degradation and gender-based oppression in *Collective Amnesia*. According to feminist scholars, there is a long-standing argument that womxn's bodies are symbolically linked to nature, often in ways that reinforce

patriarchal control (Merchant 1980; Plumwood 1993). Byrne's analysis of "Water" engages with ecofeminist ideas, particularly in how womxn's labour – such as fetching water, cooking, and cleaning – renders them more vulnerable to the impacts of environmental degradation. Ecofeminism also allows for a reading of "Water" as a site of opposition. In her collection, Putuma subverts conventional associations of water with purity and domesticity, instead using it to expose the racial and gendered violence embedded in historical and religious narratives—for example, linking the ocean's saltiness to the tears of enslaved South Africans and portraying baptism as an act intertwined with histories of invasion and oppression.

Marianne Hirsch's concepts of postmemory (2012) and intergenerational trauma offer a third lens for understanding Putuma's engagement with history and memory. Postmemory is defined as the process through which trauma is transmitted across generations, influencing the identities of those who have not directly experienced the trauma itself, but who continue to bear its emotional and psychological weight. Putuma's work aligns most closely with affiliative postmemory, as she connects her own and her community's experiences to the broader, inherited memory of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid, forging solidarity through shared remembrance rather than strictly familial transmission. In *Collective Amnesia*, water functions as a medium through which ancestral pain is both inherited and contested. The ocean, in particular, becomes a metaphor for the suppressed histories of the African diaspora and the erasure of Black narratives in mainstream historical accounts. Using the medium of poetry, Putuma offers a counterpoint to this erasure, employing water as a conduit for memory and storytelling, as in the line: "The sea is a graveyard too" (Putuma 2017, 40).

The use of these theoretical perspectives will provide a nuanced reading of *Collective Amnesia*, expanding beyond Byrne's racial analysis to consider the poem's queer and gendered dimensions, particularly in its thematic and affective engagement with sexuality, intimacy, and resistance. In doing so, it will demonstrate how Putuma reclaims water not only as a site of historical violence but also as a space for resistance, healing, and identity formation, envisioning queer and decolonial futures that challenge inherited narratives of erasure and oppression.

Literature Review: Critical Perspectives on Water in South African Womxn's Poetry

When writing about how South African womxn poets respond to water as both a symbol and a reality, Deirdre Cassandra Byrne systematically explores the (hydro)connections between femininity, environmental degradation, and

colonial history within the Anthropocene. Her article, “Water in the Anthropocene: Perspectives on Poetry by South African Women,” published in 2021 in *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, focuses on the poetry of Allison Claire Hoskins, Toni Stuart, Koleka Putuma, Wilma Stockenström, and Gabeba Baderoon. Byrne employs three distinct theoretical frameworks: feminist psychoanalysis, feminist new materialism—an approach that emphasizes the agency of matter and the entanglement of bodies, environments, and power—and decolonial theory. It must be added here that, in addition to Byrne’s analysis, other scholars such as Bibi Burger (2020) and Uhuru Phalafala (2017) have explored Putuma’s work within the broader context of South African queer poetics, emphasizing themes of resistance, identity, and the negotiation of postcolonial histories.

Byrne’s study highlights how Allison Claire Hoskins and Toni Stuart use audio-visual poetry to represent water as a transformative force, capable of bringing about change and retribution—in Byrne’s terms, a symbolic and restorative reckoning with historical and environmental injustice. It also examines Koleka Putuma’s poem *Water*, which critiques the colonial exploitation of water and, through Byrne’s ecofeminist lens, calls for its restoration as a site of memory, identity, and interconnectedness between human and ecological well-being for Black people. Wilma Stockenström’s *The Wisdom of Water* utilizes traditional elements to portray water as a vital force personally attached to womxn and the natural world. Lastly, the article notes that Gabeba Baderoon uniquely addresses the impact of climate change, using her poetry to highlight the environmental degradation caused by human activity. Through these diverse perspectives, Byrne’s research demonstrates how the poets collectively depict water as a potent symbol of connection and transformation.

This critical part of the paper focuses on the ecofeminist approach in Byrne’s reading of Koleka Putuma’s poem *Water*, representing a “skillful and multimodal delinking from Eurocentric thinking about Black people’s relationship to the natural world” (Byrne 2021: 3). Building on Byrne’s framework, my reading further explores how this delinking incorporates queer spatialities and the concept of hydrocolonialism to reveal water as a site of both embodied trauma and transformative resistance. Byrne establishes her ecofeminist methodology from the outset, explaining that the provision of water for drinking, cooking, and cleaning is a fundamental aspect of household and family socio-economic security. This responsibility is predominantly borne by womxn across cultures, reflecting the social duties and clichés that designate reproductive labour as “women’s work” (Byrne 2021, 1).

Placing the reader in the geological temporal context often termed the “Anthropocene,”² Byrne draws on Donna Haraway’s more situated and multispecies critique—sometimes framed as the “Chthulucene”—to highlight how the impacts of climate change are unevenly distributed between men and womxn. Womxn bear a disproportionate responsibility for ensuring food and water security, making them more vulnerable to the adverse effects of environmental damage. Byrne argues that this could be a key reason why some South African womxn poets—whose gender is associated with water in myth, symbolism, and popular media—engage with the theme of water in their work (Byrne 2021, 1). Applying a hydrocolonial lens to Byrne’s article, one can observe that the author essentially describes female bodies in a way that resonates with Astrida Neimanis’s concept of “bodies of water” (Neimanis 2017), which emphasizes bodies as actively engaged in the hydrological cycle—an interpretation that, while not explicitly cited by Byrne, helps deepen the understanding of her argument:

Women’s bodies are strongly associated with blood (via menstruation); milk (signaling their capacity for motherhood); and tears (physiological signs of emotion). Their psyches are perceived as mutable because they are supposedly more susceptible to emotion than men. Women tend to be perceived as physiologically and psychologically fluid and watery. Poetic representations attest to this association. (Byrne 2021, 2)

Byrne critically engages with this essentialist linkage, highlighting how such associations simultaneously reinforce gendered stereotypes while also offering poetic potential to challenge and reconfigure the meanings attached to women’s embodied fluidity.

Koleka Putuma’s poetry makes no exception. Her debut collection *Collective Amnesia* evokes water in ways that foreground painful historical experiences within South African culture. Byrne highlights the importance of race and gender roles in Putuma’s collection, even suggesting that Bibi Burger’s interpretation, which emphasizes formal poetic techniques and aesthetic qualities, lacks adequate focus on the racial aspects central to Putuma’s work. Through close reading, Byrne identifies that Putuma’s poem “Water” evokes a strong dialectical antagonism: the lyrical voice adopts an “us” versus “you” approach, creating a forceful critique of heteronormative and patriarchal white male deities.

² According to Donna Haraway, the Anthropocene represents the realization that human actions have caused climate change and environmental degradation. The National Geographic Society calls it “an unofficial unit of geologic time, used to describe the most recent period in Earth’s history when human activity started to have a significant impact on the planet’s climate and ecosystems”.

Byrne's interpretations of specific metaphors are presented with interpretive certainty, though alternative readings remain plausible. For example, in the lines from Putuma's poem: "May that be the conversation at the / table / And we can all thereafter wash this / bitter meal with amnesia," Byrne argues that the image of "the table" evokes the Last Supper, a pivotal event in Christian tradition, while the "bitter meal" alludes to a historical episode in South Africa when Black people were compelled to serve food to white people. The term "amnesia," therefore, evokes the erasure of colonial histories—a phenomenon that resonates with the title of the collection.

The author's interpretation of Putuma's poem is clearly informed by a racial perspective, particularly emphasizing her status as a "wake artist".³ However, the interpretation is arguably one-sided, as it overlooks aspects of queerness—which would foreground non-normative sexualities and embodied resistances—and the application of a hydrocolonial critique, which would emphasize the entanglement of water, colonial violence, and Black bodies in Putuma's work. Byrne's understanding of water in Putuma's poem seems limited to its role in expressing suppressed histories and memories, with insufficient attention to its potential for critiquing gender roles. Nonetheless, the article remains a valuable contribution to the field, elucidating the lyrical power of contemporary South African poets. While Byrne does not explicitly invoke postmemory theory, I draw on this framework to further emphasize the transgenerational trauma present in the work. The article also successfully explores water's potential as a unifying force between these two concepts.

Water as a Symbol of Colonial Violence

Collective Amnesia challenges historical amnesia and provides a poetic reimagination of water as both a site of trauma and a source of empowerment for marginalized identities—through narrative reclamation and collective memory that affirm identity and resistance. As Shun Man Emily Chow-Quesada writes in her article, approximately three decades have elapsed since the termination of apartheid in South Africa; yet the nation continues to grapple with the lingering shadows of its history. Despite concerted efforts to establish a "rainbow nation," underlying tensions persist, particularly regarding the silencing of the voices of Black womxn (Chow-Quesada 2024, 211). Putuma's

³ In the context of Christina Sharpe's conceptualisation of "wake work" (2016), Putuma's practice can be understood as a form of artistic and intellectual intervention, aimed at challenging and disrupting oppressive, colonial, and patriarchal epistemologies.

Collective Amnesia is deeply autobiographical, as she manages to “amplify marginalised voices and interrogate the roles of trauma and memory in literary activism” (Chow-Quesada 2024, 211).

Putuma attracted global attention with her poem “Water,” which she performed at TEDxStellenbosch in 2015. According to Sacks, the white audience reacted with disapproval, and the venue decided not to publish her performance. In response, Putuma released her own recording, which attracted further significant attention (Sacks 2024, 155). The poem’s impact can be attributed to its ability to address unresolved racial tensions in South Africa, particularly by drawing upon memory to challenge the official narrative of the post-apartheid “new” South Africa.⁴

Water is employed in the poem as a medium of reflection with regard to colonial violence; here, “collective amnesia” illustrates what Leela Gandhi calls “postcolonial amnesia” (Gandhi 1998, 4). While both terms refer to the societal forgetting of historical traumas, “collective amnesia” emphasizes shared memory loss within a specific community, whereas “postcolonial amnesia” situates this forgetting within the broader context of colonial legacies and their ongoing effects. This phenomenon may be interpreted as indicative of an impulse towards historical self-invention, or alternatively, a necessity to initiate a new beginning and thereby obliterate distressing memories of subjugation. Annel Pieterse’s assertion that Putuma uses her work to resist “coloniality of power, coloniality of knowledge, and coloniality of being—in a process of unlearning” (Pieterse 2018, 35) is therefore vindicated: “You cannot wade in the ocean and not be in conversation with the enslaved bodies that came before you” (Putuma 2017, 17).

By invoking the ocean—a symbol of both colonial violence (the transatlantic slave trade) and cultural identity – Putuma challenges the reader to confront erased histories and engage in a process of unlearning, demonstrating how her poetry disrupts dominant narratives and insists on reclaiming knowledge through remembrance and resistance.

In such a context, it is clear that trauma and memory are inseparable. Returning to Marianne Hirsch’s framework, the conceptualization of postmemory provides a relevant framework for understanding Putuma’s engagement with both trauma and memory. Hirsch defines postmemory as: “the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before, to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (Hirsch 2012, 5).

⁴ For Putuma’s firsthand account of the censorship surrounding her 2015 TEDxStellenbosch performance of “Water,” see her open letter to the event organizers, where she describes the removal of her poem as “an act of diminishing my time, craft and intellect” and critiques the decision as complicity in the racial privilege of the predominantly white Stellenbosch community. (Putuma, 2015)

This may be indeed relevant to Putuma's work, as her poetry does not only recall trauma but actively interrogates and reclaims it, transforming memory into both a site of pain and a source of empowerment (Chow-Quesada 2024, 212). In *Collective Amnesia*, Putuma engages with "inherited trauma" – particularly the violence of colonialism, apartheid, and gendered oppression – illustrating how memory is not static but rather a dynamic and contested space.

Putuma suggests that Black womxn's trauma remains unresolved, lingering both in the ocean and within postmemory. Much like Hirsch's postmemory, Putuma's work shows how trauma persists across generations, shaping identities and consciousness. Putuma reframes memory as a tool for agency, challenging historical (queer) erasure and reclaiming narrative control. The following section will discuss this matter in more detail.

Water and Queer Erasure

The notion of queer erasure refers to the systemic silencing or omission of LGBTQ+ identities and experiences, often in social, political, and cultural narratives. Sarah Ahmed explains that social norms produce 'compulsory heterosexuality,' rendering queer identities invisible within dominant cultural frameworks: "Compulsory heterosexuality functions as a script that directs bodies into specific alignments, making some desires, relationships, and futures appear natural while rendering others unintelligible or impossible" (Ahmed 2004, 145). Within the context of South African literature, this erasure is particularly unsettling, as the country's political history of apartheid and subsequent post-apartheid national dominant discourse has frequently marginalized sexual minorities. Water, as a symbol, has the potential to resist such erasure, acting as a fluid and transformative force that challenges heteronormative structures. By examining how water is used in the poetry of South African poets and exploring the critical perspectives surrounding queer erasure, this section will discuss how collective amnesia is challenged in the representation of LGBTQ+ identities.

Although there have been significant legislative victories for LGBTQ+ rights, including the inclusion of sexual orientation in the *Constitution*, members of the LGBTQ+ community in South Africa continue to be marginalized in public spaces. Within the cultural sphere, notably in the domains of poetry and art, the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals are frequently overlooked or erased, leading to a form of collective amnesia. "Wake artists" and writers such as Putuma, Lebo Mashile and Mark Gevisser actively challenge the heteronormative assumptions embedded in the South African socio-political background by remembering and representing LGBTQ+ identities.

While the aforementioned article by Byrne provides critical insights into the intersectionality of race, gender, and post-colonial legacies in South African poetry, its focus on issues of race and class means that it risks excluding or simplifying the complex nature of identity, including queerness, which is clearly interconnected with the political and social concerns it addresses. The erasure of queerness in critical readings is not an isolated issue but is indicative of the broader neglect of LGBTQ+ narratives within post-apartheid South African culture. Byrne acknowledges the “gendered” nature of power dynamics and the “gendered implications [of water] for human socio-economic existence and for symbolic communication” (Byrne 1) but often fails to fully engage with the ways in which queer identities are specifically shaped by both historical and contemporary societal forces. For instance, an engagement with queer identities might explore how water in Putuma’s poem symbolizes not only racial and gendered trauma but also the fluidity and resilience of non-normative sexualities, highlighting their resistance to colonial and heteronormative erasure. Consequently, the reading falls short in fully grasping the radical potential of poets like Putuma, whose works directly engage with the fluidity of sexuality and gender.

In “Water” Putuma critiques the heteronormative and patriarchal interpretations of religious texts, highlighting the erasure of queer identities within these dominant narratives: “For all we know the disciples could have been queer, the holy trinity some weird, twisted love triangle. And the Holy Ghost transgender.” Moreover, the visual imagery used for the act of submerging or drowning in water can be interpreted as a metaphor for the process of silencing queerness, as individuals grapple with navigating their sexual identities in a world that stigmatises them. Water functions here as an agent of visibility, serving to both obscure and reveal—echoing Sara Ahmed’s concept of “unintelligibility,” where marginalized identities are simultaneously rendered visible yet misunderstood or erased within dominant frameworks. By employing this watery imagery, Putuma gives voice to the unseen, offering a platform for the expression of those whose narratives have historically been obscured. This act of bringing forward the often unseen stories and experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals is fundamental in challenging the erasure of queerness from the South African literary canon, which, like every canon, has been dominated by narratives that focus on race, colonialism, apartheid, and national identity, often centering male and heterosexual perspectives.

It is important to acknowledge at this point that the writers above mentioned, Lebo Mashile and Mark Gevisser, have also incorporated elements of fluidity and transformation in their works. Even though Mashile rarely employs queerness explicitly in her poetry, the fluidity of gender and sexuality, as well as the strength of Black womxn, are recurrent themes in her experiences of being a womxn of colour in the post-apartheid society: “I see the wisdom of

eternities / In ample thighs / Belying their presence as adornments / To the temples of my sisters” (Mashile 2006, 22). Gevisser’s background is entirely different, as he identifies as a white gay male. He also engages with the historical erasure of queerness in his work, particularly in his book *Lost and Found in Johannesburg* (2006), where he reflects on the personal and political implications of living as a queer individual in post-apartheid South Africa: “In a society where sexual orientation has so often been silenced, it is important to speak of it, not just for ourselves, but for the generations to come, so that they might live without fear” (Gevisser 2009: 141). This call to speak openly about sexual orientation resonates with the concept of postmemory and literary activism, as it seeks to break cycles of silence and fear by transmitting affirming narratives to future generations, thus fostering healing and social transformation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Koleka Putuma’s *Collective Amnesia* stands as a powerful collection that explores memory, identity, and resistance, with water functioning as a central motif that binds together intersecting experiences of race, gender, sexuality, and trauma. By using water as both a symbol of colonial violence and a space for reclamation, Putuma’s poetry navigates the histories of South Africa, shedding light on the marginalized experiences of Black South African womxn and queer individuals. Through her lyrical engagement with water, Putuma interrogates the erasure of these identities, providing a platform for the silenced voices of the past and present. This analysis of *Water* demonstrated how feminist new materialism, postmemory theory, and hydrocolonial critique intersect to reveal the poem’s layered engagement with water as a site of trauma, resistance, and identity formation. Together, these perspectives illuminate how Putuma’s work challenges colonial and patriarchal narratives while foregrounding the embodied experiences of Black queer subjects.

Hydrocolonialism highlights the ways in which water, as a site of colonial violence, also functions as a medium for contesting the historical and cultural forces that have long shaped the lives of Black and queer communities—an interplay that is not only thematic but also embodied in Putuma’s lyrical form and poetic strategies. The colonial legacy of exploitation is inextricably tied to water, which has historically been used as a means of erasure and oppression. Yet, in Putuma’s work, water also emerges as a vehicle for memory and identity formation. This duality of water—both as a symbol of trauma and a source of healing—reveals the fluidity and complexity of identities in post-apartheid South Africa.

Putuma's use of water imagery challenges dominant gender and sexual norms, specifically critiquing the heteronormative structures that continue to marginalise queer identities. As seen in *Water*, Putuma exposes the ways in which queer people, particularly queer womxn, are erased within both historical and religious narratives. The poem's subversion of religious symbols and the play on fluidity in water imagery serve as a stark critique of societal norms that seek to suppress queer identities. By invoking water as both a life-sustaining force and a site of oppression, the poet opens up a space for the visibility of queer experiences, offering a counter-narrative to the erasure of queerness within both mainstream and literary discourses.

In contrast to Deirdre Cassandra Byrne's analysis, which largely focuses on race and gender, this study broadens the lens through which Putuma's work is understood by including a more robust exploration of queerness. While Byrne's feminist and ecofeminist frameworks provide valuable insights into the ways in which water symbolizes both exploitation and resistance, her reading overlooks the specific ways in which water challenges heteronormative and patriarchal structures. The lack of queer engagement in Byrne's analysis misses the opportunity to fully grasp the radical potential of Putuma's work in disrupting normative gender and sexual identities, which is a key aspect of the poem *Water*. A queer reading would highlight how the poem resists fixed identity categories and subverts spiritual binaries, revealing alternative modes of embodiment and belonging that challenge dominant colonial and heteronormative frameworks.

Ultimately, *Collective Amnesia* serves as a reclamation of space and narrative for those whose histories have been obscured by colonial, gendered, and heteronormative forces. Through her vivid and evocative use of water, Putuma offers an important poetic piece on memory, survival, and the ongoing fight against erasure. Her work not only calls attention to the historical traumas of Black South Africans but also challenges the present-day invisibility of queer identities within both cultural and political spheres, including state policies and media representation. By reading *Water* through the lens of hydrocolonialism, ecofeminism, and queer theory, it becomes evident that Putuma's poetry is not only a critique of South Africa's post-apartheid landscape but also a call for visibility and recognition of marginalized identities, offering a space for healing and remembrance.

