

STRATEGIES OF COLONISATION AND (NON)RESISTANCE – DISCURSIVE AND FORMATIVE INFILTRATION OF MEDIA INTO THE TRANSITIONAL CROATIAN LITERATURE

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Abstract: The work detects and analyzes the change in contemporary Croatian literature poetics during the transition from socialism to capitalism. Although postmodern poetics was present in pre-war Croatian literature as well, post-Yugoslav or transitional literature in Croatian prose approaches the characteristics of postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism, and its discourse is thereby greatly formed by the emerging media, from stylo-thematic macrostructures to stylo-linguistic microstructures.

Keywords: *poetics, transition, narration, realism, media, postmodernism.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the world's literature classic titled *The Man without Qualities*, Robert Musil describes a hypothetical situation of how (non)functioning Plato's style and intellect are when the famous philosopher takes employment in a modern newsroom. Musil humorously suggests that in such a situation, editors would not allow Plato to take the time to reflect on his work due to the pace of news production, that his

work would be trivialised with suggestions that he write entertaining articles as well, and finally, that he would be urged to change his discourse so that it is "more casual and plainspoken" (Musil 2008: 409), by no means abstruse.

Of course, in the aforementioned passage Musil critically ironises the degrading adjustment of high culture to the language of mass media with the purpose of communication comprehensibility to the general public.

Today, it is true what Stanko Crnobrnja briefly presents in his work on mass media: "Electronic technology in developed societies at the beginning of the twentieth century represents such a 'natural' environment without which the elementary social processes, such as politics, economy, mass communication, recreation, arts and other, can no longer even be imagined, let alone achieved" (Crnobrnja 2010: 10). The emergence of new media at the turn of the century is, with its structural influence on every aspect of culture and everyday life, viewed entirely reasonably as "the final confirmation of mass

media reign" (Peović Vuković 2012: 10). This phenomenon gave birth to a fraction among intellectuals that does not consider this kind of progress to be positive, but warns of cultural devastation, isolation of society through the media matrix and the collective manipulation of ideological mechanisms, which lies underneath the spectacular surface of mass media and the seductive pop-culture industry. Unlike Musil's Plato, who obviously needs tutoring on how to functionally exist in the new cultural paradigm, Nicholas Carr in his work *The Shallows* (2011) analyses in detail how his intellect, formed through the bibliophile culture, "spontaneously" modifies itself with respect to information representation on the Internet, thus diagnosing himself lack of focus when facing more complex texts and the inability to contextualise, even admitting empty-headedness caused by intense bombarding with heterogeneous web information that in the end disappears from his memory. In other words, Carr describes how his brain is just learning how to process the hypermedia offer.

Meta Grosman focuses primarily on the effects of visual media: "television techniques entail short segments of content, swift action, quick cuts and rapid image changes that impose short cognitive units on a child, and consequently, a short attention span which is insufficient for continuous mental strain" (Grosman 2010: 97). Additionally, he warns that multimedia codes stuffed with information cause passivity, disable interaction, and the marginalisation of language in everyday media and pop-culture spectacle leads to "today's emotional incapacity already being explained as an inability of narrative shaping one's own experience with words" (Grosman 2010: 76).

Generally, the appeal of images in mass media perception and the central place they occupy in modern communication and pop-culture industry has led to the conclusion that "visual display is the dominant model of representation in contemporary societies" (Purgar 2009: XVI), due to its seemingly signifying efficiency, referential transparency and clear ostentation, in the sense of "dominance of image and visual communication in everyday life" (Purgar 2009: VIII). This dominance, even inflation of images inspired W. J. T. Mitchell to diagnose a pictorial turn and claim that postmodernism is "an epoch of absorption of all language into images" (Mitchell 1994: 28). It is an epoch in which the image "is not just a part of your everyday life, it is your everyday life" (Mirzoeff 1998: 3), but when Mirzoeff claims that "postmodernism is visual culture", then it means that "visual culture does not depend on pictures but on this modern tendency to picture or visualize existence" (Mirzoeff 1998: 6).

