

## NARRATING/ PICTURING THE POSTMODERN SELF. STRATEGIES OF REPRESENTATION

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### *Abstract*

Postmodern art is self-reflexive, constructing itself, as Lyotard states, without knowing the rules of its own creation. It entails an individual (author/writer, reader/spectator, protagonist(s) as participants in the act of communication) that plays an active role in the act of fictionalization of *reality* and *the self*, possible only through narrativity and (visual) representation. Postmodern theories (Linda Hutcheon) sustain that human 'reality' is a construction, that there is no stable and coherent *self* and that *history* and *the novel* do not offer a *totalizing subjectivity* but rather construct it around *différance*. The present paper tries to analyse the process of fictionalization of such a type of *self* in connection to postmodern narration as communication.

**Keywords:** postmodernism, self, narration, fictionalization, identity, 'life and art'

Literature is communication, or, as David Lodge phrases it, *the novel* is communication. The critic debated on this issue in a lecture he delivered at Cambridge University, as part of some interdisciplinary conferences under the title "Communication" (Lodge 1997: 179). His lecture starts from a simple hypothesis: "there are two possible ways of approaching this topic", namely, on the one hand, "the novel is a mode of communication", consisting of "formal features as techniques of communication", and, on the other hand, there is the "assumption" that "the novel is communication" and this is to be questioned from the perspective of "what is implied by that assumption, and what excluded" (180). Since literature is language and language is a means of communication, it is tautological to affirm or feel the need to demonstrate that 'literature is communication'. Nevertheless, Lodge quotes from *Tom Jones* and *Adam Bede* in order to refer to a special type of communication that comes with the realist novel, with the omniscient and 'intrusive authorial voice' by means of which writers "saw themselves as engaged in the act of communication with their readers" because in this case, the act of writing turns into a *speech act* and, most importantly, "the act of telling is transformed into a gesture of showing" implying the visualisation and subjectivization of what is represented (181):

This offer to transport us out of our own world, with all its problems, unfinished business, boredom and disappointment, into another world where we may escape these things or negotiate them vicariously, is perhaps the fundamental appeal of all narrative (181).

Hence, that '*the novel is communication*' comes from more than the ability of fiction to provide 'escapism'. Actually, it is its *composition* as 'a form of *narrative*' that transforms the entire act of creation, transmission and reception into some appealing and powerful liaison between 'worlds' or 'realities', due to "the peculiarly hypnotic spell the novel casts upon its readers", "morally and aesthetically" (183), says the critic. Thus, structurally speaking, the novel is *story* and/or *plot* and it resembles other forms of narrative, both verbal (the Bible, history, folktales etc.) and nonverbal forms (drama and film) (181-182). The novel is *process* and *change* because, explains Lodge, "it converts problems and contradictions in human experience into process in order to understand and cope with them" by "raising questions [...] about the process" (182). What is more, verbal narrative is an 'interweaving of *representations*' through the narrator's *voices* and the character's *voices* (text and scene, telling and showing) and, speaking of the realistic novel (because, in Lodge's view, "the novel

is characteristically a *realistic* form of narrative”), there is one feature that is a *quality* of such a type of representation – “its illusion of reality”:

Its discursive variety and complexity is one of the reasons why it imitates the social world with a verisimilitude unequalled by other literary forms [...] Is there not something fundamentally unnatural and unhealthy about a form of art which suspends the reader’s awareness of his own existence in real space and time? Is not the pleasure of the novelistic text akin to day-dreaming, wish-fulfilment fantasy? (Lodge 182, 183).