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L'UTILISATION DE L'EKPHRASIS DANS LA CONSTRUCTION DU PORTRAIT DE L'ARTISTE. VINCENT QU'ON ASSASSINE (MARIANNE JAEGLÉ)

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ABSTRACT. *The Use of Ekphrasis in the Construction of the Artist's Figure. Vincent qu'on assassine (Marianne Jaeglé).* The following study focuses on the use of the *ekphrasis* in the portrayal of the main character and in the construction of the narrative structure in the case of the novel *Vincent qu'on assassine* by Marianne Jaeglé. The main hypothesis is that the *ekphrasis* goes beyond its canonical function, as descriptive element, and serves other roles. We focus on its narrative and chronotopic purposes as the element that creates the frame of the story, the space of virtual dialogue between characters and the background needed for the artistic vision of Vincent Van Gogh. One by one, we analyze the situation in which the Greek concept shapes the space of conflict, of ideas exchange, of death and of an imaginary, subjective reality. As a methodological approach, we use the concept of intermediality to prove that there is a strong connection between literature and the transposition of visual arts in the narrative structure. The main conclusion of the study is that Marianne Jaeglé's book is fundamentally based on the use of *ekphrasis* and the character cannot be separated from the novelistic depiction of his canvases because that is the central element, the one that gives coherence to the entire plot.

Keywords: *ekphrasis, intermediality, ekphrastic novel, character construction, narrative function.*

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REZUMAT. *Utilizarea ekphrasis-ului în construcția portretului artistului. Vincent qu'on assassine (Marianne Jaeglé).* Prezentul studiu se concentrează asupra utilizării *ekphrasis*-ului în construcția portretului personajului principal și în cea a structurii narative în cazul romanului *Vincent qu'on assassine* de Marianne Jaeglé. Ipoteza principală este aceea că *ekphrasis*-ul își depășește funcția sa canonică, de element descriptiv, îndeplinind și alte roluri. Ne concentrăm asupra utilizărilor sale narative și cronotopice, devenind astfel un element ce conturează cadrul romanului, spațiul de dialog virtual între personaje și fundalul necesar expunerii viziunii artistice a personajului-pictor Vincent Van Gogh. Rând pe rând analizăm exemple în care conceptul grec modelează spațiul conflictual, cel al schimbului de idei, al morții și al unei realități imaginare, subiective. Ca demers metodologic, folosim intermedialitatea pentru a dovedi că există o strânsă legătură între literatură și transpunerea artelor vizuale în structura narativă. Principala concluzie a studiului este aceea că volumul autoarei franceze este construit în jurul *ekphrasis*-ului, iar personajul nu poate fi separat de reprezentarea romanească a picturilor sale, deoarece aceasta este elementul central, cel care dă coerență universului ficțional.

Cuvinte-cheie: *ekphrasis, intermedialitate, roman ekphrastic, construcție personaj, funcție narativă.*

1. Introduction

La fusion artistique entre la parole et la couleur a toujours suscité la curiosité des gens, plaçant sous la lentille critique des chercheurs les œuvres littéraires qui utilisent les éléments descriptifs picturaux. Le mélange entre la littérature et les arts visuels apparaît très tôt dans l'histoire de la culture, notamment sous la forme de *l'ekphrasis*, concept que nous avons choisi comme fil rouge de notre démarche critique. Vu l'intérêt contemporain accru pour le concept d'intermedialité et pour le croisement des domaines, nous décidons de consacrer la présente étude à l'analyse critique de la manière dont un personnage littéraire est esquissé à travers *l'ekphrasis*.

Nous désirons premièrement passer en revue de façon ponctuelle les moments historiques et littéraires cruciaux dans l'évolution de ce concept dans la littérature, pour nous lancer ensuite dans l'analyse d'un roman contemporain, *Vincent qu'on assassine* (Marianne Jaeglé), dont la construction se fonde sur l'utilisation de *l'ekphrasis*. Nous nous proposons de montrer comment *l'ekphrasis* devient le principe fondateur du portrait de l'artiste-personnage choisi comme étude de cas.

Dans la théorie littéraire, le terme d'*ekphrasis* est connu dès l'Antiquité par la description que Homère fait, dans l'*Illiade*, du bouclier d'Achille forgé par le dieu Héphaïstos. Comme Klára Csűrös le remarque dans son article « La fonction de l'*ekphrasis* dans les longs poèmes », l'*ekphrasis* était conçue à l'époque comme une description exacte et détaillée d'un objet, d'un paysage, d'une personne ou d'une scène, qui était réalisée par hypotypose :

L'*ekphrasis* est aussi vieille que l'épopée homérique : la première réalisation, le bouclier d'Achille au chant XVIII de l'*Illiade*, en est devenu à jamais le parangon classique. [...] En tant que littéraire, elle se distingue donc de tout discours critique ou technique sur les œuvres d'art, et, en tant que description d'une œuvre d'art, elle occupe une place à part parmi les diverses variantes de la description, notamment l'hypotypose, avec laquelle elle est souvent confondue. (Csűrös 1997, 169)

Ensuite, dans la première moitié du troisième siècle, le sophiste romain, de langue grecque, Philostrate de Lemnos l'utilise dans son ouvrage intitulé *Eikones* en tant qu'exercice littéraire : il décrit, dans un discours adressé à des enfants, 64 tableaux exposés réellement ou fictivement dans une galerie. C'est le moment qui marque le glissement sémantique du terme qui s'imposera pendant les siècles suivants comme évocation d'une œuvre d'art, réelle ou fictionnelle, cette description étant enchâssée dans un récit. Le critique Sandrine Dubel marque cette transposition générique de l'*ekphrasis* de la poésie vers le domaine du récit :

Les Images (Eikones) de Philostrate l'Ancien constituent le premier recueil de descriptions d'art autonomes en prose que nous connaissons. Écrite dans le courant du III^e siècle de notre ère [...] cette collection de tableaux suscite dans l'Antiquité même au moins deux imitations directes : elle fonde ainsi un genre, à la coïncidence du sens antique d'*ekphrasis*, description rhétorique définie par son effet, l'évidence, et de l'emploi moderne du mot *ekphrasis*, description définie par la spécificité de son objet, l'œuvre d'art figurative. [...] ce premier recueil s'appuie sur une fiction narrative : nos *Images* racontent la visite d'une pinacothèque privée [...] Le sujet en est donc moins la description d'une collection que la découverte de cette collection par ses spectateurs, soit une expérience collective du regard [...] (Dubel 2014,13)

C'est Leo Spitzer qui offre la définition moderne du terme d'*ekphrasis*. La définition proposée par le théoricien autrichien envisage l'*ekphrasis* comme « la description poétique d'une œuvre d'art picturale ou sculpturale [...] la reproduction d'objets d'art perceptibles, par l'intermédiaire des mots ». (Spitzer

1955, 207) Nous observons donc que la définition de Leo Spitzer met l'accent plutôt sur le côté descriptif du terme. Au contraire, l'œuvre que nous allons analyser illustre la fonction narrative de *l'ekphrasis*.

En partant de ce cadre théorique général, nous nous proposons de passer en revue quelques manifestations de *l'ekphrasis* et de son rôle ou plutôt de ses rôles dans le roman *Vincent qu'on assassine* écrit par l'écrivaine française Marianne Jaeglé. Elle y réalise un portrait littéraire du peintre Vincent Van Gogh, saisi pendant ses deux dernières années de vie, qui correspondent à la période de son activité artistique la plus intense. Il faut remarquer que l'auteure insiste plutôt sur les moments qui ont conduit à la fin tragique du peintre hollandais. Incompris par le public, abandonné par la communauté qu'il désirait former, le personnage vit une existence vouée à la solitude et à la dépression. Comme intrigue, la romancière élucide l'énigme de la mort du peintre, en abordant la supposition historique du meurtre. Dans le livre, la vie de Vincent est brusquement arrêtée suite au conflit possible avec un jeune homme. Nous partons de l'hypothèse que l'autrice s'appuie souvent sur la technique de *l'ekphrasis*, en allant de l'œuvre vers l'homme et l'artiste, pour faire comprendre au lecteur non seulement la vie, mais notamment la signification de son œuvre et la vision unique du peintre. Dans la partie suivante de notre recherche, nous proposons de discuter l'encadrement littéraire du livre de Marianne Jaeglé dans la catégorie du roman ekphrastique, ce qui nous permettra par la suite de construire un cadre théorique plus complexe concernant *l'ekphrasis*.

2. Vincent qu'on assassine - roman ekphrastique

Nous observons tout d'abord que Marianne Jaeglé illustre la forte liaison entre le créateur et sa création en choisissant de transposer dans la fiction la grande figure mythique du domaine pictural, Vincent Van Gogh. Nous nous proposons de démontrer qu'elle utilise comme procédé principal la description des tableaux en les mettant en rapport avec le personnage. Cela nous détermine à considérer le livre *Vincent qu'on assassine* comme roman ekphrastique, genre littéraire défini ainsi par Alexandra Vrânceanu : « un texte structuré autour de la description d'une œuvre d'art, un texte qu'on ne pourrait pas concevoir en dehors de *l'ekphrasis*, à qui *l'ekphrasis* donne la signification, le sujet, le thème, la structure, parfois même le titre et les personnages. » (Vrânceanu 2011, 12) Ce cadre théorique est justifié par l'impossibilité d'ignorer le poids de *l'ekphrasis* dans l'économie du roman, car elle est, d'après nous, un élément fondateur dans la trame narrative et dans la construction littéraire du personnage Vincent Van Gogh.

Les critiques Julie Dainville et Lucie Donckier de Donceel placent l'*ekphrasis* à « mi-chemin entre la description et la narration » (Dainville et de Donceel 2021, 2), mais nous nous proposons de montrer que dans le cas de Marianne Jaeglé, ce concept est utilisé plutôt comme technique narrative, en dépassant son emploi purement descriptif. Dans ce qui suit, nous allons montrer les principaux rôles que l'*ekphrasis* remplit dans la construction du protagoniste, pour prouver notre hypothèse : elle définit la condition de l'artiste, elle se constitue comme un espace de dialogue virtuel entre l'artiste et ses confrères, elle remplit la fonction de topos symbolique de la mort et non des moindres, elle évoque une réalité absente.

3. L'*ekphrasis* – porteur du credo artistique

3.1. La condition de l'artiste

Premièrement, l'*ekphrasis* est utilisée en tant que description des autoportraits de Vincent Van Gogh, mais aussi de Paul Gauguin et d'Émile Bernard, en soulignant d'une manière comparative leur vision sur l'art et sur la condition de l'artiste. L'image que Vincent Van Gogh (Figure 1) offre de lui-même dans ses autoportraits est appréhendée par Marianne Jaeglé qui souligne son hypostase humble, modeste, son apparence physique pauvre, renvoyant à celle d'un ermite : « Un halo semble se dégager de son crâne rasé comme celui d'un moine. » (Jaeglé 2014, 20) L'hypostase de moine suggère son inadaptation au monde et sa solitude. Il est à remarquer que l'autrice note la réalisation de cet autoportrait en double exemplaire, élément qui peut être associé à l'obsession du peintre pour le motif du double. Cette obsession renvoie à un événement biographique qui a hanté Van Gogh toute sa vie, celui de la mort de son frère aîné, une année jour pour jour avant sa naissance, frère dont il portait le nom. D'ailleurs, le motif du double explique l'étroite relation du peintre avec son frère cadet, Théo, le seul qui croit dans son talent et qui apprécie sa vision différente sur la création artistique. La fratrie y est vue comme un véritable organisme symbiotique, étant donnée l'étroite liaison affective des deux frères Van Gogh : « Les chagrins de Vincent étaient ses chagrins, ses échecs étaient les siens, à lui, Théo. Ils n'étaient pas trop de deux pour porter ce fardeau si lourd, du premier Vincent. » (Jaeglé 2014, 209) Marianne Jaeglé réussit à donner une dimension littéraire à cette relation si spéciale, à laquelle l'histoire de l'art a dédié des pages entières.

La belle-sœur de Vincent Van Gogh, Johanna, observe, elle aussi, cette liaison inhabituelle en termes de peinture : « Vous êtes comme deux versions légèrement différentes d'un même portrait. » (Jaeglé 2014, 150) La superposition des images des deux frères, remarquée par les personnages trouve son inspiration dans l'œuvre réelle de Van Gogh, comme le remarque Harold Blum : « Théo était inconsciemment représenté dans les autoportraits, aussi comme cocréateur de l'art de Vincent et quelqu'un qui le partage. » (Blum 2003, 681)

Il y a d'autre part des situations dans le roman où l'*ekphrasis* semble avoir une utilisation neutre. C'est-à-dire la description d'un tableau réalisé ne renvoie qu'à elle-même. En effet c'est juste une apparence, car la technique permet à l'autrice de présenter la vision sur l'art de Vincent d'une manière plus subtile. Il s'agit de la description du tableau *L'Église d'Auvers-sur-Oise* (1890) (Figure 2) qui exprime le crédo du peintre selon lequel il doit représenter sur ses toiles ce coin de terre tel qu'il le voit :

Il s'est efforcé de rendre la silhouette trapue de l'église sur le fond bleu cobalt du ciel d'été, sa forme un peu lourde, semblable à celle d'une femme de la campagne, la rugosité de la pierre grise, l'éclat des vitraux colorés. Il a donné à voir sa présence minérale, l'air vibrant de chaleur, et le fait que le ciel semble avoir été fait dans le même matériau que le fond du vitrail. C'est la rude simplicité d'Auvers et de ses habitants qu'il a ainsi représentée. [...] son église ne renvoie à rien d'autre qu'elle-même, à ce monde paysan, à la foi naïve de ses habitants, mais cela, il a tâché de le lui faire exprimer avec force, avec toute la justesse dont il est capable. (Jaeglé 2014, p. 147)

D'autres toiles de Vincent van Gogh décrites dans le roman reflètent l'existence de misère du peintre, son inadaptation à la vie bourgeoise. D'une manière symbolique, la nature morte intitulée *Souliers* (1887) (Figure 3) peut être considérée comme l'expression de la précarité de l'apparence du peintre lui-même, vu par les yeux de ses contemporains. D'autre part, cette séquence ekphrastique est associée par l'écrivaine à une lecture plus large attribuée au frère du peintre, celle d'image du destin humain en général, de la route de l'existence :

une paire de chaussures d'homme, usagées, montant haut sur la cheville, ses propres souliers, que Vincent a peints. Le cuir est brun avec des touches d'orange pour l'intérieur, les lacets et la semelle. Ils reposent sur un fond bleu sombre, devant un mur d'un marron qui s'éclaircit sur le côté gauche. Le soulier droit est renversé et montre une semelle garnie d'une double rangée de clous couleur argent ; celui de gauche est posé

d'aplomb, le lacet défait serpente tandis que la partie haute bâille, révélant l'intérieur. Le cuir est marqué par l'usage, la forme du pied y a imprimé des bosses et des creux mais l'ensemble donne une impression de solidité. Ces chaussures peuvent encore servir. Théo y voit une image de la vie, comme route à parcourir, de la fatigue de l'existence, de l'espoir à conserver dans les moments de doute. (Jaeglé 2014, 98-99)

Dans ce cas-là, le Théo romanesque est le premier spectateur du tableau. D'après la vision de l'autrice, il envisage déjà la prochaine perception collective du tableau, le moment où il va être montré au public consommateur d'art. Les impressions que la toile du protagoniste dégage renvoient à la précarité et à la modestie, en étant en accord avec la vision artistique du Vincent-le personnage.

Après avoir vu comment Marianne Jaeglé illustre de manière littéraire la vision artistique de Van Gogh, la section suivante se propose de montrer comment la description romanesque des toiles devient l'espace d'un dialogue virtuel entre les peintres et « un champ de bataille » entre des idées et des croyances artistiques différentes.

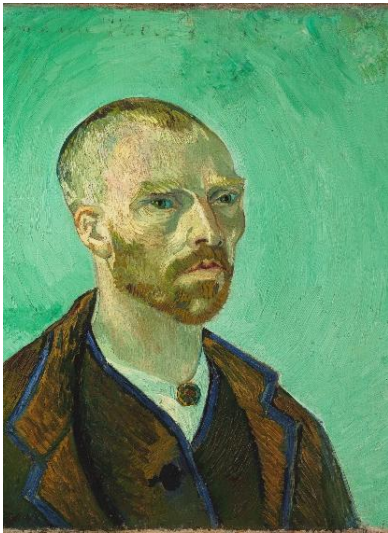


Figure 1. *Autoportrait dédié à Paul Gauguin (1888), Musée Fogg, Massachusetts*

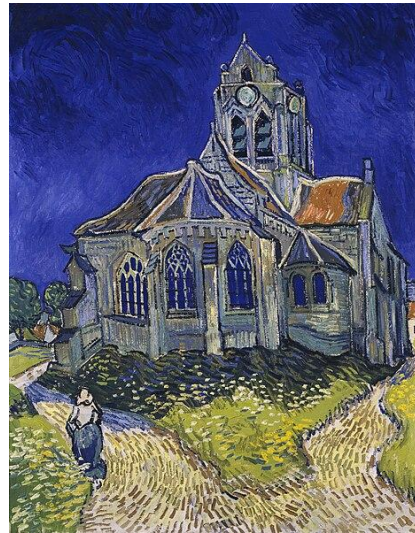


Figure 2. *L'Église d'Auvers-sur-Oise (1890), Musée d'Orsay, Paris*



Figure 3. *Les Souliers* (1887),
Musée d'art, Baltimore

3.2. *Ekphrasis* – espace de dialogue

La même fonction de représentation du destin singulier de l'artiste, marqué de difficultés, est remplie par l'*ekphrasis* du paysage de montagne intitulé *Le Ravin* (1889) (Figure 4), dont la contemplation pousse la version romanesque de Paul Gauguin à reconnaître l'unicité de la vision de Van Gogh, en dépit du fait que celui-ci peint encore selon la nature. Le symbolisme de l'art de Van Gogh s'avère ici plus subtil par rapport à celui très évident manifesté dans les toiles de Gauguin. L'*ekphrasis* devient donc le point de départ d'une réflexion sur les différentes manières d'utiliser les symboles dans la peinture, en d'autres mots, d'un dialogue virtuel entre les deux peintres :

c'est un paysage de montagne, où deux voyageurs minuscules montent, semble-t-il, à la recherche de l'inconnu. De-ci, de-là, des notes rouges comme des lumières, le tout baigné dans une clarté violette. L'horizon est partout bouché par la montagne, et pourtant, munis de leur bâton de pèlerin, ils avancent, ils attaquent la pente rocheuse, ils ne semblent pas découragés. Il entend la voix de Vincent répéter : « Là où il y a une volonté, il y a un chemin. » [...] C'est comme s'il se contentait de faire voir comment il perçoit le monde, alors que tous, autour de lui, s'acharnent à inventer de la nouveauté, des façons inédites de le représenter. Et pourtant... Quelque chose dans sa façon de faire est si profondément singulier... (Jaeglé 2014, 138)

Toujours par la description d'un tableau, Marianne Jaeglé essaie d'esquisser l'admiration de Vincent Van Gogh pour Paul Gauguin, dans lequel le peintre hollandais voit un modèle à suivre et un chef d'école artistique. C'est donc par la description d'un tableau, *Le salle de danse à Arles* (1888) (Figure 5), que Van Gogh

adhère à la vision de Gauguin, changement de vision qui est marqué dans le roman comme un abandon de soi. L'*ekphrasis* devient cette fois-ci la scène d'un dialogue entre les voix qui émergent de la toile et que Vincent entend dans sa tête. Il s'agit ici, au-delà de la référence à la maladie mentale de Van Gogh, de la suggestion à une autre réalité dans laquelle l'artiste vit : le peintre entre effectivement dans le monde de ses tableaux, il dialogue avec les personnages qu'il peint et, encore plus, il dialogue avec la réalité qu'il représente. D'une part, il y a des dizaines de figures qui lui reprochent son style à lui, sa manière de voir le monde par la peinture : « Mais ce que tu faisais n'a aucune valeur. Tu as perdu ton temps ! répètent en chœur les silhouettes du bal, sur un air de fanfare, en poursuivant leur danse effrénée. Tu as perdu ton temps ! » (Jaeglé 2014, 72) D'autre part, il y a la figure de Madame Augustine Roulin qui lui reproche justement l'envers, d'avoir renoncé à sa vision, à sa manière de représenter le monde : « Vous n'auriez pas dû abandonner, répète-t-elle et il sait d'instinct que c'est de son travail qu'elle parle, de sa façon de peindre. Quelque chose comme une douloureuse révélation se fait en lui. Augustine Roulin le contemple impuissante, avec une nuance de compassion dans le regard. » (Jaeglé 2014, 72) Il est important de souligner le fait qu'à travers l'*ekphrasis* de ce tableau, l'autrice réussit à illustrer le conflit intérieur de son personnage et les tendances artistiques contraires qui s'imposent sur son imaginaire pictural.