Furthermore, the so-called visual studies became aware of the fact that image and iconicity are so omnipresent in contemporary culture that we should only address the appeal of its mimetic aspect and analyse it as yet another sign system in the spectrum of our habit of labelling the world, but they are also so visually impregnated into our perception and our cognitive understanding of the world that "now something else needs to be understood, that this iconic production of meaning works" because the images "are used everywhere, and that we do not have enough knowledge of how they operate" (Boehm 2005: 459-460). And that is, he points out, an important knowledge because "the logos does not rule the image potency, but it allows dependence on it" (Boehm 2005: 465), claiming that the image becomes an anchoring

tool for knowledge, far more comprehensive and more sophisticated than one might get the impression from Wittgenstein's criticism of images hidden in linguistic metaphors and language production mechanisms in general. It not only signifies de-throning of logocentrism and the paradigm of treating culture as text, but from this perspective also a more significant problem of image independence to the extent that it raises the question of "whether from now on an image will, in an ontological sense, precede every conceivable understanding of reality constructed by the media" (Pać 2009: 10).

All of the above has presented common places of contemporary theories of postmodernity, the media and the (visual) culture. However, practices, trends and tendencies of contemporary Croatian literature reflect the indicative changes towards the poetics which confirms the formative role of media and visuality in shaping a literary text, due to their intriguing and historically thickened transition from socialism to capitalism.

II. THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Even though postmodernism is equated with Western societies of the second half of the 20th century and the logic of late capitalism, universal characteristics of postmodern poetics have intensively subsisted in the practice of contemporary Croatian literature even when it still belonged to the cultural domain of socialist Yugoslavia.

Joining the Western European poetic tendencies despite insurmountable differences between nominal socio-political ideologies surely would not have been possible had the 1948 separation of Tito's Yugoslavia

and Stalin's politics not created the climate for emancipation from the poetic of dogmatic social realism. This has caused the culture of Yugoslavia's countries to on one hand return to the creative freedom of modernist heritage, and on the other hand to renew the contact with Western European cultural circle, thanks to the "semi-openness" of socialist Yugoslavia to the West.

The postmodern theory and practice have reached their culmination in this area during the eighties, and one of the strongest cores of postmodern poetics was gathered around the journal *Quorum*. Based on the insights of poststructuralist and deconstructive theory, inspired by Barthes' theses, the *Quorum* premises were: reign of the signifier, materiality of language, artificiality and conventionality of language production, discursive construction of social reality and the ideological motivation of every possible signifying practice and discursive structure. Briefly put, "the *Quorum* twist towards reality and the subject was performed (...) in order to challenge their own self-evident perseverance, clarity and fundamentality (...). The *Quorumers* know that (...) *each representation has its own policy* (...) and that both the policy and the representation are the basis for construction of social and cultural systems, so they direct their textual and poetic construction towards deconstruction of the most resilient institutions of discursively shaped world: tradition, the subject, politics, ideology, morality, knowledge etc. (...). The *Quorumers'* discursive reversal is in this sense futile and a persistent pushing of boundaries of representational systems that can still be regarded only towards the discourse, never outside it, the line behind which sits

not only a general transcendence, but also a culturally and media produced otherness (Vuković 2005: 32).

As a result of what Linda Hutcheon refers to as “awareness of our ideological implication in our dominant culture” (Hutcheon 1988: X), the Quorumers have produced ironic and metafictionally conscious narratives. “Uses and abuses the conventions of discourse” (Hutcheon 1988: XIII), this was the fundamental Quorum tactic for sabotaging discursive seams and developing paradox in places of the signifying gap. However, the policy that text “is not organised on the basis of the referential role of prose regarding the ‘outside world’, but above all on the basis its linguistic structure, of its own form” (Suško, prema Žmegač 1991: 388) was interrupted by the outbreak of war, which leads to “literature that deals with literature and enjoys the hall of mirrors containing literary codes, and the intertext suddenly becomes terribly odious when you are forced to protect it with sandbags and cover the windows with brown tape” (Pavičić 2004: 126). Be that as it may, Pavičić reminds us that in 1991 an article was published in the Croatian press entitled “The Days of Sumatras and Javas Have Passed” as a confirmation that “strong reality” of war versus Vattimo’s “weak thought” in the heart of postmodern poetics went in favour of the literary scene where postmodern elitism, obscurity and the complicated theoretical load simply annoyed, so it was not acceptable that the postmodern worldview prose dominate literary culture.

The prevailing climate was extremely unfavourable for fundamental postmodern beliefs: on one hand, underlining the discursive mediation of experience and the artificiality of language production that leaves the authentic beyond the signifying system when one

needs to present the war drama, with the distance of ironic meta-consciousness, seems truly unethical (therefore, there is the pressure of responsibility for the dignity of war trauma victims). On the other hand lies the postmodernist tendency towards subversions, relativisation and deconstruction of all narratives, which was not advisable at a time of installing new, nationalist myths and a flourishing ideologised rhetoric for the purpose of homogenisation and mobilising the masses, as well as reconstruction of traditionally understood collective identity.