The problem with the *classic realist text*, states the critic, is that it has been disregarded, in recent times, as a form of communication and looked at as a form of “ideological domination and repression” because of reproducing the dynamics of industrial capitalism, thus entrapping and alienating readers in an apparently ‘natural’ world, inducing a “naïve confusion of literature with life” (184). This began to change with Henry James, Modernism and the modernist novel that was less interested in mirroring ‘objective reality’ but rather in constructing some ‘real reality’ which is not to be found *outside* the mind of creators, narrators, characters, readers, but *inside*, in the mental realm, and this becomes possible through *stream of consciousness* and the flow of thoughts and sensations, a new type of narrative technique as instrument for representing ‘reality’ (according to the modernist principle which casts doubt on the very concept of *reality* as ‘real’ and ‘pre-existing’) in search for “a more faithful representation of reality” (Lodge 185). There are three types of narration possible in the stream-of-consciousness novel: the first-person narration, the interior monologue (the confessional/ pseudo-autobiographical novel) and the free indirect style (interweaving the speech of the author and the speech of the character, in the third person, past tense) (186). Precisely because of this subjectivization of ‘reality’ where ‘reality’ is not outside the individual but in his mind, each constructing his own reality, the modernist novel, explains Lodge, “often communicates the *difficulty or impossibility of communication*” (187). This happens because Life itself is not unitary, uniform, predictable, given, exact, certain but rather “fragmented, chaotic, incomprehensible, absurd” and the only certainty is in the mind that the individual can control (188). The discourse of such a novel is, therefore, complex, sophisticated, high, elitist and its most essential component is the *Word/ language* which constructs this subjective ‘world’/ ‘reality’ because, explains Lodge: “Language is not an iconic sign system, in which the signifier has a visual resemblance to the signified [...] but a symbolic one in which the connection between signifier and signified is arbitrary” (189). The problem with such a novel is that, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, its discourse is actually a set of voices/ discourses that make a polyphony, and this characteristic, states Lodge, comes against “the idea of the novel as communication” because it does not respect the linear sequence of the model of communication (addresser – message – addressee) (Lodge 190-191). It is here that a stronger shift appears in the concept of the novel as communication, along with poststructuralism and deconstructivism, i.e. with Postmodernism. The shift comes from the idea that every act of decoding of the message is nothing more than an act of re-coding it, precisely because of the ‘receiver’/ reader whose role in this *process* is more important than the one of the ‘transmitter’/ writer. Lodge quotes here Morris Zapp, one of his characters in his campus trilogy, to explain this never-ending game of en- & de-coding & re-coding. In Roland Barthes’ terms, Zapp’s theory translates as ‘the author is dead’. The text is open to infinite interpretations (192) and this is why for some authors like Barthes literature is not communication but *production of meaning* because of the cultural and historical *context* that generates the *text*, where *context* is obviously more important than the individual writer (Lodge 193). This *context* is more importantly of the receiver/ reader (than of the writer) for he produces a type of meaning that is more important and thus he re-writes the text, re-encodes and re-communicates! This is what *postmodernism* has done to literature,

transforming it into an 'academic text' in which critical writing is interwoven with creative writing, resulting in a hybrid, the result of deconstructivism, and David Lodge repudiates it because the novel, in his view, should be:

[...] the creation of a particular human being, who has a particular vision of the world, which he or she tries to communicate to his or her readers by employing the codes of narrative and language in a particular way, and is responsible for the novel's success or failure in this regard, and deserves praise or blame accordingly. That is the basis on which most novels, including my own, are actually written, published and received in our culture (194).

There are several difficulties implied in the idea of such a postmodern novel as communication, Lodge states, among which: the idea of intention, which can barely be linked with the author since he cannot predict the complexity of what is to be said in the process of saying/ writing and since the text is open to numberless interpretations even after its completion. "Can this be described as a process of communication?", wonders Lodge, and his answer is Bakhtin and the *dialogism* of any language, including the novel:

I think it can, as long as we realize the inadequacy of the simple linguistic model of communication (addresser-message-addressee) not only to literary discourse, but to any discourse. The model only works at the level of the textbook example, the single isolated sentence. But there are no isolated sentences in reality [...] Language, according to Bakhtin, is essentially dialogic. Everything we say or write is connected both with things which have been said or written in the past, and with things which may be said or written in response to it in the future. The words we use come to us already imprinted with the meanings, intentions and accents of others, our speech is a tissue of citations and echoes and allusions; and every utterance we make is directed towards some real or hypothetical Other who will receive it (196).