L'*ekphrasis* est associée par Marianne Jaeglé à la technique narrative de la mise en abyme dans la scène où les deux peintres Vincent Van Gogh et Paul Gauguin conçoivent, chacun à sa manière, les fleurs de tournesol. Dans le portrait qu'il réalise de Van Gogh (Figure 6) et où il suggère l'état maladif de celui-ci, Paul Gauguin utilise la mise en abyme pour expliquer à Vincent l'effet de perspective. Ce qu'il réussit, c'est de suggérer continuité entre la réalité représentée par les fleurs jaunes et le tableau. La vie et l'art se continuent donc et s'entremêlent en formant une unité indestructible :

Devant lui [Vincent Van Gogh], un vase contenant des tournesols, ceux-là mêmes qu'il a peints avec ardeur, des semaines durant, s'efforçant de rendre leur splendeur solaire, leur vitalité, le tournoisement qui le fascine. Et juste à sa droite, comme dans une continuité, la toile sur laquelle ces mêmes tournesols sont représentés. Mais l'effet de la perspective est tel que le peintre semble appliquer directement les tournesols eux-mêmes sur la toile plutôt que de les dessiner. (Jaeglé 2014, 59)

L'*ekphrasis* vient se mélanger à la description du processus de création artistique proprement dit, afin d'offrir au lecteur une image réelle, palpable de l'acte artistique, et des personnages tout à fait particuliers, chargés de profondeur psychologique. Dans le cas du Vincent de Marianne Jaeglé, la série de tableaux qui ont

comme sujet le tournesol (Figure 7), leitmotiv dans l'art de notre personnage, est cruciale dans notre analyse. Si au début les fleurs ont été l'instrument par lequel Paul Gauguin enseignait à Vincent la notion de perspective picturale, le protagoniste revendique cet élément floral et lui confère le rôle de porteur de son crédo artistique :

Il en fera une demi-douzaine de toiles au moins, jusqu'à posséder totalement le motif. Il aime ces fleurs du Midi qui s'orientent vers le soleil, en adoratrices humbles et passionnées. Il aime leur rotation fervente, mais aussi le fait que leur admiration se traduit par une imitation modeste de leur divinité : leur cœur et leurs pétales ne sont rien d'autre qu'un hommage coloré et vibrant au soleil. En tant que peintre, il est lui aussi un admirateur, celui de la nature à la beauté de laquelle il exprime son adoration. Il est donc juste que le tournesol soit sa fleur. Comme à son habitude, il se lance dans l'entreprise avec frénésie. Il a enduit six toiles de 30, et les envisage sur fond cobalt, puis sur fond jaune cadmium, cherchant ce qui exaltera le mieux leur solaire éclat. (Jaeglé 2014, 28)

Le personnage montre un intérêt à part pour le jaune, couleur chargée de symbolisme. Vincent est fasciné par cette nuance qui n'est pas seulement un élément chromatique fondateur pour son œuvre, mais qui donne aussi, d'un point de vue symbolique, une certaine matérialité à ses rêves (par exemple : la Maison Jaune, espace de rencontre de la communauté artistique imaginée par Van Gogh). En analysant le symbolisme de cette couleur donné par le *Dictionnaire des symboles* de Chevalier et Gheerbrant, nous observons que le jaune illustre les caractéristiques de la peinture de Van Gogh, parmi lesquelles cette intensité chromatique est la plus ponctuée dans le récit :

Intense, violent, aigu jusqu'à la stridence, ou bien ample et aveuglant comme une coulée de métal en fusion, le jaune est la plus chaude, la plus expansive, la plus ardente des couleurs, difficile à éteindre, et qui déborde toujours des cadres où l'on voudrait l'enserrer. [...] Il est le véhicule de la jeunesse, de la force, de l'éternité divine. » (Chevalier et Gheerbrant 1969, 835)

Nous devons souligner le fait que la couleur devient ici un miroir du personnage, miroir qui reflète en fait ses pulsions créatrices placées sous le signe du chaos et de l'exubérance expressive.

Si les toiles aux tournesols illustrent à travers leur couleur la vie agitée et créative de Vincent, le tableau *Champs de blé aux corbeaux* (1890) va renverser le symbolisme du jaune, en lui donnant une dimension thanatique, dimension qui fait l'objet d'analyse de la section suivante.

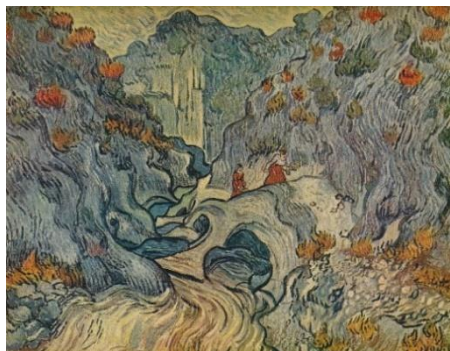


Figure 4. *Le ravin* (1889),
Musée Kröller-Müller, Otterlo

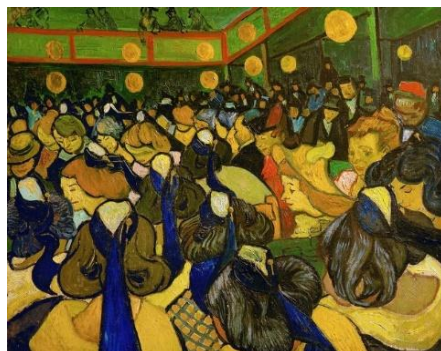


Figure 5. *La salle de danse à Arles*
(1888), Musée d'Orsay, Paris



Figure 6. *Van Gogh peignant des
tournesols* (1888), par Paul Gauguin,
Musée Van-Gogh, Amsterdam



Figure 7. *Les tournesols*
(1888), Musée Sompō,
Tokyo

4. *L'ekphrasis* – antichambre de la mort

Comme nous l'avons déjà remarqué dans les interprétations précédentes, Marianne Jaeglé convertit *l'ekphrasis* en élément de technique narrative. En s'appuyant sur la description du tableau *Champs de blé aux corbeaux* (1890) (Figure 8), elle raconte les événements qui mènent à la fin de Vincent Van Gogh, en racontant effectivement son agonie par l'intermédiaire de la toile, jusqu'à traduire en couleurs les sons entendus et les douleurs éprouvées par Vincent. L'écrivaine crée l'impression que Vincent, blessé, agonisant, parcourt son tableau, en devenant un personnage invisible :

Sur le chemin poudreux qui sent bon l'herbe sèche, les fleurs, la terre chaude, il titube. Devant lui, bordée de part et d'autre par les champs, la sente semée de cailloux et blanche de poussière s'allonge, à l'infini, lui semble-t-il. De part et d'autre, les champs aux formes géométriques alignent leurs surfaces de couleurs variées : jaune foncé pour le blé mûr, vert intense pour la luzerne, vert Véronèse pour les seigles. De loin en loin, un arbre découpe sa silhouette noire sur le ciel bleuissant. À l'est, un mince croissant de lune et l'étoile du berger sont apparus, qui jettent une clarté pâle et froide sur le chemin qu'il doit parcourir. Qu'elle est longue cette route, jusqu'au village ! Il avance, pas après pas, serrant les dents sur sa douleur, sur le froid qu'il ressent et qui le fait grelotter malgré la douceur de l'air. (Jaeglé 2014, 195)

Dans les pages suivantes, Marianne Jaeglé convertit un élément de la description de ce tableau, la présence des corbeaux, en élément d'enquête policière autour de la mort de Vincent. Son frère Théo fait observer aux policiers que Vincent n'aurait jamais pris un pistolet pour éloigner les corbeaux, puisqu'il les avait peints, donc il les considérerait comme une partie intégrante du tableau qu'il avait saisi :

Qui peut croire que Vincent était dérangé par les corbeaux ? Sa dernière toile le montre, les corbeaux font partie intégrante de ces paysages, leur note noire et vernissée au-dessus de la blondeur des blés donne son sens à l'ensemble, équilibre et ponctue la lumière qui inonde le tableau. *Vincent ? Être dérangé par les corbeaux ?* Il a peint pendant un an parmi les fous, leurs clameurs, leurs hurlements ! Il a peint en pleine chaleur à Arles, il a travaillé sans manger des jours durant... Non, son frère n'était pas un peintre d'atelier que les oiseaux dérangent, ou que les mauvaises conditions empêchent de travailler. (Jaeglé 2014, 208)

Une fois de plus, la technique de *l'ekphrasis* souligne le rapport que le peintre-personnage Vincent Van Gogh entretenait avec la réalité extérieure – il intériorise et intègre cette réalité dans ses toiles, en vivant en fait à l'intérieur de sa création, pas dans le monde.

La relation étroite du peintre avec la nature est présente aussi dans la critique d'art par la voix de Graciela Prieto qui souligne son programme artistique consistant dans une identification avec les éléments naturels et dans leur traduction en langage pictural : « Dans sa correspondance, Van Gogh parle beaucoup de ce qu'il fait, décrit les tableaux, explique ses choix plastiques ou techniques. Il établit une réciprocité entre le visible et l'audible, la nature lui parle [...] La peinture devient ainsi une sorte d'écriture du message, une écriture qui chiffre la jouissance. » (Prieto 2013, 274) Il faut mettre en évidence le fait

que la vie de Vincent se déroule à travers ses toiles, car Marianne Jaeglé crée une relation symbiotique entre le peintre et son œuvre. Notre personnage traduit le monde à travers la peinture, même en ses derniers moments.

L'ekphrasis est utilisée de nouveau à fonction narrative dans la scène du délire de Théo Van Gogh qui est marqué par la perte de son frère. Le cadet de Vincent s' imagine entrer dans le tableau de l'église peint par son frère, converti en espace de leur rencontre au-delà de la mort :

[...] l'église d'Auvers projette sur lui son ombre protectrice. Il la contourne afin d'en trouver l'entrée, la voici, une porte de bois en forme d'ogive. Vincent est à l'intérieur, il l'attend. Ils vont se retrouver. Théo pousse la porte, Dieu qu'elle est lourde. Il faut pourtant qu'il entre, qu'il aille rejoindre son frère, sinon que croira Vincent ? » (Jaeglé 2014, 217)

Marianne Jaeglé utilise *l'ekphrasis* en tant qu'élément constituant du topos du livre, car elle esquisse le lieu thanatique de rencontre entre les deux frères dont la relation reste indestructible jusqu'à la fin.

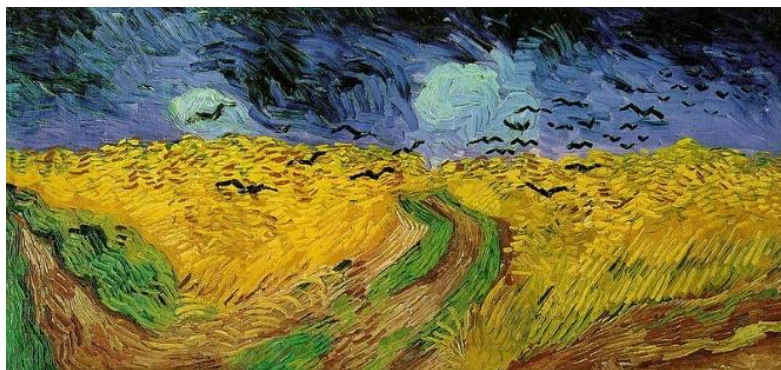


Figure 8. *Champs de blé aux corbeaux* (1890),
Musée Van Gogh, Amsterdam

5. *L'ekphrasis* – « la réalité absente »

Nous achevons notre analyse par deux tableaux imaginaires décrits dans les pensées du peintre. Nous associons ces épisodes ekphrastiques à l'observation faite par Emmanuelle Danblon selon laquelle « *l'ekphrasis* est répertoriée dans la littérature comme une description vivante destinée à placer sous les yeux de l'auditoire une réalité absente pour en figurer la présence. » (Danblon 2021, 93) Marianne Jaeglé utilise donc cette fonction de *l'ekphrasis*,

celle de rendre l'invisible visible, dans la construction des derniers moments de Vincent. Le premier c'est le visage du meurtrier. Dans ce moment critique, le peintre hollandais regarde le jeune homme et commence à s'imaginer la manière dans laquelle il peut transposer son expression sur la toile : « Il observe sans répondre le sourire froid sur le visage juvénile, distrait par le contraste, se demandant s'il serait capable de rendre cela sur la toile » (Jaeglé 2014, 194.) Il anticipe, en fait, les réactions de son agresseur après son acte meurtrier sous la forme d'un tableau potentiel. La deuxième toile imaginaire est conçue juste avant sa mort, au moment où Vincent regarde son frère Théo pour la dernière fois :

Alors Théo se laisse tomber sur la chaise en paille qu'on a installée au chevet de son frère, cache sa tête dans ses mains et, à son tour, il se met à attendre. Vincent le regarde et grimace un sourire. S'il en avait la force, il dessinerait Théo dans cette pose, et ce portrait-là pourrait s'appeler *Inquiétude*², ou de tout autre nom dramatique. (Jaeglé 2014, 205.)

À travers l'imagination de son protagoniste qui pense et s'exprime d'une manière ekphrastique, Marianne Jaeglé illustre une réalité deux fois absente : absente devant les yeux du lecteur, mais aussi absente devant les yeux des amateurs d'art, car les tableaux décrits ne seront jamais peints. Nous désirons souligner que nos hypothèses concernant les toiles fictives du personnage trouvent leur point d'ancrage théorique dans les remarques de Liliane Louvel, théoricienne qui considère l'*ekphrasis* comme un élément intermédiaire qui reflète : « la superposition de deux moments [...] où passé et présent, vision imaginaire et réelle, se superposent. » (Louvel 2014, 20) D'après les mots de Louvel, ce concept grec devient l'outil de l'intermédialité, pas seulement entre la peinture et la littérature, mais aussi entre la fiction et le réel.

6. Conclusion

Pour conclure, l'*ekphrasis* s'avère la principale manière de construction du portrait littéraire du personnage romanesque Vincent Van Gogh tel qu'il est présenté dans le livre de Marianne Jaeglé. Cette technique dépasse la fonction purement descriptive et devient le procédé principal de l'avancement de la narration qui se tisse autour de la figure du peintre maudit. En plus, l'*ekphrasis* enrichit les biographèmes de Vincent Van Gogh, en donnant au personnage de Marianne Jaeglé une dimension psychologique plus profonde.

² Ce dernier tableau imaginaire décrit dans le roman peut être pourtant associé à l'une des dernières toiles de Van Gogh, *Devant la porte de l'éternité* (1890), peinte un mois avant sa mort.

L'ekphrasis constitue dans ce cas un vrai fil rouge de la trame narrative, en dévoilant la manière propre au personnage Vincent Van Gogh de traduire le monde à travers sa peinture : celui-ci intériorise la réalité pour la transposer ensuite sur la toile blanche. La description de l'œuvre picturale devient ainsi l'espace de la narration et de la construction du portrait psychologique du personnage, en racontant des épisodes de sa vie. Elle suggère au lecteur le plan de l'action et parfois retrace, symboliquement parlant, le dialogue entre plusieurs visions artistiques différentes. L'œuvre de Van Gogh expose sa vie et sa mort, en gagnant le statut d'un *axis mundi* personnel, individualisé, autour duquel se tisse l'existence du peintre-personnage. La vie, la fin et les croyances artistiques de celui-ci sont illustrées dans le récit à travers *l'ekphrasis* qui devient le principe fondateur du portrait littéraire du Vincent Van Gogh envisagé par Marianne Jaeglé.

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METONYMISATION OF MEDICAL EPONYMS BASED ON PERSONAL NAMES AND THEIR METONYMIC PATTERNS IN ENGLISH CLINICAL TERMINOLOGY

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ABSTRACT. *Metonymisation of Medical Eponyms Based on Personal Names and Their Metonymic Patterns in English Clinical Terminology.* This paper presents insights into the metonymisation of medical eponyms based on a comprehensive overview of relevant literature. The article introduces a corpus-based study that analyses 25,787 medical eponyms derived from proper names

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extracted from articles, dictionaries, and specialised online resources. Given the established metonymic frameworks, this research investigates the characteristics of medical eponyms categorised as metonymic expressions through descriptive analysis. In our study, we considered eponymy as a subclass of metonymy, involving metonymic shifts where a name indirectly refers to a related medical concept. The specific features of a medical phenomenon are transferred from the object to a person who either discovered or is somehow associated with it. In this case, the proper name in an eponymous term does not provide access to biographical information but reveals the meaning of the medical phenomenon associated with a person. We also regard eponymy as a common form of metonymy that manifests in elliptic constructions, where the proper name is used without common nouns like disease, reflex, sign, etc. Metonymy is also considered from a cognitive standpoint in medical terminology, as it is used in reasoning to indicate how humans perceive medical objects. The information contained in eponyms gradually accumulates in the doctor's mind. Such knowledge accumulation helps to elucidate the relationship between language and medicine, enriching not only theoretical linguistics but also medical practice and education. The deeper the knowledge, the more information is condensed within the eponymous term; i.e., the meaning of a medical eponym is revealed as it is studied and characterized by individual associative layers and identification descriptors, where the proper name serves as a trigger for understanding the information ingrained within it. The proper name picks out a unique entity from several similar ones and provides access to some specific information. A mental lexicon uses such names as a compact container for keeping a large amount of information that can be grained into particular categories. Such metonymic categories as PHYSICIAN FOR THE DISEASE, PATIENT FOR THE DISEASE, and PART-FOR-WHOLE METONYMY can be specified within medical terminology due to the associative relations between source and target. Such an associative relationship between eponyms and medical phenomena is based on knowledge and experience, which steadily extend and may convey complex concepts quickly. The cognitive framework of metonymy facilitates the structuring of conscious processes and potentially influences standardized medical nomenclature, which in turn enhances clarity in international communication.

Keywords: *metonymy, eponym, eponymous terms, proper names, metonymic patterns.*

REZUMAT. *Metonimizarea eponimelor medicale bazate pe nume personale și modelele lor metonimice în terminologia clinică engleză.* Acest articol prezintă perspective asupra metonimizării eponimelor medicale pe baza unei analize cuprinzătoare a literaturii relevante. Articolul introduce un studiu bazat pe corpus care analizează 25.787 de eponime medicale derivate din nume proprii extrase din articole, dicționare și resurse online specializate. Având în vedere cadrele metonimice stabilite, această cercetare investighează caracteristicile

eponimelor medicale clasificate ca expresii metonimice prin intermediul unei analize descriptive. În studiul nostru, am considerat eponimia ca o subclasă a metonimiei, implicând schimbări metonimice în care un nume se referă indirect la un concept medical conex. Caracteristicile specifice ale unui fenomen medical sunt transferate de la obiect la o persoană care l-a descoperit sau care este asociată în vreun fel cu acesta. În acest caz, numele propriu dintr-un termen eponim nu oferă acces la informații biografice, ci dezvăluie semnificația fenomenului medical asociat cu o persoană. De asemenea, considerăm eponimia ca o formă comună de metonimie care se manifestă în construcții eliptice, în care numele propriu este utilizat fără substantive comune precum boală, reflex, semn etc. Metonimia este, de asemenea, considerată din punct de vedere cognitiv în terminologia medicală, deoarece este utilizată în raționament pentru a indica modul în care oamenii percep obiectele medicale. Informațiile conținute în eponime se acumulează treptat în mintea medicului. Această acumulare de cunoștințe ajută la elucidarea relației dintre limbă și medicină, îmbogățind nu numai lingvistica teoretică, ci și practica și educația medicală. Cu cât cunoștințele sunt mai aprofundate, cu atât mai multe informații sunt condensate în termenul eponim; adică, semnificația unui eponim medical este revelată pe măsură ce este studiat și caracterizat prin straturi asociative individuale și descriptori de identificare, unde numele propriu servește ca un declanșator pentru înțelegerea informațiilor înrădăcinate în el. Numele propriu selectează o entitate unică dintre mai multe entități similare și oferă acces la anumite informații specifice. Un lexic mental utilizează astfel de nume ca un container compact pentru păstrarea unei cantități mari de informații care pot fi împărțite în categorii specifice. Categorii metonimice precum MEDIC PENTRU BOALĂ, PACIENT PENTRU BOALĂ și METONIMIE PARTE-PENTRU-ÎNTREG pot fi specificate în terminologia medicală datorită relațiilor asociative dintre sursă și țintă. O astfel de relație asociativă între eponime și fenomene medicale se bazează pe cunoștințele și experiența utilizatorului, care se extind constant și pot transmite rapid concepte complexe. Natura cognitivă a metonimiei facilitează structurarea gândirii și raționamentului uman și poate influența nomenclatura medicală standardizată, ceea ce, la rândul său, sporește claritatea în comunicarea internațională.