Post-war reality has in turn imposed exploration of social themes, and the turbulence of transitional transformation and stratification of society caused by restructuring according to the order of neoliberal capitalism has mostly reduced literature to a description of dynamic reality.

III. TEXT AND MEDIA

A key feature of almost entire war and post-war Croatian prose is the reconstruction of realism poetics and traditional narration. Even though at first glance this turn towards what most literally can be understood as mimetism seems justified as the most appropriate form, which can more or less encompass and articulate the violence of current reality, we must consider the possibility that such poetic redirection was prompted by the fact that post-socialist literature was facing two important factors of the new order: the market and the media.

Reaffirmation of traditional narration in storytelling can on one side be interpreted as a return to archetypal values of storytelling, by reminding us of the importance of the universal role that storytelling

has in civilisation. It is true especially in terms of establishing coherence over reality's contingency through causal sequence, as well as teleological focus in retelling the world, which supporters of the plot cult in Croatian prose emphasized in order to defend their own poetic orientations, presenting the story as a forgotten essence of literature and the core of its eternal magic. However, Christian Salmon sees the planetary trend of storytelling revitalisation as a hypnotic ideological smokescreen of an unsafe and decaying world. In that world the individual is no longer able to plan his tomorrow due to the crises caused by globalization and neoliberal capitalism: "Storytelling has turned out to be the cornerstone of the change ideology" (Salmon 2010: 87). One of the constituting formulas of popular culture, the one in which all the appeal is built on genre literature, Hollywood blockbusters, soap-operas and flashing of all segments of life- says Salmon- is taken over by politics and economy, presidential candidates and managers, and those who win are those who tell the most plausible stories, all the while the story presented does not necessarily have to relate to non-fictional logic, truth and facts. The story that wins is the story that makes the world of masses better organised and clear enough for us to be able to position ourselves within the matrix.

"If you do not communicate with stories, you do not communicate at all", says the author (Salmon 2010: 107). Contemporary Croatian fiction writers are also aware of this, so they defend the schematicity and repetitiveness of their own fabulation by saying that literature should be written for the readers, and not for history, i.e. that literature lives off of readers, and not off of praise from a closed and isolated circle of the

academic ghetto. Certainly, behind the rhetoric of alleged strategy against the death of literature is an ulterior motive: it would be sufficient to replace the word "readership" with the word "market". Croatian prose fights for this market against pop-culture and media industry, so this desire for being liked, as well as the competition logic, results in a condition that Maša Kolanović describes with the following words: "Those novels, as the latest fad of dialogue between the Croatian novel and the popular culture would belong to the type of postmodern discourse that, according to the American theorist Frederic Jameson (1988) is marked by the "new shallowness and the elimination of critical distance". Alongside them Croatian literary text has also, I dare say, in the true sense stepped into 'postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism'" (Kolanović 2011: 389).

When Kolanović indicates the "shallowness and the elimination of critical distance" in such prose, she indicates a worrying trend of commercialization which avoids anything that might fend off the reader, and it resorts to pandering to the widest audience. Such prose does not, of course, play with language as the radical postmodernists do, because that would jeopardize the basic tools of their marketability in terms of being widely understood, nor can it afford the expression of critical distance towards the artificiality of its textual production even in the mildest metafictional form because it needs to sell, above all – an unspoiled illusion.

In the narrative sense, the narration of these writers has been largely established on the culture of film narration, taking from that field of art the simplified narrative schemes, clear stereotypes, reluctance towards prolongation and digressions,

dynamic change of motives and situations, emphasised dialogues and descriptions that are for information obtainment only, for story development, to which everything else is subordinated. All of the above has contributed to the fact that most Croatian literary novelties have had faithful adaptations in a relatively short period of time.

To compare, the narrative practices of Croatian postmodernists in the eighties were not merely dismantled, parodied or ironic as a worn out scheme of constructing the illusion of coherence in a fictional text, but were also fragmented, partly by means of questioning the status of artwork after the appearance of remote control or video, and partly by reflecting world's general perception after the postmodern elimination of grand narratives. To be more vivid: while transition prose is prone to formulas of the Hollywood film industry, eighties' postmodernists were- in large part, due to the spectacle of the appearance of MTV- inspired by the structure of music videos in their narrative compositions.