This is what one of the most famous postmodern characters, Salman Rushdie's Saleem Sinai, wonderfully confesses when speaking about his *self* or *identity*, understood as dialogic, multiple, a fusion of selves, coming from *others* (as opposed to/ and contained in *I*) generated by history and the cultural *context*:

*Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each "I", every one of the now-six-hundred-million-plus of us, contains a similar multitude. I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you'll have to swallow a world* (S. Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 535).

This '*I*' is the '*sum total*' of all the processes of communication/ narration that he has been a part of. What the reader obtains here is a *fragmented self*, split into numberless *voices* – a construction of postmodernity that all postmodernist novels seem to focus on in their fervent search for the denied essential *self* that cannot be autonomous and unitary because the monadic, bourgeois individual, the centre, logos, reason, certainty have disappeared in our world of delegitimation, being replaced by an arbitrary, relative, paradoxical and ambiguous *self* and *culture* as a result of the multiplicity of signifiers/ interpreters that construct infinite meanings in *one* self, individual, and, ultimately, in being. 'Reality' and the 'self' are artificial for being fictionalized, fashioned and what results in such a discourse (of whatever nature) is not one *coherent self* but a celebration of multiplicity and difference:

The [postmodern] individual/ *self* is a fabricated/ 'self-fashioned' *subject*, a *multiple self* that encompasses continuous but provisional perceptions,

understandings, reflections, interpretations of 'others'. Such art, called postmodern, is made to reveal the process of its own creation, entailing an individual that co-participates in the act of fictionalization of 'reality'/ 'the self' – possible only through narrativity and visual representation [...] These arts encompass the same postmodern interplay of meaning, in their game of de- and re-legitimation of a certain 'order', which reveals and hides itself in arbitrariness, undecidability, indeterminacy, fragmentation, disruption etc., inducing in the reader a sense of *complicity* with which the work of art challenges and baffles and without which there would be no revelatory act and no knowledge. This is how even such art that demystifies the idea of a *unique kind of truth* asserts it by inscribing, in artworks, the individual's permanent trial to *construct* and thus *find* meaning of his identity in relation to the continuous facets of change in the world (Hosu 2012: 14-15).

The construction of such a *postmodern self* coincides with the self-conscious act of writing/ creation of meaning: metafictional self-reflexivity. This characteristic of narration is what contributed to the disappearance of mimesis/ the idealistic representation of the 'real' because, as in every act of communication, there is *no unmediated* access to reality. In Linda Hutcheon's terms, this translates as:

[...] have we ever known the 'real' except through representations? We may see, hear, feel, smell, and touch it, but do we *know it* in the sense that we give meaning to it? [...] Our common-sense presuppositions about the 'real' depend on how that 'real' is described, how it is put into discourse and interpreted. There is nothing natural about the 'real' and there never was – even before the existence of mass media. [...] What postmodern theory and practice together suggest is that everything always was 'cultural' in this sense, that is, always mediated by representations [...] The postmodern [...] is not a degeneration into 'hypereality' but a questioning of what reality can mean and how we can come to know it. It is not that representation now dominates or effaces the referent, but rather that it now self-consciously acknowledges its existence as representation – that is, as interpreting (indeed as creating) its referent, not as offering direct and immediate access to it (Hutcheon 2005: 31, 32).

Postmodern art (especially fiction and film) is a process of *showing* the techniques of construction of subjectivity/ of *narrativity*/ of *visual representation* (Hutcheon 2005: 105), i.e. meta-fiction/ meta-cinema/ meta-reference. In this entire process of self-conscious fictionalization of reality and the self, *imagination* and *the imaginary* play an elementary role for it is a 'communication medium' among our diverse identities/ selves, confirms Corin Braga in *Concepte și metode în cercetarea imaginarului: Dezbaterile Phantasma [Concepts and Methods in the Research of the Imaginary: the Phantasma Debates]* (2007). The imaginary is the 'instrument' that helps us 'construct and experiment diverse facets or identities', 'parallel, simultaneous, interior or exterior identities' (17-18). This communicational quality of the postmodern novelistic discourse, which exhibits *voices/ selves/ identities* in search for coherence and unity, in a dialogic/ polyphonic construction, connects two important participants in the act of communication: *identity* and *alterity*/ the *Other*, i.e. *I* and all *the others* that co-participate in the process of narration and fictionalization. Mark Currie explains the phenomenon as follows:

[...] narrative is central to the representation of identity, in personal memory and self-representation or in collective identity of groups such as regions, nations, race and gender [...] Narrative is as inescapable as language in general, or as cause and effect, as a mode of thinking and being. After seminal studies such as Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* it does not seem at all exaggerated to view humans as narrative animals, as *homo fabulans* – the tellers and interpreters of narrative (Currie 1998: 2).