Cuvinte-cheie: *metonimie, termeni eponimi, eponim, nume proprii, modele metonimice.*

1. Introduction

Eponyms usually appear to commemorate an outstanding physician or scientist who played a significant role in detecting medical conditions (Ferguson & Thomas 2014) as well as recognizing leading scientists for their scientific contributions (Schubert et al. 2022). They are a prominent feature of medical

language and the number of articles dedicated to eponyms published each year has been growing (Cabanac 2014). Eponyms flourished in the late nineteenth century (Ferguson, 2014). Since then, they have not fallen out of favour, as evidenced by the steadily increasing number of PubMed queries, which has also been growing since the early twentieth. Thus, the question of eponyms within the medical setting remains relevant and requires further attention.

The word “eponym” comes from the combination of two parts, i.e., the Greek suffix “epi”, which originally means “upon”, and “onyma” implies “name”, respectively (Budrys 2005). There are many linguistic theories about proper names, where the priority is to distinguish between proper names and proper nouns, where proper names are considered “as both linguistic and cultural items whose purpose is to refer to a unique referent, and which convey a meaning that refers to some idiosyncratic characteristics of the referent” (Héois 2020: 2-3). Moreover, proper nouns are specified as “word-level units belonging to the category noun”; and in contrast, “proper names are expressions which have been conventionally adopted as the name of a particular entity” (Payne & Huddleston 2002: 515-516). And finally, proper names are defined “as words or expressions (of several words) mainly used in noun phrases that refer to contextually unique individuals (people, places, institutions, events, monuments, etc.)” (Mignot & Philippe 2022: 1).

Within medical terminology, it is considered that “an eponym comes from the name of a person – real, fictional, mythical, or imaginary – but it can also come from the name of a place or a brand name” (Duque-Parra et al. 2006: 220). An alike opinion can be traced in the definition according to which an eponym is “a person, place or thing after whom or after which something is named” (Nieradko-Iwanicka 2020: 56). Most studies show evidence that the source of eponyms is not only a person but a place as well (Ferguson & Thomas 2014; Mora & Bosch 2010; Kucharz, 2020; Arnaud 2022). In general, an eponym can be considered any name since “there is no reference to whether the name is “proper” or “common”, nor to whether it refers to a person, thing or place” (Cappuzzo 2008: 25).

According to various theories, such as philosophical, neuropsychological, and linguistic ones, proper names have a special status in language (Kljajevic & Erramuzpe 2018). In general, proper names are considered to be labels attached to referents and have no semantic meaning. They are “those linguistic entities most specifically suited to fulfill and guarantee an unmistakably established and constant relation between a given phenomenon in the world on the one hand and a linguistic sign or the use of a linguistic sign on the other” (Evans & Wimmer 1990: 259). They are considered lexical units that can distinguish unique entities perceived in the surrounding world or evoked from our internal conceptual

structures (O'Rourke & de Diego 2020). Proper names get into the mental lexicon and undergo the processes of conceptualization and categorization (Karpenko & Golubenko 2015); thus, they are quite often used as a metonymy to refer to a certain object. Specific features of a particular person that have become generally known will allow them to be used as a metonymy, provided that the person or object being described has agnate characteristics or traits (Adam & Palupi 2023). In this regard, metonymy is a cognitive impulse that provides access to the target context (Panther & Thornburg 2004), and a proper name used metonymically serves as a landmark that reproduces in memory the unique properties of an object associated with it. They are viewed as a significant information processing factor during its perception since they become specific headings used for extracting necessary fragments of knowledge from the mental lexicon, preserving essential information in memory, and combining verbal, encyclopedic, and non-verbal information (Karpenko 2006). People's names are also important for social activities, as the use of personal names in communication creates recognition, and attention to the issue being discussed, which is paramount in a medical setting.

2. Material and Methods

The study is focused on the analysis of 25787 medical eponyms based on proper names extracted from multiple publications, i.e., articles retrieved from PubMed platform, *A New Dictionary of Eponyms* (Freeman 1997), *Dictionary of Medical Eponyms* (Whitworth, Firkin 2001), *Dorland's Illustrated Medical Dictionary* (2002), and website such as whonamedit.com. The object of the investigation is the eponymous terminological units of English medical terminology, which are considered to be a compound unit where a proper name is the modifier of a common noun. In our study, we were guided by the fine-grained metonymic patterns (36 categories) identified in proper names by Arnaud (2022) based on metonymic patterns (23 categories) specified by Peirsman & Geeraerts (2006). The subject of our research is the characteristics of medical eponyms in the light of metonymisation. We screened all the terms found through the PubMed medical platform for their use in the medical field. The methodology includes descriptive analysis methods, which consist of selecting and systematising the collected facts in their logical comprehension and identification of specific patterns. The etymology of the terms used in this paper was researched using Internet resources such as whonamedit.com.

Eponyms are considered a subclass of metonymy (Lipka 2006), which does not transfer qualities but indirectly refers to one thing by means of another word denoting a similar entity. Eponyms are based on metonymic shifts (Brdar-

Szabó & Brdar 2023) where the name for one thing is applied with the essence of a different but spatially and/or temporally linked item (Ghan 2018). In our study, we considered eponymy from two standpoints:

- eponymy as a subclass of metonymy (eponymous terms in their full form (syntactic construction), e.g., *Hageman factor*) where the specific features of medical phenomena transferred from the object to a person who either discovered or somehow related to it. In this case, the proper name in an eponymous term does not provide access to biographical information but reveals the meaning of the medical phenomenon associated with a person since “the relation between source and target is typically contingent, i.e., conceptually non-necessary” (Panther 2017: 280). Moreover, information about a medical phenomenon can be accumulated and disclosed gradually, depending on the person's knowledge;
- eponymy as a common form of metonymy that manifests in elliptic constructions, where the proper name is used without common nouns like disease, reflex, sign, etc., such as *the Ruffier* instead of *the Ruffier test*.

Our study aims to analyse metonymic categories of eponymous terms and shed light on eponyms based on personal names used for medical concepts associated with them. To collect data from PubMed via its API, we utilized Entrez Programming Utilities (E-utilities), which provide programmatic access to various NCBI databases, including PubMed. These utilities allow us to search, retrieve, and download publication data, such as abstracts, citations, and metadata, in an automated manner. For this purpose, we developed a Python script that combines research and effect services to search PubMed and retrieve abstract information.

3. Results

Metonymised eponyms were compiled based on the metonymic relations and analysed considering metonymic patterns (categories). The study found that certain categories require some clarification in terms of medical terminology. For instance, the category INVENTOR FOR THE INVENTION identified by Arnaud (2022) was aligned with PHYSICIAN FOR THE DISEASE ASSOCIATED WITH detected by Brdar (2019) and subsequently to the truncated form as PHYSICIAN FOR THE DISEASE which are shown in Table 1. We categorized POSSESSED FOR PERSON to the PATIENT FOR THE DISEASE pattern. Table 2 displays the examples found under the metonymic pattern PATIENT FOR THE DISEASE.

When analysing eponyms originating from personal names, PART-FOR-WHOLE metonymy was also found. Table 3 displays such a metonymic pattern in terms of the personal names of physicians. Given eponymy, PART-FOR-WHOLE METONYMY within medical eponyms can be considered spatial since it

relates to the people who lived in different times and countries (dimensions). Such a category as linear PART-FOR-WHOLE metonymy can be drawn up for medical eponyms originating from the family name of people who are relatives and gathered under one surname. PART-FOR-WHOLE METONYMY was also regarded as comparable with synecdoche.

4. Discussion

4.1. Insights into the nature of metonymy

Metonymy has received much less attention in the literature, and metonymic phenomena have only been occasionally subject to investigation considering medical terminology. Traditionally, metonymy is regarded as a lexical phenomenon, i.e., "...as a rhetorical device that gives rise to special meanings of lexical items..." (Barcelona 2012: 257). Given that, linguists have assumed for a considerable period that metonymy is a linguistic device used in various contexts to convey meaning and create associations between related concepts. It is defined as a figure of speech in which one linguistic unit refers to the standard referent of a related item (Lakoff & Johnson 1980) or the name of one item represents another that is usually closely related to the first (Teraoka 2016). Metonymy is also defined as "a figure of language and thought in which one entity is used to refer to, or, in cognitive linguistic terms, provide access to another entity to which it is somehow related" (Littlemore 2015: 4). The study of metonymy from the perspective of cognitive linguistics specifies metonymy as a linguistic form and a powerful cognitive tool to conceptualize the world, i.e., "Metonymy allows us to conceptualize one thing by means of its relation to something else; metonymic concepts structure not just our language but our thoughts, attitudes, and actions" (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 37). In this respect, metonymy is not only a language issue but also thoughts since languages reflect human conceptualization of the world.

From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, metonymy is based on assumptions that differ from traditional opinions. Lakoff & Turner (1989) view metonymy as a type of structured conceptualization, which is seen as a cognitive tool, rather than a linguistic strategy or rhetorical device. Radden and Kövecses (2007) examine metonymy from a standpoint of cognitive processes. They claimed that "metonymy is a cognitive process in which one conceptual entity, the vehicle, provides mental access to another conceptual entity, the target, within the same idealized cognitive model" (Radden & Kövecses 1999: 21). This point of view echoes another, where metonymy is described as "a conceptual phenomenon represented by the schema X for Y, where X stands for the source meaning and Y symbolizes the target" (Panther & Thornburg 2004: 95).

Credible studies provide insights into the nature of metonymy in connection with metaphor, as well as specify convincing grounds for differentiating these two figures of speech (Barcelona 2000; Dirven & Pörings 2002; Haser 2005). Metaphor and metonymy differ at the level of perception, where the former is considered the result of similarity or analogy, while metonymy is based on contiguity, that is, a complex spatial metaphor when applied to the cognitive domains (Arnaud 2022). They are also said to have different functions, for instance, metaphor is “principally a way of conceiving of one thing in terms of another, and its primary function is understanding,” while metonymy “has primarily a referential function, that is, it allows us to use one entity to stand for another” (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 36). Precisely speaking, “an eponym is the person or place after whom someone, something, or someplace is named; eponymous refers to the disorder, procedure, invention, etc., named after that person. This has become a distinction without a difference. The person and the disorder are now considered one and the same” (Abel 2014: 76).

4.2. Metonymic patterns of eponyms

In respect of eponyms, we follow Lipka, who claims that “eponymy may be regarded as a subclass of metonymy” (Lipka 2006: 32). Within the healthcare setting, metonymy is specified as the substitution of the name, which may concern referring to a person as a disease or other medical phenomenon (Camp & Sadler 2020). Patrick asserts that metonymy is quite common in medical discourse due to the polysemous nature of terms (Patrick 2006). The systematic type of metonymy assumes that it is a universal cognitive phenomenon; therefore, metonymic meanings are considered very accessible and automatically perceived by people (Barcelona 2012; Brdar-Szabó & Brdar 2023; Panther & Radden 1999; Radden & Kövecses 1999, 2007). Since metonymy is systematic and adheres to certain patterns, the following categories have been considered within medical terminology in terms of eponyms coined from personal names: INVENTOR FOR THE INVENTION (Arnaud) / PRODUCER & PRODUCT (Peirsman & Geeraerts); POSSESSED FOR PERSON (Arnaud) / POSSESSOR & POSSESSED (Peirsman & Geeraerts); PART FOR WHOLE (Arnaud) / SPATIAL PART & WHOLE (Peirsman & Geeraerts).

4.2.1. Inventor for the invention

The website *whonamedit.com* comprises a plethora of eponyms named for a person with a biography of this person, most of which fall under the category INVENTOR FOR THE INVENTION / PRODUCER & PRODUCT. This category is relatively controversial in terms of medical eponyms since not all of them are

named after the inventors (discoverers). Besides, Stephen Stigler believes that eponyms do not reward the achievement of an original discoverer because they are usually wrongly attributed. Stigler's law of eponymy states that eponyms are never named after the original discoverer. This law implies that eponyms appeared either to honor a person or due to somebody's contribution, but not discovery (Stigler 1980). Moreover, eponyms are usually named after one person, while scientific discoveries often reflect the efforts and work of a group of people over time (Woywodt 2007). Some eponyms came into scientific use after the scientist's death when another researcher claimed the discovery again, who still paid tribute to the initial discoverer by immortalizing their name in the term. In general, such a method of naming is often quite chaotic and random. It occurs for a number of reasons, sometimes even due to chance or reflects the linguistic and cultural dominance of the time. The naming process usually begins when widespread attention is drawn to an entity, not necessarily for the first time. The physician or scientist whose name becomes eponymous often stands out from others for reasons other than being first. It may be reputation, details in the report, or an accidental rediscovery, often decades later, by someone who links the disease to one or more of the earlier scientists (Ferguson & Thomas 2014). Thus, in our study, we assigned such medical eponyms named after a physician to the category PHYSICIAN FOR THE DISEASE ASSOCIATED WITH HIM / HER (Brdar 2019: 59), that is, DOCTOR / RESEARCHER FOR THE DISEASE STUDIED / DISCOVERED BY HER OR HIM (Brdar 2019: 64) as the well-established metonymy in medical eponymy. The category PHYSICIAN FOR THE DISEASE is more reasonable and acceptable for medical eponyms since it can be attached to any eponym in honor of a doctor associated with a medical phenomenon who they did not suffer from. We advocate using eponyms of such category in a non-possessive because "Non-possessives have already been standardized for compound eponyms and for toponyms. It has also been suggested that non-possessives should be used for concepts based on the name of a family or patient..." (Anderson 1996: 177).

Table 1: Eponyms named after physicians who contributed to the invention but were not original discoverers

Eponym	Etymology
Graves disease	Graves described the disease in 1835. Indeed, it was Parry who first reported a case of hyperthyroidism and goiter in 1786. In 1802, Flajani described a disease characterized by the coexistence of palpitations and exophthalmos.
Burnett syndrome	Burnett et al. described a syndrome in 1949. Earlier, it was described by Cope (1936), Hardt & Rivers (1923), and Sippy (1910).

Eponym	Etymology
Rendu-Osler-Weber syndrome	This syndrome was first described by Sutton in 1864, then Babington published a case in an account of hereditary epistaxis in 1865, and Legg in 1876. Rendu, Osler and Weber differentiated the condition from haemophilia.
Buerger disease	Thromboangiitis obliterans is a disease named after Buerger, who described the pathologic changes in the amputated extremities of patients in 1908. However, von Winiwater described thromboangiitis obliterans in 1879.
Madelung deformity	In 1878, Madelung gave a precise description, with suggested etiology and treatment. Nonetheless, other authors, including those cited by Madelung, had described the pathology earlier, such as Dupuytren (1834), Smith (1847), Adams (1854), Malgaigne (1855), and Jean (1875).
Reinke edema	This benign vocal cord disorder was first described by Hajek 1 in 1891 and subsequently by Reinke in 1895.
Tillaux fracture	The fracture was described by Cooper in 1822 and further characterized by Tillaux in cadaveric studies in 1845.
Hoffman sign	Hoffman first postulated this sign, though it was described by his assistant Curschmann.
Whipple procedure	Whipple, Parsons, and Mullins described a two-stage operation for the resection of ampullary carcinoma in 1935, earlier performed by Kausch in 1912, and in 1899 first reported by Halsted.

4.2.2. Possessed for person

Such metonymic patterns as POSSESSED FOR PERSON (Arnaud) / POSSESSOR & POSSESSED (Peirsman & Geeraerts) within the medical setting due to eponyms can be categorized as PATIENT FOR THE DISEASE as such eponyms arose in honor of a sick person who suffered from a particular condition or were diagnosed with a disease. In this regard, a possessive form can be used for such a category to specify a true possessive sense but not convey structurally adjectival as opposed to eponyms after the doctor associated with it. The possessive form can be constructed by a possessive formant, preposition, or inflection, depending on the proper noun. The eponyms after patients and their rationale for the source of origin are displayed in Table 2. Examples are suggested without a possessive form since additional investigations are required to detect the most acceptable form within a medical environment. Moreover, the AMA manual of style provides some reasons to avoid the possessive forms with regard to spelling and pronunciation.

Table 2: Eponyms named after patients who suffered from a disease

Eponym	Etymology
Carrion disease	Daniel Carrión, a Peruvian medical student, inoculated himself with material from a verruca lesion to record the clinical features of the disease.
Christmas disease	It was named after Stephen Christmas, who was the first person diagnosed with this medical condition in 1952.
Cowden disease	This disease was first described in 1963 by Lloyd and Dennis, who named it after their patient Rachel Cowden.
Hageman factor	Ratnoff named it in 1955 in honor of his first patient, John Hageman, who had 'incoagulable' blood in vitro and no abnormal bleeding after surgery.
MacLeod phenomenon	It was named after Hugh McLeod, the first patient whose erythrocytes showed weak expression of Kell system antigens.
Mortimer disease	Hutchinson in 1898 coined the term after the name of his patient Mrs. Mortimer.
Lou Gehrig disease	It is named after Lou Gehrig, the famous baseball player who got the illness.
Ravn virus	The name is derived from the surname of the patient from whom this virus was first isolated.

4.2.3. *Part for whole*

An eponym can also be defined as the name(s) of one or more individuals who are believed to have developed or described anatomical structures, classification systems, clinical conditions, principles of examinations, signs, symptoms, or surgical procedures (Hunter & Lund 2000). In this regard, we can speak about PART FOR WHOLE metonymy since medical phenomena result from a cohort study or investigation and not from a single person. In this case, we may discuss SPATIAL PART & WHOLE (Peirsman & Geeraerts). Given that most physicians lived in different centuries and countries, such a category can be considered spatial. PART FOR WHOLE (Arnaud) / SPATIAL PART & WHOLE (Peirsman & Geeraerts) can conventionally adhere to all eponyms of the PHYSICIAN FOR THE DISEASE category. Metonymy is similar to synecdoche and is more likely confused with it since they are both based not on similarity but on contiguity. It is used to represent the whole and vice versa. Generally, it is a synecdoche if A is a part of B or B is a constituent part of A, and a metonymy if A is usually associated with B but not part of the whole, or the whole is used for a part (Ghufraan 2023), like using body parts to refer to people, where “head

counts” is used for the number of persons employed. Synecdoche is also used in medical terminology to describe the relationship between different body parts, which involves the transference of meaning when words are employed to refer to something different from their actual meaning, as in *head-to-toe assessment*, which means an examination of all body systems. Thus, it is necessary to clarify the status of eponyms named after the group of people and whether they should be considered synecdoche or metonymy. We propose considering them as metonymy, as synecdoche implies a semantic change that shifts the meaning of a word. Still, in case of medical eponyms, the meaning does not undergo changes but points out the number of people united under one family name. Given that, we would like to propose the category LINEAR PART & WHOLE metonymy, where eponyms denote the family name of people who are relatives and gathered under one surname (so to speak, they come from the same lineage). Such eponyms and their rationale for source of origin are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3: Eponyms named after the group of people

Eponym	Etymology
Ackerman syndrome	The syndrome was named after the relatives Ackerman J. L., Ackerman A. L., and Ackerman A. B. who described its features.
Brugada syndrome	The syndrome derived its name after Spanish cardiologists Pedro and Josep Brugada, the brothers who defined it as a distinct clinical syndrome.
Hartnup disease	The disorder received its name from the Hartnup family, who were featured in a study of the condition.
Machado-Joseph disease	The condition was originally described in members of Machado family and the descendants of Antone Joseph.
Opitz G/BBB syndrome	The syndrome is derived from the first letter of the family names of the patients described by John Opitz.

To trace the elliptic constructions of eponyms, we selected 5 eponyms from all the eponyms mentioned in our paper that had more than 10,000 publications and counted the number of units within the open sources on the PubMed platform as of August 30, 2024. In the first case, we entered the term in its full form (syntactic construction), such as *Burnett syndrome*, and then only the surname *Burnett*. The number of units containing the surname is much higher since the surname can be used as an elliptical construction and can be mentioned directly as an individual.