Similarly to what has been said about the extremely pragmatic sense of language among authors of Croatian transitional prose, i.e. language as a functional means and not as a discussable media, moreover language treated as yet another medium of imaging, restored popularisation of the realist poetics is quite understandable.

No matter how much the techniques of realistic credibility have been exposed as "an effort to extort the suggestion of reality with language" (Žmegač 1991: 178) and no matter how much the postmodern representation of the eighties "denaturalises even the realistic transparency" (Vuković 2005: 32) within postmodern emancipation, according to which "de-

mythologised display mechanisms have led (...) to widespread distrust in authenticity of mediated content" (Vuković 2005: 98), the language of realistic description remains permanently popular as a form of transposition of reality into fiction so that the widest audience experience it as closest to their everyday speaking and worldview. This is true to the extent that James Wood is able to take a randomly selected section of Flaubert's work and say: "It was published in 1869, but it could have been published in 1969" (Wood 2008: 42).

The reasons behind long-lasting "conversion of realism into literary ideology" (Žmegač 1991: 161) according to which the "works of the so-called realists contained a guaranteed precise image of life" (Žmegač 1991: 161), and not a manipulative language structure, may partly be found in the rise of the capitalist bourgeoisie, but the most prominent feature of realism (Wood 2008: 41) – derives its authority from empirical philosophy and the tendency to take "sensory experience as the basis of knowledge" (Mitchell 2009: 26), where vision takes the highest place on the senses chart. Jenks therefore says: "The Westerners have eventually learned to consider vision as the most immediate access to the outside world. (...) the ability to see has (...) blended with other cognitive powers (...) vision is assumed to all other senses and is considered to be completely independent, free, even unadulterated (...). Viewing, vision and knowledge have become dangerously intertwined" (Jenks 2002: 11).

Additional fuel, even more than photography, was provided by the camera, and it overtook photography due to its possibility to record movements or actions, so W. J. T. Mitchell confirms that the camera "has

merely (...) amplified the belief that it is the most natural way of representation" (Mitchell 2009: 45), which can be illustrated by Wood's description of realistic credibility of one of Flaubert's passages: "Flaubert scans the streets indifferently, it seems, like a camera. Just as when we watch a film we no longer notice what has been excluded, so we no longer notice what Flaubert chooses not to notice" (Wood 2008: 42).

Indeed, realism of the second half of the 20th century was overly marginalised in Croatian literature, due to aversion towards the implications of social-realist poetics, and to avoid directness in favour of political caution. However, realism of the eighties returned to the social literary scene through a path of strengthening the genre literature in terms of postmodern erasure of hierarchy between high and low literature, and another route through the new-historical novel in the wake of postmodern ideas of historiographical metafiction, where realism was never literal, unambiguous, but was always relativised or multiply encrypted.

In post-socialist era the realist poetics was, of course, at first imposed by the war theme, which guided many authors through the imperative of recording, the faithful transmission of experience and expertise. The fantasticality of war did not need imaginative refining and the realistic chronotope was merely a frame that was supposed to indicate that the work was going on in the unique ambience of here and now. Most writers still approached the post-war transitional milieu from positions of social chroniclers and commentators, whereby a fundamental role is played by the fact that a good portion of current Croatian literary mainstream are journalists. "The fact of the matter is that there have never been more

journalists among writers and there have never been more writers among journalists" (Visković 2006: 134), says one of the leading Croatian literary critics Velimir Visković, and that perhaps partly explains the extremely pragmatic understanding of language use in literature, i.e. in terms of functional conveying of information and recounting actions, as well as demystified sense of literature, which, like some sort of newspaper form, must be clearly and simply structured within a selected genre, comprehensible and easy to read so that it could keep the reader's attention to the final page.

Moreover, Visković adds: "While journalism used to be considered a necessary evil in literary circles, and the fact that Matoš, I. G. Kovačić or Kozarčanin lived from newspaper writing was generally taken as an example of poor social status of Croatian writers who survive by working for newspapers (actually at the expense of the only worthy thing- writing verses and prose narratives), new Croatian writers do not see journalism as something degrading and undeniably opposed to literature. The journalist side of their work is seen as equal to the literary side, equally creative; better yet, new writers have strong awareness of the importance of mass media, of their power in modern society; they show a desire to seize that power in favour of literature" (Visković 2006: 133).

While lack of problematisation of literary language is motivated by knowledge that communication fluency is paramount for the media to successfully (commercially) function with a wide audience, choosing the realist poetics, i.e. choosing a recognizable environment is also motivated by the awareness that the work must be current or at least provide landmarks which will make the reader feel safe.