The multiplicity of the *fragmented self*, striving to find coherence in the process of identity construction, also derives from what Derrida called *différance*, both *sameness/ idem* and *difference/ ipse*, and this because *meaning is binary: different* (as “distinction, inequality, or discernibility”, as identity) plus *deferred* (as putting off “until ‘later’ what is precisely denied, the possible that is presently impossible”, as non-/ or denied identity) (Derrida 385). Hans Bertens underlines the importance of difference in the construction of meaning, starting from the important set of binary oppositions in any individual/ culture: “we are made up of conflicting fragments” to be identified in such dichotomies as: “good vs. evil, truth vs. falsehood, masculinity vs. femininity, rationality vs. irrationality, thought vs. feeling, mind vs. matter, nature vs. culture, purity vs. impurity” and one of these is always centre (I) while the Other is always marginal/ inferior/ deferred in a kind of “*strange complicity*” because “the inferior term in this oppositional set turns out to be the condition for the opposition” (Bertens 2001: 128-130, 137).

The *self* in postmodern writings is displaced, disrupted, plural, multiplied, incoherent and *decentred*, consisting of conflicting fragments that come from the infinite dialogues/ acts of enunciation/ communication/ narration between *I* and the *Others*, both composed of those indeterminate binaries that are not only inside the individual but also *outside him*, in his cultural ‘reality’. Thus, the postmodern narration constructs a decentred multi-layered self that interrogates all his relations with the Other(s) in order to find coherent answers and a stable element, while trying to give or restore *meaning*. Nevertheless, this type of disrupted self is not necessarily a postmodern invention, despite the claims that decentredness is a characteristic of the postmodern era. In *Framing the Margins. The Social Logic of Postmodern Culture*, Philip Brian Harper compares the “postmodern subjective fragmentation” with the modernist question of the “wholeness of individual character” (as modernist alienation) explaining the difference between the two:

[...] in the context of modernism, the apprehension of the individual human subject as a disintegrated entity occurs as a merely collateral effect of inquiry into the more pressing disjuncture that obtains among different human subjects or between human subjects and the entities that constitute the objective world [...] the irremediable gap between thinking, speaking subject and the objects of thought or speech. The consequent and continual realization that these objects are unavoidably Other in relation to ourselves – and we in relation to them – issues in the sense of alienation that I take to characterise the modernist mood (Harper 1994: 22).

The example given by P. B. Harper is Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* in which he distinguishes, in the case of Clarissa Dalloway, and not only, a *lack of communion*, if not of communication, between people as the cause of subjective alienation. Moreover, her “inquiry into the *alienated* condition of the human subject [...] leads inevitably to a sense of the *fragmented* condition of the human subject, the signal characteristic of postmodernist culture” (23). Hence, subjective fragmentation is a *secondary* issue in this novel and only a *cause* of alienation [Clarissa Dalloway manages to “compose herself into a harmonious unity for the sake of her social function” (23) at the end of the novel] whereas in postmodernist texts, fragmentation, decentredness is a *product of* social conditions and it appears in a strong connection with the “narrative treatment of social difference and marginality” (28). From this point of view, Michael Cunningham’s re-writing of *Mrs Dalloway*, the book *The Hours*, starts from such an alienated *and* fragmented self, that remains modernist; and yet, the narrative

strategies of representation in the text and the strong focus on marginality on grounds of gender identity and sexual orientation transform it into a postmodernist construct.