Table 4: Syntactic and elliptical constructions

Eponymous term	Number of articles	Number of eponymous terms (Graves disease)	Number of proper names/ellipsis (Graves)
Graves disease	26327	19999	52275
Burnett syndrome	19251	13	16660
Carrion disease	12098	38	8641
Hageman factor	41505	1741	5210
Christmas disease	19431	678	23301
Whipple procedure	19251	3318	12523

We presuppose that elliptical constructions in medical discourse are possible under several conditions:

- proper names should be used with the definite article, an apostrophe, or both to differentiate them, otherwise, the eponymous terms are to be the best-known and stand-alone names so “No physician is in any doubt about what disorder is intended when encountering Down’s, Alzheimer’s, or Parkinson’s” (Abel 2014: 76);

- enhanced by adjectives, as in such terms as *positive Babynskyi* or *prolonged Holter*, where the omitted words do not affect understanding. An elliptical construction without an article or reinforcement of words such as *positive*, *negative*, or *prolonged* is challenging to detect since a proper name can be mentioned directly as a natural person.

The suggested examples prove that there is nothing figurative about metonymy, which is an essential cognitive process pervasive in both thought and language. Metonymic phrases have cognitive status in reasoning, and show how people conceive of entities and events within conceptual frames (Paradis 2004).

5. Conclusion

Medical terminology is not only one of the oldest but also one of the most rapidly developing. Due to the conceptualization of certain analogies in the plane of the new reality, terminological units of various origins have appeared in English medical terminology, including terms based on proper names, i.e., eponyms or eponymous terms. A personal name is like a label that helps open a memory repository. It is a way to collect and add information, where the meaning of the medical eponym is revealed through expertise. Metonymy, in turn, is seen as a relationship in which the meaning of a word is recognized, and this relation is based on everyday experience. The research

results demonstrate that metonymic expressions in the language of medicine have cognitive status in thought processes and reflect ways of conceptualizing medical phenomena. Metonymic relations in medical eponyms structure language, the thoughts, and actions of medical practitioners, which is consistent with the cognitive theory of Lakoff and Johnson. The taxonomy and classification models applied allowed identification of specific frequencies in medical eponyms in the analysed corpus, namely PHYSICIAN FOR THE DISEASE, which is the most widespread pattern covering eponyms honoring physicians who studied or described diseases; PATIENT FOR THE DISEASE, i.e., a pattern for eponyms named after patients who suffered from particular diseases and eventually PART FOR WHOLE pattern which reflects the collective nature of medical research. We also identified a discrepancy between the original discoverers and the individuals after whom eponyms are named. The analysis conducted on this particular corpus supports the findings of earlier research, for which Woywodt & Matteson are credited. Stigler's law of eponymy states that eponyms do not always accurately reflect actual grants to medical science; therefore, it is pivotal to accurately label and logically represent medical objects, as this is a fundamental cognitive process that permeates thought and language. We presuppose that elliptical constructions in medical discourse are possible to detect only when proper names are used with the definite article, an apostrophe, or enhanced by adjectives. Otherwise, a surname can be mentioned directly as a natural person. Metonymy is a common and convenient means of communication and cognition because it enables brevity or verbal economy and helps us perceive the world around us. Metonymisation provides insights into how medical language evolves and may potentially influence standardised medical nomenclature, thereby improving clarity in international communication. Moreover, clear metonymic patterns will facilitate tracing the etymology of terms and promote their inclusion in the dictionary. The study opens up perspectives for further investigation into the diachronic development of medical eponyms, the cross-cultural features of medical eponymy, the impact of contemporary trends on the formation of new eponymic patterns, as well as the standardisation of eponym usage in medical practice.

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Laura MULVEY¹ 

WOMEN'S TIME, CINEMATIC TIME: PAST AND PRESENT IN THE FOUND FOOTAGE, OR COMPILATION FILM²

Concepts of time are integral to the structuring of history and memory, often invisible, often implicit often seemingly following a teleological line between past and present. Recently, or even for some time now, the traditional image of temporality as linear has been challenged. Radical ideas of history have stretched

¹ **Laura MULVEY** (born in Oxford, in 1941) is Professor of Film and Media Studies at Birkbeck College, University of London. She was born in a family with a distinguished intellectual tradition and has learnt French and Italian since childhood. Mulvey studied history at St. Hilda's, Oxford University, but she switched her interest from history to the semiotics of cinema. Laura Mulvey is widely known as the initiator of a new trend in gender studies through her world famous 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", where she discloses the Hollywood strategies to assign masculinity and femininity their traditional places and reinforce comfortable stereotypes. In other words, Mulvey realised that the female protagonist of Hollywood movies is objectified as a site of male pleasure while the male protagonist is protected from any subordination by action. Major influences in Mulvey's intellectual life were Julia Kristeva, Women's Liberation Movement, as well as her husband and collaborator, Peter Wollen, whom she met in Oxford. After dissecting the Hollywood cinema, Laura Mulvey turned to the avant-garde movies and theorised upon a spectator who is not tempted by voyeuristic identification but by curiosity and intellectual zest. Mulvey herself identifies three strands in her work: the critique of patriarchy, the recuperation of forgotten female artists, writers, or film makers, and the development of a feminist aesthetic. Her rich and influential work is a major contribution to the development of gender studies theory. Mulvey co-edited *British Experimental Television* (2007); *Feminisms* (2015); and the collection *Other Cinemas: Politics, Culture and British Experimental Film in the 1970s* (2017). She authored *Visual and Other Pleasures* (1989); *Citizen Kane* (1992); *Fetishism and Curiosity* (1996); *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (2006); and *Afterimages: On Cinema, Women and Changing Times* (2019). She made six movies with Peter Wollen, including the renowned *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977), and two others with Mark Lewis.

² Integrating Professor Mulvey's research on the temporal dimensions of compilation films, this plenary lecture was delivered at the Tenth "Constructions of Identity" Conference (2019). The text has been edited by **Mihaela MUDURE**, Professor Emerita of Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, who is also the author of the bionote above. Dr. Mudure is interested in the intersection between gender and ethnicity and in the British Enlightenment. Email: michaela.mudure@ubbcluj.ro.



the narrative causality of 'then and then'. Perhaps particularly feminist history has associated the linear causal narrative with a patriarchal control of time, looking to find in women's stories other patterns and configurations. On a different cultural level, memory necessarily blurs a mental image of time, dispersing the immediacy of a present 'now' with the dreaminess and uncertainty of a persistent 'then'.

In her essay on *Women's Time*, Julia Kristeva evokes very vividly the resonant opposition between two images of gendered time. On the one hand: linear, unfolding... departure, progress, arrival and closure, encapsulated by a teleological concept of history. On the other, she cites Plato as the source of this concept of the feminine as outside time: a matrix of space, un-namable, anterior to God. The opposition is reinforced by the Freudian and Lacanian theories of the Oedipus complex: the maternal figure is to be left behind in an a-cultural space outside time, as the child progresses into the patriarchal Symbolic and its temporal order. Kristeva complicates the politics of this gendered opposition through her concept of succeeding generations of feminism. She says: "In their initial struggle for equality, women aspired to escape from their relegation to an a-cultural and pre-temporal space, aspiring to inclusion in the linear, progressive concept of time and the politics that went with it" (Kristeva 1981, 18). Kristeva's second generation, however, are: "Essentially interested in the specificity of female psychology and its symbolic realizations, these women seek to give a language to the intra-subjective and corporeal experiences left mute by culture in the past" (Kristeva 1981, 19). To my mind, Kristeva touches precisely here on two kinds of struggle: the necessary struggle for a 'better life' an intervention into a dominant order, the 'point being to change it', for which a grasp on the idea of the 'future' is essential. On the other hand: an exploration of female symbolic realisations, the difficulty of finding a language for those mute experiences that demand work on the level of imagination, the word and image itself, even the poetic. Here there's an aspiration to find a name for the unnameable, a voice for the muteness of the maternal figure on which the dominance of patriarchy depends.

But quite apart from these questions of gender, time is difficult to conceptualise, or to imagine or to articulate in so many words. Society and culture are possessed, on a daily basis, by patterns of temporality that are habitual and intangible, and an essential part of any social or cultural fabric. From this perspective, there's a politics to making visible the "mythologisation of temporalities" (Berardi 2011, 19) finding images for their reimagination.

Representations of time and the temporal mediation of images are deeply embedded in the cinema. It could be argued that the predominance of 'cause and effect' cinematic narrative has reinforced a linear temporal pattern in popular culture. However, alternative filmmaking had demonstrated across

its history that cinema can also potently disrupt and confuse temporal logic and make visible a more complicated temporality. Not only do duration and instant paradoxically coexist (in the length of a single shot and the single frame of the film strip) but film also easily reverses time and movement. Furthermore, cinema embodies time as contingent and subject to the imagination.

Three kinds of temporality are relevant to cinematic time:
1) indexicality and the photosensitive medium, 2) reversal and pausing of temporal flow, 3) the compilation film.

1. Indexicality and the photosensitive medium

Roland Barthes, the pre-eminent theorist of photographic time, notes that when light casts an image on photosensitive material, its reality is inscribed and preserved as, in semiotic terms, an indexical sign. The persistence of this trace necessarily affects photographic time: "What I see has been here, in this place which extends between infinity and the subject (operator or spectator); it has been here and immediately separated; it has been absolutely irrefutably present, and yet already deferred" (Barthes 2010, 59).

The difficulty of finding an adequate grammatical tense for this uncertain temporality, the coexistence of the 'then' of the operator's past moment with the spectator's 'now', leads to Barthes' term 'this was now'. Ann Banfield has suggested that this formulation points to a failure of language: "Like Proust, Barthes' effort is to find the linguistic form capable of recapturing a present in the past, a form that, it turns out, spoken language does not offer. This now-in-the-past can be captured not by combining tenses but by combining a past tense with a present time deictic (now/then; here/there etc): the photograph's moment *was now*" (Banfield 1990, 75).

Barthes' use of the shifter, or deixis, that is, marks a point at which the tense of the photograph, due to its essential confusion of temporal linearity, evades conventional grammar. Although this argument is concentrated on the still photograph, the cinema also captures its images indexically, the instant of each frame's registration is preserved and persists into the future.

2. Formal powers of arrest and reversal of movement

Roland Barthes had pointed out polemically in *Camera Lucida*: the unstoppable flow of film and its easy affinity with narrative flow tended to hide the complex temporalities he associated with the photograph, that is, the inextricable co-presence of past and future. But Raymond Bellour has argued that the presence of a stilled image (for instance, a photograph) disrupts cinematic continuity, breaks the flow of the narrative drive forward; the presence of its filmic past moment is inserted into the flow of a fictional present.

In *Death 24 x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* I tried to take this argument into the realm of new technologies: once the spectator could pause the flow of a film, the unfamiliar stillness opened up the time to think about time, its registration, representation and its passing. To my mind, these kinds of temporal complexities characteristic of photosensitive material could be returned to film – obviously paradoxically and anachronistically – once its flow was stilled. Digital technologies literally placed this possibility into the hands of every spectator. I hoped to argue that, even if only in metaphor, that this film/digital conjuncture could create a confused temporality that spread out and stretched time itself, reaching into a zone in which it stands suspended as though in space. This intrusion of stillness into the moving image has always existed. As Annette Michelson says: “To describe a movement is difficult, to describe the instant of arrest and of release, of reversal, of movement is something else again; it is to confront that thrill on the deepest level of filmic enterprise, to recognise the privileged character of the medium as being in itself the promise of an incomparable, and unhoped for, grasp upon the nature of causality” (Michelson 1975, 104).

3. The found footage, or compilation film

The double temporality of the compilation film and its significance for ‘women’s time’ is the central topic of my presentation today. The compilation film is a form of cinematic and historical narration based on the reconfiguration of archive material or found footage. Pre-existing footage, raw material from some past moment in history, that is then re-edited into a new work, represents a meditation on that past from the perspective of a new present (the moment of the filmmaker, who further extends time to that of the future audience). Jay Leyda summed up the first two moments in the title of his early book on the topic *Film Begets Film*, which is also evoked by Christa Blüminger’s term “second hand film”. Although pre-existing footage has been reassembled since the beginnings of cinema, there are landmark moments in its history. Estir Shub pioneered the use of found footage as critique in her film *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927), Joseph Cornell pioneered its use as art in *Rose Hobart* (1936) and the form has continued along these paths as well as deviating into others.

To reiterate: there is a crucial gap between the time when the original footage was shot and its later editing and arrangement. In this layering of time, the later reworking is laid, as it were, onto or over, the found footage’s past. And then, as Jaimie Baron has pointed out, the spectator, at some later moment of exhibition, must be conscious of this ‘temporal disparity’. Baron uses the term ‘archival effect’ to underline the specificity of the relation between the form and its double/triple temporality: “Hence I suggest that we regard archival documents

as – in part – the product of what I call ‘temporal disparity’, the perception by the viewer of a ‘then’ and ‘now’ generated within a single text. Indeed, the experience of temporal disparity is one of the things that gives rise to the recognition of the archival document as such, or, in other words to the ‘archive effect’ (Baron 2013, 106).

Public recognition is the compilation film’s third temporal level: the audience and the public sphere of the film’s ultimate distribution and exhibition. This temporal intricacy inherent in the compilation, or found footage film, offers an alternative to conventional historical narrative and thus has particular relevance for feminist historical thought.

Cinematic time and women’s time in the compilation film

This form of film, compilation or appropriation film, represents a look back into a past from a present, addressing a future spectator, creating a complex layering of time. Although the compilation film has no inherent relation to women, the form, as I’ll argue, is appropriate for stories that emerge out of silence and cultural marginalization, quite tentatively making the shift from an individual and private, world, into circulation in the public sphere. Sheila Rowbotham has suggested a differentiation between the silence of the complete cultural exclusion of oppressed people and the consciousness of that silence in a moment of dawning political awareness. She said: “The oppressed without hope are mysteriously quiet. When the conception of change is beyond the limits of the possible, there are no words to articulate discontent so it is sometimes held not to exist. This mistaken belief arises because we can only grasp silence in the moment in which it is breaking” (Rowbotham 2015, 29).

The compilation film’s doubled temporality is echoed in the doubling of women’s consciousness: the work of bringing silence into public visibility must be performed later, that is, within a new context of political aspiration, both on the part of the filmmaker and the future audience.

The compilation film can, of course, be extremely conventional. But the double temporality, this persistence of the past, its refusal to be laid to rest as it were, generates its own metaphor of haunting. The compilation process, rather similar in a sense to the work of ‘history from below’, can construct a story, transforming it from cultural invisibility, silence, into a meaningful discourse. However, the form preserves the voices of its witnesses; those memories that are embedded in the raw material continue to speak. In the essential incompleteness and residual heterogeneity that characterises even the final version of the edited film. This refusal to be neatly closed off seems to carry the ghostly voice’s message

insistently into the future. The old footage, often incomplete and partial, full of holes and gaps, often without cinematic aesthetic value, might be seen metaphorically to function in this genre as 'cinematic memory'.

Four tropes are relevant to the process of reconfiguration

Palimpsest: evokes the gap in time between the original footage and the final film. A palimpsest refers to a double inscription: one text is laid over another; the original might be partly erased but still haunts the later text. Similarly, as found footage is overlaid by its later reconfiguration, two time levels exist simultaneously. This persistence of the past generates its own metaphor of haunting.

Détournement: refers to the frequent, but not essential, ideological gap between the original footage and the final film. The term cites the Situationist practice in which a pre-existing cultural text (usually of high standing) would be distorted for political critique, producing an antagonistic or antithetical meaning.

Gleaning: relates to the gap in value between the found material and the final film. Suggested by Agnes Varda's film *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* (France 2000), the term gives a cultural lineage to the process of collecting, accumulating, sifting through and recycling discarded materials. Gleaning not only refers to what was, once upon a time, a specifically female task (collecting the unwanted residue of an agricultural harvest) but also evokes the kind of apparently trivial things, personal or emotional, collected and saved, in which women invest value. By extension, the term also evokes the often apparently valueless nature of found footage material that, almost by definition, has no place in film culture; only when re-evaluated and recycled does it acquire significance, and consequently, value.

Haunting: In the dislocations between found footage and its reconfigured form, ghostly figures, preserved as they are on film, refuse to be laid to rest. Film's preservation of images of the living dead, figures from long ago that still move, gesture, perform exactly as they did when registered on film, gives substance to a message from the silenced and oppressed of the past brought back to light by new political perspectives. In the meantime, they have, if only metaphorically, refused to 'give up the ghost' of to be laid to rest.

How do these formal properties fit with the stories that emerge out of silence and cultural marginalization, as they tentatively make the shift from an individual and private world into circulation in the public sphere? To refer back to

Kristeva's 'symbolic realisations,' the temporality of her second feminist generation, the form can begin to move towards the restoration and re-configuration of those experiences that have been left mute in the past. Thus: gleaning – the collection of fragments of film material without apparent value speaks to the undervalued cultures of the feminine; détournement – the rearrangement of the film material from a different political perspective, speaks to the feminist film maker who reveals misogynies of the past; the palimpsest – the persistence of the past material through its re-arrangement – speaks to a feminist aesthetic of the heterogeneous; haunting – speaks to the political nature of these stories, lost and mute, that have been returned to a future time in which they might be able to find public recognition.

Feminist methodologies privilege informal materials, often the only traces left of women's difficult everyday lives, constructing the past out of personal relics such as memorabilia, letters and diaries. Out of these necessarily scraps of sources, a picture of the past can emerge in which women's lives are central rather than marginal; and, in the absence of public events usually associated with politics, women's everyday struggles challenge given boundaries of formal, political history. Problems associated with the female body, with sexuality, emotion or motherhood, for instance, can be extracted from the taboo of the feminine, from the silences of embarrassment and shame, to find a historical discourse in the public sphere.

To reiterate: beyond the question of content and untold stories, this kind of gathering together of disparate material affects the formal structure of the text and its process of narration. On the one hand, these texts tend to be made up of heterogeneous fragments; on the other, feminist history, once having given space to unheard voices, has a commitment to their integrity; a balance must be made between creating a political discourse and fidelity to the material from which its drawn. Aesthetics and politics intertwine to form textual heterogeneity, an unfinished and unpolished final product.

Alina Marazzi: *Un'ora sola ti vorrei*. Italy 2002

Un ora sola to vorrei tells the story of Liseli Hoepli/Marazzi. It was made by Liseli's filmmaker daughter Alina Marazzi, primarily from home movies shot by Liseli's father, Alina's grandfather. These images are the main source of the film's visual track, but Marazzi drew on Liseli's letters and diaries, her own words, to construct the soundtrack. After a privileged upbringing during the 1950s in a cultured, bourgeois Milanese family. Liseli married and moved to the US with her children and her anthropologist husband where she began to suffer

from depression. On her return to Italy, she spent most of her time in clinics, undergoing the kind of treatment for mental illness that was current at the time. At the age of thirty-two, when Alina was seven, she committed suicide. She was never subsequently mentioned in her family.

In *Un ora sola ti vorrei* the gap in time, characteristic of the compilation film, between the time when the raw material was shot and the time when it was edited into the film's final form is accentuated by the ideological gap between the 'then' of the grandfather's world view and the 'now' of Marazzi's narration. In the first instance, she was searching on a personal level, for her lost mother. But as her work continued, she, in dialogue with her editor Ilaria, came to the realisation that Liseli's story has a significance and importance beyond the individual. From this point of view, folded within the gap of time that separates Marazzi from her grandfather is also marked by a pivotal shift in consciousness. Her grandfather's overarching intention, as his granddaughter perceived it, was to record on film a privileged bourgeois way of life, that of his own well-to-do, elegant and cultured family. Having grown up into a new, feminism influenced, social consciousness, Marazzi invests the footage with a changed or charged significance: Liseli's story is translated into a history, emblematic of many young women's experiences in contemporary Italy. Out of the fragmented bits of home movie footage, Marazzi made a film that found public recognition and understanding very particularly among women, and, among them, most particularly women of her mother's generation. The film moves the story, that is, from the realm of women's silence and suffering to recognition within a feminist discourse of history. As Marazzi puts it: "In the dialogue between the images and the words, beyond the letters and diaries, there is another level of writing: Ilaria's and mine. We edited and re-edited, subverting the original intention of the images, appropriating and retelling the story as it seemed to us, taking up the point of view of the filmed. In a certain sense we liberated the feminine spirit imprisoned in those boxes, as though with Aladdin's lamp" (Marazzi 2006, 53).