IV. CONCLUSION

The structure and dynamics of these texts, as well as the speed at which they pass through the easiest prose suggests that writers of the so-called neorealistic poetics actually equilibrate between the position of a social chronicler (that is, a reporter or a journalist) and the cameras, showing scenes and describing the action so as to satisfy the readership that is mainly formed through the film culture and visual culture in general.

Though seemingly provocative, these writers are actually sensationalists who only controvert with the current political scene, without deeply questioning the system and reaching to structural disputes of the newly established ideology. Unlike the eighties' postmodernists who deconstructed every possible discursive apparatus and attempted to perform a systematic subversion of discursive production of reality, including its own medium, i.e. language, and even though it ended with nihilism and oblivion, post-socialist writers are included in the functioning scheme of Debord's society of the spectacle, battling with daily political issues, but without interfering with constituent generators of the problematic present day, and not crossing the ideological framework of society of the spectacle. On the contrary, they introduce strategies of the media, of spectacle, of market logic and the logic of late capitalism, allowing the market to absorb them as pseudo-opposition, and allowing the system to capitalise them.

Speaking of ideological background of "servile realism" (Kearney 2009: 132), Stanko Crnobrnja states: "The essence of realist form on television is representation of reality in an understandable way.

The principle on which a realistic telecast becomes understandable to the modern viewer is the same principle on which the viewer makes the entire social environment understandable. And that is a wide ideological framing of reality. Thus, the principle on which one seeks meaning and significance of reality rather than its definition in the industrial and post-industrial capitalism (...) spreads the cultural discourse through cross-cultural influence of different meanings and pleasures which positions the viewer in a culturally acceptable and understandable ideological position" (Crnobrnja 2010: 280).

Neorealism of the new generation of Croatian writers greatly contributes this process as well. It is also becoming increasingly clear that the relief with which Croatian postmodern writers of the eighties were marginalised from the scene represents a triumph. It is a triumph of a mindset that did not feel at ease in the looseness and slipping of support for the soothing experience of the constructed world we inhabit, to which the postmodernists of the eighties pointed and what they intensified with their actions. To compare it to a perspective of the 21st century consumerist society: Croatian postmodernism of the eighties was constantly creating interference in the TV signal transmission, while the post-socialist writers indeed contribute TV forecast's smooth 24-hour flow, with no intention of sabotaging the programme, much less technology. With no wish to take over the TV station, they are satisfied with the length, forming their reading according to the supposed ways that would allow them entry into the representational media space and the medialised mind of the audience.

When writing about the process of remediation in Croatian literature in the context of explosion of new

media technology and its effects on the formation of a literary text in her paper titled "Literature and remediation : media as cultural dominant of late capitalism", Katarina Peović Vuković consistently warns that the analysis of new media's effect on literature should move away from the content and she persistently returns to McLuhan's recommendation that a true understanding of media's nature come from elucidating their structures. Indeed, the amount of pop-culture references in the new Croatian prose and the presence of new technologies in an environment of fictional worlds and the daily lives of their protagonists often deceive the occasional studious reader that this is a sufficient indication of omnipresence of the new century mediasphere. Moreover, it leads to the realisation that visual culture and new media's discursive mechanisms have not entered the language of literature because they form a reality to which literature should refer as well, but that the language of visual culture and the new media is written by literature in moments when the authors think they speak their language.

It is reflected not only in the poetics of post-socialist writers (narrative realism), in the strategies of their contemplation over their own position, as well as the position of literary text in today's media and cultural constellation (functional communicability), but also in the structure of their prose, which is characterised by simplification and one-dimensionality, ease and fluency, thus reflecting the informational imperative of modern media and the spectacular noise devoid of substance and depth.

A more detailed analysis using the visual studies' instruments would prove a major role of visualisation in the reference dimension of these texts, as well as

generally, in verbalisation of the imagined, tending towards mimesis understood as mapping rather than to diegesis, i.e. understanding literature as an artefact that is made real through retelling.

Finally, stylo-linguistic analysis on a micro-level could prove shortening and impoverishment, simplifying the syntax, the absence of invention even when it comes to neologisms, perhaps even in the poetic play with grammar rules and the absence of significant breakthroughs towards experimenting and overstepping the convention.

In short, in this new poetics (or paradigms), language is no longer a venue, a place where the new world emerges, but the means of transmission, mere verbalisation, frequently only informative.

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