What the reader receives in *The Hours* is *one* single self, Clarissa, multiplied in several voices that come from *within*: Virginia Woolf and Woolf's alter-ego/ Woolf's sister, plus a character in construction in *Mrs Dalloway*, Clarissa Dalloway, in dialogue with her creator; Laura Brown and 'a' Mrs Dalloway, as a character already completed in the book *Mrs Dalloway* which is read, in dialogue with her *opposite* domestic self; and Clarissa Vaughan, an embodied figure of Clarissa Dalloway, this time 'acting' in real life, in dialogue with her haunting ideal self. This split *self* is furthermore multiplied by/ or fragmented in a set of other voices coming from *outside* – from all the other individuals that co-participate in this search for coherence, as an *act of communion and communication*, that intersect with the three main voices from 'within'; these outer selves are the dichotomist necessary element of construction of (*gender*) *identity*: Leonard, Vanessa, Nellie, Dan, Richie, Kitty, Sally, Louis, Richard, Julia, Mary Krull. Moreover, the *cultural context* with its discourse (three periods of different social conditions, i.e. early, mid and late twentieth-century) turns into an important 'enunciator'; the entire drama seems to come from the fact that time and evolution have not contributed to some positive change in the human problematic regarding tolerance; after a century of *hours*, the 'world' remains unable to solve the problem of the decentred *self*. With the exception of Clarissa Vaughan/ Dalloway, who apparently manages to build herself a coherent *self/ identity*, all her alter-voices in Cunningham's text are doomed to fail, and this gives the novel a certain degree of naturalist pathologicalness. Both 'Clarissas' manage to gather from their 'fragments' into one unit, the 'real self', because, as the novel and Virginia Woolf suggest, they agree to *impersonate* themselves by coming to terms with social norms (Dalloway) and with life (Vaughan). In opposition, Richard, Laura, Virginia choose to reject this act of *impersonation* and prefer to remain true to their inner *self* looked at as *different/ insane/ abnormal/ shadowy*, as the characters call it. Interestingly enough, this opposition between the real and the ideal self, between sanity and insanity, social normality and abnormality is superposed, metafictionally, by the debate on *life and art*, also coming from Virginia Woolf. All the characters (Vanessa versus Virginia Woolf, Clarissa Dalloway versus Septimus, Kitty versus Laura Brown, Clarissa Vaughan versus Richard), who manage to become coherent, choose *life* instead of *art*. Life is in trivial things, in the beautiful flowers to buy, in the cake to make, in the party to plan, in the hours, in the *outer world/ self*, whereas everything that comes from within, and which needs discovery, realisation, construction, is ideal, artificial, consuming. Nevertheless, for the 'failing' selves, 'true art' seems to be in one's ability to act and be in control of one's deeds or acts in 'real life', which means that for artists like Richard and Woolf, the ideal self is in *life* and not in their (creation of) art:

On the steps of Hogarth House, she pauses to remember herself. She has learned over the years that sanity involves a certain measure of impersonation, not simply for the benefit of husband and servants but for the sake, first and foremost, of one's convictions. She is the author; Leonard, Nelly, Ralph, and the others are the readers. This particular novel concerns a serene, intelligent woman of painfully susceptible sensibilities who once was ill but has now recovered; who is preparing for the season in London, where she will give and attend parties, write in the mornings and read in the afternoons, lunch with friends, dress perfectly. There is true art in it, this command of tea and dinner tables; this animating correctness.

[...] We live our lives, do whatever we do, and then we sleep – it's as simple and ordinary as that [...] more die by accident; and most of us, the vast majority, are slowly devoured by some disease or, if we're very fortunate, by time itself. There's just this for consolation: an hour here or there when our lives seem, against all odds and expectations, to burst open and give us everything we've ever imagined [...] Still, we cherish the city, the morning; we hope, more than anything, for more (Cunningham 83, 225)

This degree of ambiguity and undecidability in the binary fragments that make the multiple self (and that find it impossible to communicate) are also part of the postmodern register of the discourse. *The Hours* does not *tell* (about) a *self* but *shows* one by simply introducing the *reader* into the fabric of construction, involving him into the process of *picturing* of the self, making all representations vivid, and turning him into a *creator* of images. The power of such a narrative might be one of the reasons why the Pulitzer Prize winning novel turned into the wonderful Academy Award winning film directed by Stephen Daldry.<sup>1</sup>

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