Some concluding points

Jacques Derrida's reflection on the temporality of the archive has particular bearing on the temporal disparities of the compilation film. He says: "In an enigmatic sense, which will clarify itself *perhaps*, the question of the archive is not, we repeat, a question of the past. It is not a question of a concept dealing with the past that might be already at our disposal, *an archivable concept of the archive*. It is a question of the future, the question of the future

itself, the question of a response, a promise and of a responsibility towards tomorrow. The archive: if we want to know what that will have meant, we will only know in times to come. Perhaps. Not tomorrow but in times to come, later on or perhaps never. Spectral messianicity is at work in the concept of the archive and ties it, like religion, like history, like science itself, to a very singular experience of the promise. And we are never very far from Freud in saying this" (Derrida 1966, 36).

Derrida makes no mention of film. However, the concept of 'spectral messianicity' implies a confusion of time, or a co-existence of past and future, that has special bearing on the complexity of cinematic time. In the first instance, the indexical materiality of film itself may preserve a moment and a voice that lie in wait for the moment of future discovery. Secondly, that confusion of time is further heightened by the compilation film's double temporality. And then, in Baron's terms, the future spectator's recognition of these coexisting temporalities creates the 'archive effect', also a recognition of the lost voice, of the promise exchanged between past and future.

Just as celluloid confuses temporality, so does the concept of promise: speaking towards a time in which unrecognised experiences might find recognition or even redemption. As Alina Marazzi layered scraps of archival material, taken from Liseli's past, into her work on the film *Un'ora sola ti vorrei*, the daughter seemingly redeems a promise to her mother to tell her story. But, in Derrida's terms, this exchange would leave the material within 'an archivable concept of the archive'. The film becomes political in its promise to a future, when Liseli's ghostly spirit can be put to rest, when, *perhaps*, a feminist future can make at least a gesture towards the silenced past. This is the point at which, after decades of invisibility, the film's affect, embedded in actual instances and split seconds, becomes political.

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INTERVIEW

FICTION ET MÉMOIRE D'UNE ROUMANIE OUBLIÉE. ENTRETIEN AVEC LILIANA LAZAR AUTOUR DU ROMAN *ENFANTS DU DIABLE*

Liliana Lazar a grandi dans un village près de Iași où son père exerçait comme garde forestier. Elle a étudié la littérature française à l'Université Alexandru Ioan Cuza de Iași. Elle s'installe en France en 1996 et réside à Gap, au pied des Alpes. Auteure francophone, elle écrit en français plusieurs romans : *Terre des affranchis* (Gaïa 2009), *Enfants du diable* (Seuil, 2016), *Carpatés* (Plon, 2024). En 2010, son roman *Terre des affranchis* lui vaut le Prix des cinq continents de la Francophonie parmi d'autres prix obtenus : Prix Première des auditeurs de la RTBF (2010) et Prix Littéraire Québec-France Marie-Claire-Blais (2011).

Dans son deuxième roman, *Enfants du diable*, Liliana Lazar plonge le lecteur dans la Roumanie profonde des années 1970 – 1990, une époque où la propagande du « brillant avenir » ne parvient plus à tromper personne. Le village de Prigor, niché dans la plaine moldave, devient le théâtre d'une tragédie dictée par le destin et aggravée par la directive absurde d'un dictateur : encourager à tout prix la natalité au nom du patriotisme, quitte à condamner de nombreux enfants à l'abandon dès leur naissance.

Liliana Lazar aborde le thème de l'avortement, étant parmi les rares auteurs d'origine roumaine qui tentent de le porter à la connaissance du public, dans le but d'amener les lecteurs à analyser en profondeur les insuffisances d'un système adulé. Le fait que l'auteure lance le livre dans son pays d'adoption, la France, montre qu'elle est peut-être consciente des possibles réserves que des lecteurs roumains auraient pu montrer vis-à-vis d'un tel sujet. Avec une mentalité encore ancrée dans le passé sous le signe de la nostalgie, il devient difficile pour les Roumains d'accepter une vérité dure.

Partant de ce constat, nous avons posé quelques questions à l'auteure sur l'histoire du roman et sur les thèmes abordés.



I.T. : Bien que placée sous le signe de la fiction, l'histoire racontée dans votre roman, *Enfants du diable*, reflète à la fois des événements et des personnages réels. J'aimerais ainsi vous demander quelles ont été vos sources d'inspiration pour ce roman ? Est-ce que vous avez été inspirée par des témoignages réels ou par des confessions personnelles ? Qu'est-ce qui vous a amené à écrire ce roman et à y aborder des questions telles que l'avortement ou les orphelinats pendant le régime de Ceaușescu ?

L.L. : Le sujet de départ de ce roman était tout autre. C'est en construisant le personnage de Laura Ferman que j'ai dû m'intéresser aux traumatismes de son enfance. Je l'ai imaginée grandir dans un de ces établissements « Casa de copii », maison pour enfants. Comme je n'avais pas beaucoup d'éléments sur la manière dont la vie s'y déroulait, j'ai commencé à faire des recherches afin de pouvoir rendre le plus fidèlement possible tout ce qui se rapportait à une réalité historique. J'ai lu des livres, regardé des documentaires, écouté des témoignages. J'ai pu m'entretenir avec une personne qui avait travaillé dans une de ces institutions, interroger des enfants qui y avaient grandi, échanger avec des femmes ayant abandonné un enfant dans une maternité. Comme de nombreux Roumains, j'ai découvert une réalité que je connaissais peu. Comme si c'était l'histoire d'un autre pays. J'ai pu aussi mettre des mots et des explications sur des événements auxquels j'avais assisté en tant que témoin lorsque j'étais enfant et auxquels je n'avais pas su alors donner tout leur sens, comme cette ambulance croisée un jour en rentrant de l'école qui était venue chercher une femme qui avait tenté d'avorter à la maison. Un attroupement s'était formé dans la rue. Je n'oublierai jamais les chuchotements des villageoises tout comme l'ambiance pesante dans les jours qui avaient suivis lorsque la nouvelle du décès de cette mère s'était répandue à travers le village. Comment oublier le garçon et la fille (plus jeunes que moi) que ce décès avait rendus orphelins ? Comment expliquer la honte de ce père convoqué au poste de milice pour y être interrogé ? Je me souviens de cette autre femme qui avait une dizaine d'enfants à la maison et qui, de temps à autre allait en ville à la « Casa de copii » pour voir un enfant qu'elle y avait laissé. Je n'avais jamais osé demander à mes parents pourquoi elle ne l'élevait pas à la maison. Combien de fois n'ai-je repensé à cette collègue de lycée enceinte de cinq mois qui, lors du « travail patriotique » des vendanges, portait des seaux remplis de raisin du matin au soir dans l'espoir que l'épuisement provoquerait un avortement ? Et toutes ces lycéennes conduites à l'infirmerie (après une dénonciation) pour un contrôle gynécologique destiné à vérifier une éventuelle grossesse ? Parfois, j'ai perçu la honte de certaines femmes d'être « encore » enceintes, alors que d'autres cherchaient une « consolation » dans la rémunération de 100 lei par mois et par enfant (si mes souvenirs sont bons) à mesure que la famille s'agrandissait.

I.T. : Dans la littérature roumaine postcommuniste, de tels sujets restent encore largement ignorés ou, du moins, insuffisamment exploités. Comment expliquez-vous un tel silence ? Est-ce une question de blocage, de honte, de refus, de public même... ?

L.L. : Je n'ai pas d'explication ni de commentaire à propos de ce sujet. Lorsqu'il s'agit d'écrire sur l'histoire, un certain recul temporel est nécessaire. Un certain détachement aussi. En ce qui me concerne, la distance géographique ainsi que celle offerte par le français comme langue d'écriture m'ont aidée. Je reste persuadée que nombreux sont les Roumains encore à ignorer la dure réalité de ce sujet.

I.T. : À ma connaissance, votre roman n'a pas encore bénéficié d'une traduction en roumain. A votre avis, comment le public roumain pourrait recevoir votre roman, une fois traduit ?

L.L. : J'aimerais voir mon roman traduit en roumain. Si je ne peux présager de l'accueil que lui réserverait un lectorat roumain, les nombreux Roumains qui m'ont lu en français ont fait des retours enthousiastes sur ce que cette lecture leur a apportés.

I.T. : On a beaucoup écrit sur la période du communisme et ses conséquences historiques, politiques, sociales, mais aussi littéraires ; pourtant, l'accent a presque toujours été mis sur la condamnation du régime et moins sur la condition de la femme pendant le régime. Selon vous, cette absence proviendrait-elle d'un manque d'empathie ou d'une mentalité encore réticente à prendre en compte la présence et le rôle politique des femmes ?

L.L. : Je ne crois pas qu'il y ait une quelconque réticence mentale persistante chez les écrivains roumains contemporains ou le public roumain pour être en empathie avec les femmes, je pense que de nombreux livres paraîtront prochainement pour aborder ces sujets. Les stéréotypes de personnages féminins sont caractéristiques d'une période et il y a des différences certaines entre la manière de les exploiter d'un pays à un autre, d'une littérature à une autre. La francophonie représente pour moi un espace littéraire très riche auquel j'aime me référer.

I.T. : L'avortement reste un sujet sensible pour beaucoup de femmes roumaines de l'époque. Un nombre considérable de ces femmes portent encore en elles les cicatrices de leurs traumatismes anciens. La littérature pourrait-elle

être une solution de guérison pour ces femmes ou pourrait-elle les encourager à partager leurs expériences ? Ou, tout au contraire, une telle expérience pourrait rouvrir des blessures péniblement cicatrisées et accroître davantage leurs souffrances ?

L.L. : L'avortement est un sujet traumatisant pour une femme quelle que soit l'époque, les motivations et les conditions dans lesquelles un tel acte a lieu. Il ne peut y avoir de raccourci dans le traitement d'un trauma. Il est vrai qu'aujourd'hui l'écriture en tant qu'acte de création est parfois proposée comme thérapie à part entière dans la prise en charge de ce type de traumatisme. Mettre des mots sur la souffrance, l'absurde de tant de situations douloureuses aiderait certainement de nombreuses femmes à initier un travail de reconstruction et lutter contre le stress post traumatique. Mais sans accompagnement approprié, sortir du silence n'est pas facile, encore moins dans une société où la parole n'est pas toujours encouragée.

I.T. : Comment s'est déroulé pour vous le processus d'écriture du roman *Enfants du diable*, en tenant compte des thèmes abordés et de l'histoire qui les sous-tend ? L'avez-vous trouvé difficile, avez-vous rencontré des blocages ?

L.L. : Il est toujours difficile d'aborder des sujets tels que l'avortement et l'abandon d'un enfant, et peut-être davantage quand on est soi-même une mère. J'ai vécu une pression inévitable lorsque j'ai choisi d'écrire sur des personnages avec de telles blessures. À plusieurs étapes de l'écriture j'ai ressenti le besoin de faire des pauses et prendre du recul. Ces périodes m'ont permis d'analyser et d'approfondir des informations sur des situations dramatiques découvertes pendant le processus de documentation. Enfant puis adolescente pendant la période communiste, je n'avais pas saisi la portée des événements relatifs aux abandons d'enfants et à la situation dans les maisons pour enfants. La distance temporelle et géographique, la consultation des archives, les témoignages, m'ont permis d'y voir plus clair. Dans le processus d'écriture, je pense que les deux formes sont importantes : l'implication et la distance.

I.T. : À quel point est-il important, dans une telle démarche, de connaître toutes les facettes de la vérité, d'écouter les histoires non racontées ?

L.L. : En tant que romancière, j'essaie de donner une voix aux histoires restées dans l'ombre. Dans *Enfants du diable*, j'ai voulu explorer cette part cachée de l'histoire, ces silences de tant de familles, en créant des personnages au passé douloureux, pris en étau entre la peur et la honte, deux facteurs qui empêchent

les gens d'affronter leurs traumas. Je pense que la fiction permet cela, de faire exister ces vies effacées, de dire l'indicible, la douleur, la rage, parfois la résignation et peut-être, d'amorcer un processus de guérison collective.

I.T. : Pensez-vous que la question des orphelinats et des enfants abandonnés pendant la période communiste reste encore difficile d'accès, d'un point de vue historique et social ?

L.L. : Oui, je pense que c'est une plaie mal refermée. Combien d'enfants ont été invisibilisés, instrumentalisés, brisés ? Aujourd'hui encore, ces sujets restent tabous dans de nombreuses familles alors que dans la société persiste une sorte de gêne collective face à une réalité trop honteuse pour être affrontée. Aujourd'hui encore, dans certaines institutions on choisit la sédation des enfants pour qu'ils se tiennent tranquilles. La négligence, le manque de soins, la maltraitance sont des sujets d'actualité qui ne peuvent plus être évités au risque d'un délitement de la société.

Entretien réalisé par **Ioana-Georgiana TRANDAFIR**

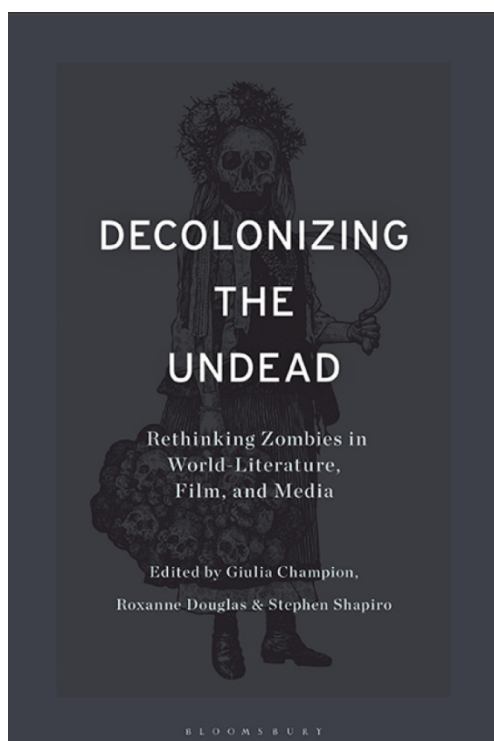
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BOOKS

Giulia Champion, Roxanne Douglas, and Stephen Shapiro,
Decolonizing the Undead: Rethinking Zombies in World Literature,
***Film and Media*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023, 224 p.**



This collection of essays, edited by Giulia Champion, Roxanne Douglas and Stephen Shapiro, comes as a contribution towards a decolonizing movement that differentiates itself from the postcolonial attitude. As Shapiro points out, starting from a contrast expressed by Nick Couldry and adding a 'Warwick School perspective', whereas postcolonialism posited a colonial endeavor that focused on difference as a mechanism for meaning-creating epistemic violence, decolonizing goes beyond criticizing "capitalism, globalism, and neoliberalism" by aiming to find "intellectual resources from beyond the Western Canon", especially if they come from the 'Global South' (2023, 40-41). To be specific about the Warwick School perspective adopted here, Shapiro explains a fundamentally world-systems-based approach towards capitalism that reveals it to be a system which "operates through the creation of social inequalities (rather than simply social differences) to achieve its drive for

endless accumulation for accumulation's sake" (41). Furthermore, the decolonizing approach recognizes that capitalism *inherently* functions because of weakly proletarianized labor, as much as the centrist liberalism he critiques in the third chapter would theorize otherwise (41). The reason for the necessity of this theoretical preamble is the fact that it reflects upon the other entries into this collection. As much as a claim can be made for the individuality of the perspective, the methodology and of the cultural material chosen to



be discussed on the part of each author, engaging in the (same) specific endeavor of decolonizing the figure of the zombie in World Culture requires shared fundamental values and perspectives towards said figure that can be found in Shapiro's more theoretical essay. To clarify and reiterate, it is not a case of uniformity, but rather an interplay of nuance that lets each author complement or contrast the work of their co-contributors.

Having established a sort of starting point and necessary common ground, it is time to look at how it manifests in the collection at the level of structure and briefly highlight the specific interest of each author within their section(s). After the introduction written by Roxanne Douglas and Giulia Champion, the volume is divided into three parts: 'Thinking Zombies', 'Zombie World-System' and 'Zombie Decolonial'. Before moving on too quickly, however, it is interesting to note that this volume immediately follows up on the intention of seeking out marginalized sources of scholarship by dedicating a section of the introduction to Katherine Dunham, an important, even if not completely understood or appreciated, voice in Ethnography and extremely relevant to this volume's essays.

The first section starts with "*Il y a des zombies dans ceci... : Dessalines, Disembodiment, and Early Haitian Literature*" by Elizabeth Kelly, which is a perfect introduction into the problematic nature of the current perception of the figure of the zombie, since she points to the spiritual and philosophical origins of the Haitian concern with the body and its undeath. An important clarification is that in Haitian culture zombification can be seen as a disembodiment rather than a simple puppeteering of an empty body (the way in which contemporary media often portrays it). Furthermore, she contours a historical shift that evidences the evolution of the relationship between the living and the dead as a transition between the philosophies of Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines, important figures in Haiti's independence. She shows how it is the latter's conceptual contributions that claim an intertwinement between physical and spiritual whereas Louverture had put emphasis on the physical (often seen as familial) relations between bodies. The second chapter of the first section is Cécile Accilien's "White and Black Zombies: How Race Rewrites the Zombie Narrative" in which she explores how the zombie came to be in the American cultural consciousness, its different role in Haitian voodoo faith and how this gap was created intentionally in order to justify and perpetuate American discriminatory and racist views, both for cultural and economic benefits. She uses the example of the movie *White Zombie* that accentuated and perpetuated the fear the American populace had towards a supposedly barbaric population of heathens that practiced magic that had the power to enslave people, thus linking Haiti with the idea of the bloodthirsty zombie (31-32). The third and final chapter of this section is Stephen Shapiro's "Decolonizing the Zombie: *I Walked with a Zombie's* Critique of Centrist Liberalism". Besides the theoretical considerations and criticism of central liberalism, he makes an interesting comparison between the status of the zombie and the political standing of post-independence Haiti, as perceived to have failed at self-determination and thus stuck in an in-between state comparable to that of the undead.

The second section analyzes the representation and use of the idea of the zombie in a global context. What results is exactly the decolonial method of reclaim that is sought: the zombie is shown to be functional not only as a blood-thirsty monster, but

also a metaphor for the loss of agency and an ever-present past, even outside of the Haitian context. Thus, the first chapter, "Samurai Zombies: Japan's Undead Past", by Frank Jacob, explores how Japan's warrior past and the idea of the samurai can act as a similar specter that haunts today's culture. Next are two chapters that highlight the ecological value in using the figure of the zombie. Josephine Taylor's "Crude Monsters in the 'Extractive Zone': The Creaturely and Ecological Zombie" re-merges the zombie with the idea of exploitation by using something akin to personification. Oil, and by extension the natural resources that have been the target of colonial enterprises for hundreds of years, take on the form of the undead as a way that the environment fights back against capitalist exploitation. Next is Fiona Farnsworth's "Undead, Undeader, Undeatest: Narrating the Unevenness of Ecological Crisis in Nana Nkweti's 'It Just Kills You Inside'", an essay that reads the framing of a zombie uprising within Nkweti's book as a critique of the production and spread of knowledge within a world system that places value unevenly and thus uses its specific techniques of meaning-creation to manage perceptions about ecological crises. After that, Thomas Waller discusses the relation between genre and historical conditions, as they correlate recurrently, in "Zombie Proletkino: Labor, Race, and Genre in Pedro Costa's *Casa de Lava*". The specific relevance of Costa's *Casa de Lava* is argued for in the relationship with the zombie genre, namely a distancing from its earlier manifestations, and the use of the zombie figure to comment on Portuguese society. Yet again the allegory of the zombie is used to portray the brutality of the labor necessary to sustain a capitalist system. The final chapter is Roxanne Douglas' "'It Feels Like I'm Giving My Body Something It Needs in an Intense and Powerful Way': Netflix, *Santa Clarita Diet*, and the Neoliberal Feminist Encounter with Pleasure Politics". Her contribution brings a feminist perspective that provides insight into the phenomenon of the 'cognizant zombie' as a metaphor for the societal duty of managing and thus 'being cognizant' while juggling personal responsibilities (122). It is thus shown how in these cases the almost escapist fantasy of a zombie outbreak that wreaks havoc upon society, thus breaking down social barriers and responsibilities is replaced by an allegory for the status of the '(peri)menopausal' woman in late-stage capitalism (123).

The third and final part begins with "De/Zombification as Decolonial Critique: Beyond Man, Nature, and the Posthuman in Folklore and Fiction from South Africa" by Rebecca Duncan, a more theoretical discussion on the category we call 'the human', using an intercultural array of thinkers to extract the decolonial potential from South African literature. Specifically, it is shown how the figure of the "man is thus central to the process of domination that have shaped geopolitical relations across five centuries of modernity" (143). To help decolonize this conception comes the conception of a Zombie post-humanism that uses the inherently subversive nature of a Zombie's non-rationality, for example, to step away from the fixed categories delineated centuries ago. Next is "Zombies, Placelessness, and Transcultural Entanglement: Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*" by Netty Mattar. This essay untangles the web of racism and orientalism around the US invasion of Iraq and the zombie-like representations the US created to justify its aggression. Moreover, it looks at the titular work by Mattar to argue for an "attempt to express Iraqi solidarity with the Haitian oppressed" (162). The third chapter of this section is " 'First They Bring the HIV, then the Zombie': Portrayal of the

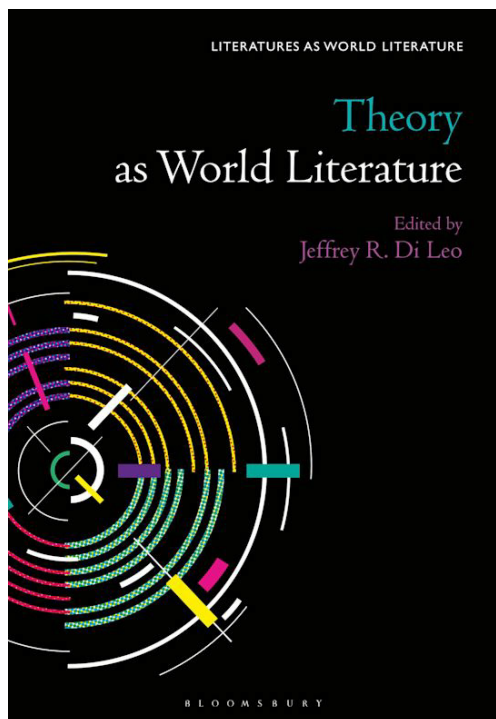
West in Contemporary Indian Zombie Literature and Cinema” by Abhirup Mascharak. The chapter starts with a brief history of zombie representations in Indian culture that highlights the efforts of Hemendra Kumar Roy to create a localized zombie lore that relies less on Western models and more on Indian myth (177). Roy’s efforts are thus contrasted to more contemporary works that “are markedly influenced by Hollywood” (177). Then, the movie *Go Goa Gone*, on which he focuses during the chapter’s analytical parts, gains the value of a reaction to this shift and characterized by a level of resentment and conservatism that makes the West become an ‘other’ (category which encompasses Westernized Indians as well) (179). The last chapter is “From the Mountain to the Shore: Migration, Water Crisis, and Revolutionary Zombies from Haiti to Peru”, Giulia Champion’s effort to highlight the emancipatory potential of the figure of the zombie through the lens of a similar revolutionary movement to that of Haiti, namely the one in Peru (192). This final part serves as a perfect restatement of the efforts of all the other contributors: besides the specificity of the Peruvian context, it solidifies the method of decolonizing the zombie by bringing to the surface its ability to destabilize colonial discourse and emancipate postcolonial materials into decolonial tools. This methodology is playfully illustrated even in the afterword, seen as a sort of in-between figure, focusing on the justification for the value of the present volume rather than reiterating its arguments.

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BOOKS

**Jeffrey R. Di Leo (ed.), *Theory as World Literature*,
New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025, 284 p.**



Theory as literature: it is easy enough to grasp how these two terms may admit to a relationship of sorts. Certainly, one may very well reject this ‘as’, in an understandable attempt to starkly differentiate the two registers, drawing a line between the philosophical and the aesthetic. Or, conversely, it is equally justifiable to affirm an intimacy between theory and literature, to the point that either one may be considered an extension of, or towards, the other. Irrespective of one’s positioning, there is a rich conceptual tradition to back up either claim, and, in both cases, it makes perfect sense to discuss and problematize theory as literature. Thus, three of four words in the title of this collection, edited by Di Leo, can be comfortably dealt with. The fourth term, however, is much more problematic, and, as if that weren’t enough, it also forms the conceptual core of this collection. What is a ‘world’? What does it mean for literature to be ‘world’ literature, and for theory to

subsequently be defined ‘as world literature’? The ‘worlding’ of theory and literature is a most pressing issue precisely because, despite one’s wholly understandable confusion with respect to the term ‘world’, a pervasive process of neoliberal globalization of cultural manifestations is undoubtedly taking place as we speak. The problem of such a globalization, as Di Leo describes it in the introduction to this collection, is that it risks



disintegrating the cultural specificity of the many theories and literatures of the world into an impossibly convoluted yet also thoroughly homogenized “babble” (4). Regrettable though such consequences of the global age may be, Di Leo keenly argues that a return to isolationist preservations of aesthetics and philosophies is certainly not an adequate solution: “To bracket and not consider them [globalization, postmodernity] because of their potential to provide an “infinite, ungraspable canon of works” in the name of world literature rather than a finite, graspable one is to bury one’s head in the ground of contemporary literary and cultural theory. That is to say, globalization does not go away as a concern for world literature just because it greatly complicates it” (5). We cannot turn against the world, and yet, simultaneously, globalization as an instrument for cultural loss ought to be resisted. We must have a worlding of theory and literature, while at the same time rejecting the world in its globalizing sense. This is the context in which *Theory as World Literature* negotiates tentative formulations and reformulations of ‘the world’: a term which at once affirms and subverts its own meanings and implications.

To do justice to the complexities and subtleties of each contribution to this collection, much more than a mere review is required. Spanning postcolonialism (chapter one), semiotics and psychoanalysis (chapter two), the political aesthetics of realism (chapter three), as well as phenomenology, philology, and what Ranjan Ghosh curiously terms plastic poetics (chapter four), *Theory as World Literature* provides a comprehensive (though not exhaustive) account of ‘world’ and ‘wordliness’ as approached from a plethora of theoretical fields, each with its own unique understanding of a process of ‘worlding’ literature. Nevertheless, what is common to all these perspectives is a fundamental engagement with the ‘world’ as a contradiction in term(s). As previously mentioned, the world literature we are faced with here is meant to resist a global tendency towards homogeneity which makes up the whole world as we know it today. Drawing on Derrida, Di Leo writes that world literature “[...] involves an imperative to act to change the world in response to the advent of the other” (10). A theory of world literature is one which changes ‘the world’, and this change can be so thorough that, in “its most progressive aspect”, it can amount to a radical “de-worlding” (26). At their most impactful, world literature and theory de-world the world: they tear apart the idea of the ‘world’ as a totalizing, unifying global entity, in the attempt to formulate a different understanding of ‘world’. This task acts as a guiding axiom for most of the essays in this collection, and it is to this problem – that of a de-worlded world – that I will restrict my brief reading of *Theory as World Literature* in this review.

In their contribution to the first chapter, “Indigeneity, Decoloniality, and Race”, Colebrook asks: “How inescapable is the world? Are we necessarily always becoming-Hegel, always orienting any text to the horizon of the world that makes a text readable?” (43). In other words, is it necessary that a global superstructure which explains and subsumes all cultures be envisaged – “something like the world in general” (40) – in order for world literature to be tenable? Many of the scholars in this collection will emphatically deny this. In fact, it is precisely by rejecting global meta-narratives, quintessential cultural theories of everything, that a new sense of world literature may emerge. For Colebrook, in a Heideggerian analysis, such radical novelty can be configured “by becoming world-

poor, by walking away from the grand narratives of globalism" (46), which is to say that worlding literature could be understood as a refusal to assert control over the globe by rigorously systematizing culture, as an affirmation of and advocacy for an irreconcilable difference, in the Derridean sense of the term. Along similar lines, Karavanta claims that what they call "archipelagic thought" – as opposed to continentally-grounded traditions – can serve as "a model by which to think about these emerging forms of being-with in the world, forms of being-with that are not accountable to the universal model of man as the citizen-subject" (57). Essential to this type of thinking is its negativity: world literature is "not accountable" to that which the term 'world' traditionally calls to mind: universality, totality, wholeness, and so on. Such negativity is anything but loss. If Hitchcock claims that "[...] as a paradigm, world literature is paradigmatically prone to failure" (77), this is only because failure, in a post-structuralist subversion of conventional binomials, here becomes a measure of success. To not be able to coordinate and structure a coherent theory of world literature is precisely a manner of allowing the fragmentariness and heterogeneity of the world to survive. Thus, for Simek, conceptually mapping a world literature entails "a never-finished project of meaning-making" (101), where this property of 'becoming' that is never reducible to stable 'being' provides an alternative to colonial, repressive worldings of literature which inevitably marginalize an 'other', in favor of a 'same'. In chapter two, "Semiotics and Psychoanalysis", Zalloua convincingly portrays psychoanalysis as a practice which unsettles the foundations of a cohesive cultural 'world' that generates these categories, or identities, of the 'same' and its 'others'. By drawing on Žižek's work, they argue that "[d]ecolonizing the mind is an act of self-violence, symbolic suicide [...] which begins with a disruption of the colonized's affective investments in her own identity" (144). A new world literature, thus, destabilizes constructs one is familiar with in discussing culture from a global perspective. The world changes, it always tumultuously becomes (without ever simply being), and thus the idea of an 'other', or of a 'national culture' can no longer be sustained. As Miller argues in their homage to Kristeva's work, the point of a new sense of worldliness is "the creation of a culture of revolt founded on psychoanalysis and literature" (136), where, crucially, one system is not replaced with another; one world does not yield to another, but rather where "revolt", or de-worlding, as Di Leo has it, becomes a central practice to the task of worlding literature without mitigating radical heterogeneity. In chapter three, "Realisms, Aesthetics, Politics", Veesser further develops this de-worlded sense of world literature by employing Said's life and work as a model for what he calls "worldliness": "[Said] kept insisting that the worldliest person is one who feels at home nowhere [...] Homelessness was, for him, the essential precondition of worldliness" (205). Where there is the stability of the home, the world can only be an oppressively totalitarian notion: one is at home somewhere, in some type of literature, and thus 'other' places and texts emerge as foreign, alien. By contrast, where 'home' is meaningless, the world unfolds without reducing its own complexities to pre-established orders: there is difference, but that difference is not subsumed to a governing, Master identity. This is precisely what, in chapter four, "Phenomenology, Philology, and Plasticity", Wehrs attempts to argue via their reading of Levinas' work: "Levinas contrasts 'peace', predicated on notions of underlying sameness behind surface differences [...] with 'proximity', in which 'an ethical relation' involves relation with 'the

unassimilable other, the irreducible other', so that acknowledgement of and respect for difference are integrated into imperatives to do justice to the 'irreducible other'" (223). What matters is proximity based on differences unresolved, and emphatically not a cultural assimilation based on fundamental similarities which leads to homogenizing peace and stability.

What is 'world' literature, and theory as 'world' literature? First and foremost, this collection shows, it is an anti-system, a way of drawing the literatures of the world in proximity, without resorting to systematizing concepts with which to relate the same to the other, the European to the non-European, and so on. This does not mean that all cultural distinctness is lost, replaced by difference without concept. As many of the contributors I cannot do justice to show, world literature maintains the contextual, historical, and social specificity of literature and theory, be it Latin American (McClennen), European (Di Leo), Chinese, Indian, or Japanese (Higonnet, Beecroft, Ghosh). What disappears, instead, is the capacity to order these literatures in simplistic, comfortably reductive manners, according to the dictates of a central authority. The margins maintain heterogeneity, while the center loses its grasp on their identities, it too ultimately becoming a margin – that is how world literature is born, a fundamentally decolonial process predicated on the irresolvable differences each text gives voice to. Ultimately, *Theory as World Literature* provides no facile blueprint to the formation of such a postcolonial world: after all, it is precisely the illusion of a global system which this collection so thoroughly resists. Yet, in the absence of a 'solution', what this collection keenly shows is that the resistance enacted by world literature is, in itself, an affirmation of a different mode of being – a theory of de-worlding which bears the potential of creating even more of a 'world' than we have now.

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BOOKS

Martin Henzelmann, *Linguistik des ökologischen Diskurses. Untersuchungen zu Kommunikationsformen in Ökologie und Umweltschutz in der Russischen Föderation*, Symbolae Slavicae, Band 39, Berlin, New York u.a.: Peter Lang, 2024, 370 S.



Was verbindet Ökologie und Linguistik? Diese Frage wird in dem hier vorgestellten Buch am Beispiel der russischen Sprache von Martin Henzelmann detailliert untersucht. Es geht dabei um Textsorten, die die Themen Ökologie und Umweltschutz aufgreifen. Der Zusammenhang zwischen diesen beiden Disziplinen wurde spätestens in den 1970er Jahren vertieft. Damals war es der bekannte Sprachwissenschaftler Einar Haugen, der die Wechselwirkungen zwischen unterschiedlichen Sprachen aus evolutionstheoretischer Perspektive analysierte. Haugen arbeitete mit der Metapher der „Ökologie“, denn er betrachtete eine Sprache als Objekt in einer natürlichen Umgebung. Diese Metaphorik ermöglicht es, Sprachen in ihrer wechselseitigen Beziehung als lebendige Organismen zu betrachten. So wie sich natürliche Lebewesen ihrer Umgebung anpassen, so ändern sich auch Sprachen in Abhängigkeit von gesellschaftlichen Neuerungen (S. 37-39).



Die bisherigen Ansätze erklären, warum Fragen der Ökologie aus linguistischer Perspektive sehr umfangreich thematisiert werden können. Sie zeigen auch, dass es verschiedene Schwerpunkte gibt, die in diese Konstellation integriert werden können. Das ist wichtig, um die Entstehung der Monographie des Autors zu verstehen. Eine Sprache kann nämlich nicht nur als Ökosystem betrachtet werden, in dem gewisse Vorgänge beschreibbar sind, sondern man kann auch über diese Prozesse umfassend diskutieren. Daher ist die Diskurslinguistik und somit die Debatte über ökologische Phänomene ein wichtiger Baustein des vorliegenden Buches (S. 65). Etwa im sechsten Kapitel geht es um derartige Diskurse. Neben der Politik, den Medien und der Wirtschaft werden zahlreiche Akteure identifiziert, die sich an Diskussionen oder Präsentation des Themas Ökologie beteiligen. Jeder dieser Akteure verwendet diverse Handlungsstrategien, um mit Umweltfragen umzugehen und sie zu präsentieren. Henzelmann zeigt beispielsweise auf, dass in der internationalen Tourismusbranche Umwelt und Ökologie als Vermarktungsstrategie eingesetzt werden. Das geschieht, indem Natur und Umgebung als wertvolle Ressourcen zur Entspannung angepriesen werden. Der Autor zeigt, dass sich beispielsweise Gebirgslandschaften, Wasserqualität und saubere Luft ideal eignen, um Gäste an einen bestimmten Ort anzulocken (S. 117-119). Dem Autor gelingt eine kritische Auswertung mit linguistisch relevanten Konzepten und touristischen Vermarktungsstrategien. Interessant ist es, dass vor allem die Tourismusbranche auf passiven Urlaub ausgerichtet ist. Erholung, Ästhetik und Sport stehen im Vordergrund, und diese Vorzüge werden mit unterschiedlichen kommunikativen Strategien beworben. Zu diesem Thema verweisen wir auch auf unseren Fachaufsatz, siehe Mihai Draganovici: „Relevanz des interkulturellen Transfers bei Übersetzungen im Bereich des Tourismus. Exemplarische Analyse anhand von Texten der Zeitschrift „Enjoy Vienna“, abgedruckt im Tagungsband *Studies on Literature, Discourse and Multicultural Dialogue. Section: Communication and Public Relations. International Conference on Literature, Discourse and Multicultural Dialogue*, Târgu Mureș (2013, S. 481).

Ein weiteres wichtiges Feld, in welchem die Umwelt eine Rolle spielt, ist nationales Recht. Das bedeutet, dass es zahlreiche Gesetze geben muss, die Umweltschutz vorschreiben. Der Verfasser stellt diese Gesetze vor und ordnet sie in einen spezifischen russischen Kontext ein. Dabei haben wir es mit Rechtsdokumenten zu tun, die im Land ausgearbeitet wurden und eine lokale Realität berücksichtigen. Das ist aber nicht mehr so einfach, wenn internationale Gesetzestexte in verschiedenen Ländern mit unterschiedlicher Rechtstradition gleichzeitig gelten sollen. Dieses Problem thematisiert der Autor sehr ausführlich (S. 173ff.). Er dokumentiert, dass vor allem die konträre Auffassung von Regeln und Terminologien problematisch sein kann. Als Beispiel werden drei internationale Abkommen aufgeführt, von denen besonders das Kyoto-Protokoll in Russland umstritten war. Dieses Dokument verlangt der Russischen Föderation Auflagen ab, deren Erfüllung für das Land sehr nachteilig sind. Sie umzusetzen würde also ein unnötiges ökonomisches Problem aufkeimen lassen (S. 191). Meiner Meinung nach ist es wichtig, auf derartige Konstellationen zu verweisen, und das wird anhand etlicher konkreter Beispiele illustrativ aufgearbeitet (S. 199-202). Auch die wichtigsten Erkenntnisse und einschlägigen Publikationen, die die Übersetzungswissenschaft hervorgebracht hat, werden systematisch in den Text inkludiert. Angefangen bei einem

Abriss über grundlegende Probleme der Fachterminologie bis hin zu Fragen der Textverständlichkeit und ihrer mehrsprachigen Übersetzung in ungleichen Rechtstraditionen werden u.a. theoretisch-konzeptionelle Arbeiten aus Deutschland, Österreich, Kanada, Frankreich, Slowenien und Rumänien rezipiert, was dem Verfasser eine hervorragende Kenntnis der Materie attestiert. Wenn man bedenkt, dass bereits die Übersetzung einzelner Begriffe mehrdimensionale Ergebnisse nach sich zieht (Draganovici 2013), dann ist es nicht verwunderlich, dass der Autor zum Schluss kommt, dass terminologische Meinungsverschiedenheiten die praktische Umsetzung internationaler Abkommen erheblich blockieren können. Sie stellen mitunter ein „voreilig eingegangenes und unüberlegtes Risiko“ für ein Land dar, und das will man natürlich vermeiden (S. 227). Nicht zu verschweigen ist gewiss auch die Tatsache, dass sich derartige Konstellationen nicht nur aus gegenwärtigen Problematiken erklären. In der Sprachgeschichte, im Sprachtransfer und in der daraus resultierenden Neuerung literatursprachlicher Normen sehen wir zahlreiche Belege für die dynamischen Problemfelder der Mehrsprachigkeit und ihrer Auswirkung. Damit setzte sich der Urheber des Buches detailliert in einem Beitrag auseinander, siehe: Martin Henzelmann „La Bulgarie et son européanisation à travers la langue française“, erschienen in der didaktischen Fachzeitschrift *Chuzhdoezikovo obuchenie. Foreign Language Teaching* 46 (1), S. 19-32.

Es folgt ein neuer Blick auf die Konstruktionsgrammatik, die in der amerikanischen und deutschen Sprachwissenschaft in gewisser Weise eine etablierte, wenn auch nicht ganz klar abgesteckte Größe darstellt. Das lesen wir etwa im Vorwort bei Ziem und Lasch in ihrem Sonderheft zur *Konstruktionsgrammatik. Konzepte und Grundlagen gebrauchsbasierter Ansätze*, Berlin, Boston (2013). Im Kontrast dazu ist sie im Russischen bislang wenig erforscht. Die Konstruktionsgrammatik beschreibt komplexe sprachtheoretische Modellierungen, um „Routinen und Usus sprachlicher Ausdrucksformen zu analysieren. Um dies zu ermöglichen, existieren multiple Instrumente, die empirischer oder texttheoretischer Natur sind“ (S. 271). Diese Form der Grammatikalisierung wird an zahlreichen Beispielen vielschichtig aufgeschlüsselt und sprachtheoretisch eingeordnet. Henzelmann arbeitet auch hier eng an den Beispielen, die dem ökologischen Umfeld entspringen, und präzisiert seine Ansichten anhand konstruktionsgrammatischer Kombinationsmöglichkeiten. Die internationale Forschung zu dem Thema wird umfassend rezipiert und auf dieser Grundlage entstehen eigene, originelle Ansätze (so etwa eine Skizze und ihre konstruktionsgrammatische Erläuterung auf S. 261).

Das letzte große Kapitel ist der visuellen Linguistik gewidmet, die im Rahmen der Germanistik von Noah Bubenhofer (*Visuelle Linguistik. Zur Genese, Funktion und Kategorisierung von Diagrammen in der Sprachwissenschaft*, Berlin, Boston, 2020) exhaustiv dokumentiert wurde. Dabei geht es um unterschiedliche Arten der sichtbaren Veräußerung von Sprache, die sich entweder auf geographischen Angaben wie Ortstafeln finden oder in digitalen Medien wie Google Maps vorkommen. In bestimmten Kombinationsregeln können diese Angaben mithilfe von Diagrammen ausgewertet werden (Bubenhofer 2020, 3-4). Mit diesem Themenfeld hat sich Henzelmann zwar auch auseinandergesetzt, legt jedoch einen anderen Schwerpunkt. So hat er mehrfach gezeigt, dass die visuelle Linguistik im südosteuropäischen Kontext durchaus ein

wichtiges Forschungspotential hat. Sprache wird bei ihm in einem multimedialen Areal, das zudem mehrsprachig aufgebaut sein kann, analysiert und als geeignetes Instrument in der Raumstrukturierung beschrieben. Das dokumentiert Henzelmann in seinem Aufsatz „Die semiotische Landschaft im Nationalpark Lovćen (Montenegro)“, in *Lingua Montenegrina* 29 (1), (2022: 49), und genau diesen Grundsatz verfolgt der Verfasser auch in seiner Monographie. Er zeigt an mehreren einschlägigen Beispielen, wie Sprache nicht nur in mündlicher oder schriftlicher Form auf dem Papier wirkt, sondern auch, wie sie Naturschutzgebiete an Ort und Stelle reguliert. Als Untersuchungsgegenstand wird das Volga-Kama-Biosphärenreservat im europäischen Teil der Russischen Föderation gewählt (S. 302). Illustrationen reichern ein weiteres Mal die plakative Vorgehensweise an und zeigen, dass der Autor die Gebiete, über die er schreibt, besuchte und ihre Strukturen aufmerksam beobachtete.

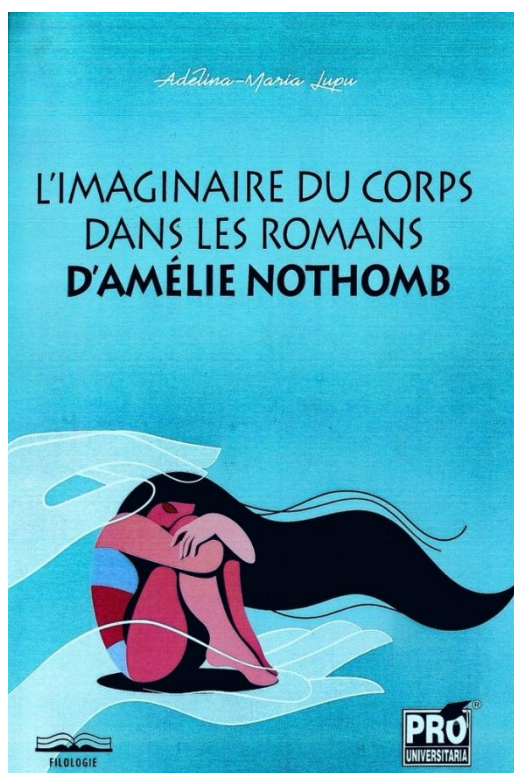
Das Buch ist klar und verständlich aufgebaut. Es arbeitet Fragen der Ökologie und des Umweltschutzes aus verschiedenen Blickwinkeln wissenschaftlich auf. Der Autor geht in seiner Argumentation stets präzise und strukturiert vor. Das Werk überzeugt gleichermaßen durch seine stilistische Eleganz und eine sprachliche Leichtigkeit. Dieser Eindruck wird durch eine Fülle an Skizzen erhellend unterstützt. Gewiss zeugt die Gesamtdarstellung von hohem Fachwissen, wie man es in solch einer komplexen und wichtigen Arbeit unbedingt erwarten möchte. Dem Buch ist deshalb eine weite Rezeption zu wünschen.

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BOOKS

Adelina-Maria Lupu, *L'imaginaire du corps dans les romans d'Amélie Nothomb*, București : Pro Universitaria, 2024, 220 p.



Plus de trente ans après la parution de son premier roman, *Hygiène de l'assassin* (1992), Amélie Nothomb continue de susciter l'intérêt de ses lecteurs et lectrices grâce à la diversité thématique de ses œuvres. Dans son étude, Adelina-Maria Lupu propose une vision d'ensemble qui relie 28 romans de Nothomb, nous permettant de revisiter des extraits marquants de titres tels *Stupeur et tremblements* (1999), *Métophysique des tubes* (2000), *Biographie de la faim* (2004) et *Acide sulfurique* (2005), pour mentionner justement quelques-uns.

À travers son ouvrage, *L'imaginaire du corps dans les romans d'Amélie Nothomb*, Adelina-Maria Lupu nous invite à plonger dans l'univers littéraire sous un angle original : celui de l'imaginaire du corps. Ainsi, on peut découvrir l'œuvre littéraire de l'écrivaine belge francophone d'une manière plus profonde, enrichie par des éléments biographiques qui, parfois, éclairent la compréhension de ses romans.

Adelina Lupu expose progressivement le thème de l'imaginaire du corps nothombien à travers cinq chapitres précédés par un « Avant-propos » et une « Introduction », suivis des « Conclusions », la « Bibliographie » et un « Index ». Cherchant à répondre à des questions complexes, Adelina Lupu nous propose « de voir comment l'identité peut être lue à

travers un corps qui traverse des espaces, l'écrivaine s'habillant de corps et d'identités multiples au fil de son existence. » (*Ibid.*)

Un des points forts de l'ouvrage consiste dans la cohésion des chapitres, fortement liés un à l'autre, dans un ordre logique et cohérent qui nous offre la possibilité de comprendre tout d'abord la présence de l'imaginaire du corps dans l'œuvre littéraire nothombienne, puis sa matérialisation dans trois étapes de la vie de l'écrivaine (l'enfance, l'adolescence et l'âge adulte, associées respectivement à Dieu, à Jésus Christ et au martyr), pour enfin relier tout cela à l'écriture. Adelina Lupu se pose alors la question : « L'écriture met-elle fin à la quête identitaire nothombienne ? » (p. 19)

Le premier chapitre, « Autobiographies ou autofictions ? Corps et identités », se propose tout d'abord de clarifier l'appartenance générique des romans d'Amélie Nothomb à l'autobiographie ou à l'autofiction, en expliquant la différence entre les deux. Ensuite, Adelina Lupu nous aide à comprendre comment l'enfance passée en Japon a influencé l'écriture nothombienne, en énonçant le fait que c'est à ce moment-là que l'idée de divinité a commencé à faire son apparition dans la conscience de l'écrivaine. Cela est arrivé à la suite du traitement que Nothomb a reçu de la part de sa gouvernante, Nishio-san, qui l'idolâtrait (p. 23), fait qui a déterminé la naissance d'une liaison entre le corps, l'identité japonaise de l'écrivaine et cette idée de divinité (p. 23). Un autre aspect important avancé par Adelina Lupu consiste dans l'importance de l'écriture dans la vie de Nothomb, parce que c'est ainsi qu'elle réussit « finalement être Dieu, dans le sens où, tout comme lui, elle contribue à la création, au fait de donner vie à ses personnages » (p. 33), mais cela lui permet également « de retourner métaphoriquement à l'état d'enfant où elle était idolâtrée par sa gouvernante Nishio-san et où elle dominait le monde » (p. 33).

Le deuxième chapitre, « Le corps de l'enfance. Appartenance à la divinité », explore l'idée anticipée dans le chapitre précédent, en présentant quatre étapes du corps d'un enfant, notamment dans *Métaphysique des tubes* (2000) et *Biographie de la faim* (2004). On découvre ainsi quelques réflexions très intéressantes : l'enfant est, au début de sa vie, un « bébé-tube » (p. 39), ayant un corps inerte avant de devenir « un être désincarné comme la divinité » (p. 35). Graduellement, on découvre le besoin de l'enfant de s'ouvrir au monde, en se transformant dans « une divinité incarnée » (p. 43). Cette ouverture engendre une prise de conscience sur son identité (p. 42) et « une faim continuelle, [...] qui fait éprouver le sentiment d'être vivant » (p. 49), aussi qu'une « soif de vivre » (p. 54), la surfaim et la sursoif symbolisant le « dépassement des limites » (p. 56), en rendant le corps invulnérable (*Ibid.*).

Le troisième chapitre, « Le corps de l'adolescence. Les supplices christiques », se concentre sur la deuxième étape de la vie de l'écrivaine, c'est-à-dire l'adolescence, qui pour elle est « une période néfaste » (p. 66). Le rejet du corps adolescent révèle une prise de conscience des transformations qui se passent involontairement au niveau du corps, appelé ainsi « dictateur » (p. 66). Cette période est associée à la monstrosité, « parce qu'elle annonce le destin de femme qu'Amélie Nothomb rejette dans ses romans » (*Ibid.*). De cette façon, on découvre le modèle de fille présent dans les romans de l'écrivaine qui « ne veut pas devenir une femme qui cherche à plaire, à séduire les hommes, à attirer leurs regards et à se vouer ainsi au narcissisme » (p. 68). Ce chapitre relève des principes qui renvoient au féminisme, par le fait de promouvoir la propriété du corps et le « désir

de ne pas devenir femme, un corps-pour-autrui » (p. 71). De plus, à l'âge de l'adolescence, les personnages nothombiens sont attirés par l'anorexie, qui, malgré son acception négative à nos yeux, représente pour eux « une normalité, une manière d'accepter leurs corps, voire leur identité » (p. 79).

Le quatrième chapitre, « Le corps de l'âge adulte. Osciller entre le martyr et la résurrection », se focalise sur la quête identitaire à l'âge adulte. Le personnage d'Amélie, comme l'appelle Adelina Lupu, « cherche à vêtir un corps acceptable, à redevenir Japonaise ou, mieux dit, à se sentir à nouveau une divinité » (p. 136), désir qu'elle avait tout au long de la période où elle était anorexique. C'est cette « quête de son identité divine » (*Ibid.*) qui détermine l'écrivaine à retourner au Japon, son « corps martyrisé dans un espace étranger » (*Ibid.*) en étant un des aspects fondamentaux présentés dans *Stupeur et tremblements* (1999) et *La Nostalgie heureuse* (2013). Il s'agit également de la façon dont le personnage d'Amélie a le sentiment de « retrouver son corps et son identité divins » grâce au comportement de son fiancé japonais, Rinri (p. 152), qu'on rencontre dans le roman *Ni d'Ève ni d'Adam* (2007). La *résurrection* métaphorique dont Adelina Lupu parle dans ce chapitre est due à Rinri, « qui l'accepte malgré sa différence, qui l'intègre dans sa vie et qui lui donne le sentiment de ne plus être rejetée, mais d'être divinisée, de ressusciter, en elle, l'enfant de jadis » (p. 153).

Le cinquième chapitre, « Le corps comme instrument de l'écriture », met en évidence l'importance de l'écriture pour Amélie Nothomb, « qui lui permet de se reconstruire et de trouver sa vraie voie » (p. 159). Sa quête identitaire cesse alors, car elle réussit à « acquérir un corps textuel » (p. 160) et retrouve, par le biais de la littérature, « le corps et l'identité divins perdus » (p. 176). Ce chapitre est consacré ainsi à la signification et au rôle salvateur de l'écriture dans la vie de l'écrivaine, ainsi qu'aux étapes que Nothomb a parcourues afin de faire son entrée dans le monde des Lettres.

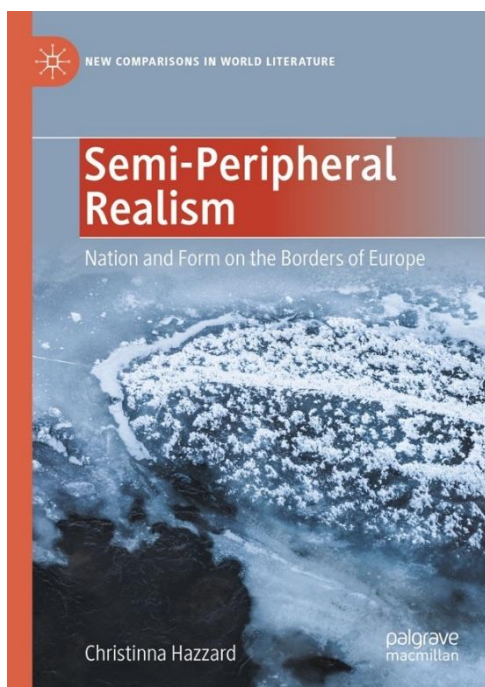
En fin de compte, nous recommandons chaleureusement cet ouvrage aux lecteurs et lectrices passionnés par l'écriture nothombienne, qui auront la possibilité, grâce aux analyses érudites d'Adelina Lupu, d'approfondir leurs connaissances sur l'œuvre littéraire de l'écrivaine belge francophone et de mieux la comprendre, non seulement comme personnage ou écrivaine, mais aussi en tant que personne.

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BOOKS

Christinna Hazzard, *Semi-Peripheral Realism. Nation and Form on the Borders of Europe*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2024, 230 p.



Christinna Hazzard's 2024 study, *Semi-Peripheral Realism: Nation and Form on the Borders of Europe*, undertakes the ambitious task of navigating the shifting frontiers of world literature, aiming to chart its unexplored and neglected territories and provide—if not new, then at least renewed—insights and interest in the field. Focusing on the semi-periphery and drawing on the theoretical frameworks and methods of Fredric Jameson and Franco Moretti, Christinna Hazzard sets out to investigate the asynchronous development of global capitalism, seeking to demonstrate how this otherwise abstract “unevenness” (1) has taken concrete shape within—and has, in turn, reshaped—both literature and literary theory.

The first chapter introduces the current setbacks and roadblocks in world literature and postcolonial studies in order to highlight the significance of researching the semi-periphery and, thereby, to justify

the rationale behind the chosen texts. Hazzard's engagement with semi-peripheral literatures is as essential to her study as it is relevant to the field. On the one hand, it intends to decenter the Eurocentric foundation of both the Western literary canon and postcolonial and comparative studies. On the other hand, the approach also creatively connects world-economic theories—that is, the world-systems theory and the theory of uneven and combined development—and the study of world literature, as a means of articulating what she calls *semi-peripheral realism*. This semi-peripheral “literary



mode" (33), propounds Hazzard, fleshes out, via form and theme, "the unevenness of capitalism with particular intensity" (1). Accordingly, Hazzard proceeds to define the semi-peripheral aesthetic and its key features in the latter part of the introduction. The book's thesis is then developed through two case studies corresponding to the regions from which the texts originate—the North Atlantic (Iceland and the Faroe Islands) and the south-eastern margin of Europe (Turkey)—across four chapters, each offering a distinct analysis of two texts by two different authors to illustrate her argument.

The second chapter offers a comparative reading of two different historical novels—Halldór Laxness' *Iceland's Bell* (1943) and William Heinesen's *The Good Hope* (1965)—considering their depictions of national histories and post-independence cultural identities. Although traditionally associated with Latin American, Caribbean, Indian, and Nigerian literatures, both novels, as Hazzard argues, adopt the "magic realist" mode, also allegorical in form (44), to convey the trauma of imperial violence and the ongoing effects of the postcolonial condition, alluding, for instance, to how older economic and social systems clashed with or were supplanted by capitalist ones (53). Furthermore, central to Hazzard's analysis is the idea that these novels perform "palimpsestic" rewritings of authentic historical material (50) to interrogate the pervasiveness and inescapable omnipotence of Danish rule. To do this, she examines the novels' symbolic tension between realist and surreal descriptions of nature, as well as the interspersing of written (i.e., letters, manuscripts, contracts) and oral registers (i.e., sagas, epic poems), emphasizing how these strategic interplays disrupt notions of historical consistency and continuity. In the second part, she turns to the novels' "allegorical configurations" (Hazzard 2024, 56) of the legal and criminal systems, remarking that their fictional portrayals of "subjective violence" ultimately expose the broader, "invisible systemic violence of colonialism and capitalism" (83).

In the third chapter, Hazzard traces the "accelerated modernisation" (89) captured within Halldór Laxness' *The Atom Station* (1948) and William Heinesen's *The Black Cauldron* (1949) "formal incongruities," with a view to how these novels engage with "the paradoxes of nationalism" as well (90). First, Hazzard argues that the *Bildungsroman* structure of Laxness' novel encapsulates "Iceland's uneven transition from a primarily agrarian economy to a modern industrial economy" (92). This historical transformation is, consequently, embodied in the protagonist's movement from the rural, traditional north to the urban, modern south. Notably, however, the surreal elements that puncture the narrative blend seamlessly into the fabric of the main character's perspective, which, according to Hazzard, underscores how "the novel's irrational form" is a reflection of "the unevenness of Icelandic society" (99). Similarly, *The Black Cauldron* is an example of the Scandinavian *kollektivroman*, or collective novel, a form that, suggests Hazzard, employs a "shifting" narrative perspective that expresses "both the feelings of heightened connectivity brought about by the war and the destabilizing effects of the accelerated and uneven modernisation that accompanied it" (Hazzard 2024, 105). Together, these four novels showcase the historical nodal points Iceland and the Faroe Islands traversed, which, while temporarily disruptive, fundamentally and irreversibly altered their temporality.

The final two chapters survey the spatial cartographies of four Turkish texts, with particular attention given to the geographical arrangements marked by what the author characterizes as a “concentrated unevenness” (184). More precisely, Hazzard looks at the “peripheralization” (142) of Turkey and the changes its hectic transition to global capitalism entailed through a comparative reading of the spatial configurations or “cognitive mapping” (184) of the city and the border. If Chapter Four compares two representations of the city of Istanbul, as rendered in Latife Tekin’s autobiographical novel *Dear Shameless Death* (1983) and Orhan Pamuk’s memoir *Istanbul: Memories of a City* (2005), Chapter Five shifts focus to different works by the same authors—Tekin’s *Swords of Ice* (2007) and Pamuk’s *Snow* (2005)—to delve into the theme of borders, mediated by the protagonists’ journeys across incongruous strands that “overlap and coincide in complex ways” (205) throughout the storylines.

Lastly, in the sixth and final chapter, Hazzard thoughtfully reiterates the book’s main premises, objectives, and arguments. Additionally, she reasserts the need to re-integrate the nation’s role within comparative world-systems analyses, noting that the “aesthetic instability” featured in all the works counteracts the programmatic national historical narratives of progress (Hazzard 2024, 222). Hazzard astutely concludes that this aesthetic reveals how, within the capitalist structure, the “local, national, and global perspectives” (222) are persistently negotiated across a complex web of often paradoxical and contradictory dialectical tensions—between the past and the present, tradition and modernity, the margin and the centre, the urban and the rural, the individual and the community, the secular and the sacred, the state and the market—that resist tidy alignment and strict delimitations.

Methodical and incisive, the study evens out the theoretical strata with detailed historical and cultural layers, all the while maintaining a focused close reading of the texts. The readings, for their part, are supported by sufficient textual evidence and skillfully threaded interpretations of narrative devices, genre, character, language, imagery, setting, and symbolism. One potential limitation, however, is the absence of summaries for the texts analyzed within each chapter. Readers are often plunged directly into the analyses without prior context, which can be challenging, especially given that some of the works are not widely known. As such, including brief synopses would have enhanced the reader’s grasp of the material. Nonetheless, Christinna Hazzard’s daring—and, indeed, political—choice to select a range of translated texts from Faroese, Icelandic, and Turkish literatures constitutes a vital endeavor to recalibrate a system that is, in itself, deeply stratified, and, in doing so, to revitalize the established avenues and expand the latent possibilities within the discipline.

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