

FROM TRADITIONAL TO HYSTERICAL REALISM

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*Abstract: We are living in a tormented world, and living itself became problematic, troublesome, tensioned. Such being the circumstances, the artists depict in their works an almost unrecognizable world. The artistic universe, echoing reality, is an amalgam of realisms rendering the complexity of the contemporary world, offering a synthetic and totalizing representation of it. Consequently, the actual state of affairs in art (literature included) oscillates between the traditional emotion and the postmodern incongruity, between completeness and rupture, it swings between hysteria and paranoia. Hysterical realism (phrase coined by the critic James Wood) or *recherché* postmodernism (phrase coined by the critic Dale Peck), subsumed to maximalism, falls under the literary tendencies of postmodernism, in its amalgam of styles and literary techniques. The maximalist genre is a creation of the American literature in the 20th century, further spreading to Europe, and it originates in the classic literature of the 19th century, hence, in the very traditional realism.*

Keywords: hysterical realism, *recherché* postmodernism, maximalism, realism, postmodernism.

Humankind inhabits, nowadays, a convulsed world – economic, social or political crises threaten the so fragile order and peace, natural disasters concur at destroying an already precarious balance of the everyday life, apathetic, sceptic, blasé people are rushing around in a ceaseless Brownian motion, alienated, tormented by all sorts of needs, permanently in search of something and apparently never finding it. Mundane reality is fragmented, turned upside-down, traditional values are abandoned or transformed, adapted, the earth itself seems to decline, the water or the spontaneous fires consuming it, the atmosphere is rarefying, becoming unbreathable, adding to the sensation of suffocation. In the circumstances, it is no wonder that the artists, mirroring the environment, depict in their works an almost unrecognizable world, a world which is no longer as it used to be, a world on the verge of self-destruction. Perhaps the world is hysterical. Maybe the world is paranoiac. Perhaps we are. As such, the professed return to revisiting the normal, calmer past is more than an address, it might be the solution to surcease the passing into nothingness.

Hence, the actual state of affairs in art (literature included), be it postmodernism, or post-postmodernism, digimodernism, pseudomodernism¹, automodernism², post-millennialism³, altermodernism⁴, metamodernism⁵ “oscillates between the modern and the

¹ Terms proposed by Alan Kirby in *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure our Culture* (New York/London: Continuum, 2009), p. 1: “owes its emergence and pre-eminence to the computerization of text, which yields a new form of textuality characterized in its purest instances by onwardness, haphazardness, evanescence, and anonymous, social and multiple-authorship”.

² Term proposed by the cultural theorist, Robert Samuels in “Auto-Modernity after Postmodernism: Autonomy and Automation in Culture, Technology, and Education”, in *Digital Youth, Innovation, and the Unexpected*, ed. T. Mcpherson (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), p. 219: “technological automation and human autonomy”.

³ Term coined in 2000 by the American anthropologist Eric Lawrence Gans to describe the epoch after postmodernism in ethical and socio-political terms.

⁴ Term proposed by Nicholas Bourriaud in *Altermodern. Tate Triennial 2009*, N. Bourriaud ed., London, Tate Publishing, 2009, p. 12: a “synthesis between modernism and post-colonialism”.

postmodern, between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity”⁶, swings between hysteria and paranoia. As Kirby puts it, living in our actual world became problematic, troublesome, tensioned, equally for both writers and readers:

[...] this fatalistic anxiety extends far beyond geopolitics, into every aspect of contemporary life; from a general fear of social breakdown and identity loss, to a deep unease about diet and health; from anguish about the destructiveness of climate change, to the effects of a new personal ineptitude and helplessness. [...] This pseudo-modern world, so frightening and seemingly uncontrollable, inevitably feeds a desire to return to the infantile playing with toys which also characterises the pseudo-modern cultural world. Here, the typical emotional state, radically superseding the hyper-consciousness of irony, is the trance – the state of being swallowed up by your activity. In place of the neurosis of modernism and the narcissism of postmodernism, pseudo-modernism takes the world away, by creating a new weightless nowhere of silent autism. You click, you punch the keys, you are ‘involved’, engulfed, deciding. You are the text, there is no-one else, no ‘author’; there is nowhere else, no other time or place. You are free: you are the text: the text is superseded.⁷

Because of all these aspects of the everyday life, the artists in their messages invite at reconsidering the circumstances in order to find a sense and a meaning for us, the tormented humans, in finding our place and part into this agitated universe. And it is precisely why the novelists’ style of today fits so well on the cultural scene, the more so as in their words the apathetic, sceptic, *blasé* readers can decipher a solution of evading, even for brief periods if time, “far from the madding crowd”, far from reality, although some of the fictional worlds depicted in the postmodern books are imitating or recreating the actual world, we are situating, doubtlessly, in the very middle of negative capability, and we deliberately step over the threshold of the fictional universe bearing deeply in our hearts the hope of discovering either the peace of mind, or a potential solution to the devouring existentialist anxiety. In such novelistic universe, the realism is that of the end of the 20th – beginning of the 21st century, by far appropriate for the epoch, for the people’s longings (or, even better, for the lack of aspirations), echoing reality; practically it is an amalgam of realisms, a hybrid. Humans recognize only fragments of the environment, and maybe some thin slices of the life as it should or could have been, if it were not for the disturbing events in the last twenty – thirty years: terrorists’ attacks – the most frightening being that on the 11th of September 2001, devastatingly earthquakes, landslides and tsunamis, plane crashes, global warming and so on and so forth.

Therefore, the need to match the more and more alienating(ed) world we are living in with its image reflected in art calls for an adequate style and that style is the one practised by the postmodernist British and American novelists such as Zadie Smith, Salman Rushdie, Thomas Pynchon, David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, to name only a few of them. The

⁵ Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, “Notes on Postmodernism”, *Journal of AESTHETICS & CULTURE*, Vol. 2, 2010 < <http://aestheticsandculture.net/index.php/jac/article/view/5677/6304>>.

⁶ Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, *ed. cit.*

⁷ Alan Kirby, “The Death of Postmodernism And Beyond”, *Philosophy Now. A Magazine of Ideas* < http://philosophynow.org/issues/58/The_Death_of_Postmodernism_And_Beyond>.

style results in hybrid realism – a possible synthesis and antithesis of the different aspects of realism (referential, magical) and it renders the complexity of the contemporary world, offering a synthetic and totalizing representation of it.

The above mentioned authors' novels are postmodernist in terms of style and year of publishing, yet classical/traditional as regards their intention, namely that of representing the contemporary society canvas, which, presumably, no need to be said, was the literature coryphaei's intention in the 19th century. The realism the writers beginning with the second half of the 20th century indulge in proves to be "guilty" of being elaborate, verging on encyclopaedic style, overflowing with "diegetic exuberance", "guilty" of having a "paranoid imagination", to mention only some of the traits of the new realism called "hysterical realism" or "*recherché* postmodernism" – phrases coined by two critics, James Wood and Dale Peck, respectively.

The authors included into this category, Zadie Smith excepted, avoided debating with the critic James Wood refusing to defend their writings, and, contrary to the style full of "chorality" they are accused of (another "hysterical" trait), choosing an absolute silence. In fact, Smith defended not only herself or the other writers somehow "abated" by Wood's criticism, she also defended all the authors' right to write and readers' to read what they can or fancy, making references to some canonical writers, whose writings are not photographically reproducing reality (Bellow, Melville, Nabokov) saying that: "These books are works of high artifice, and there isn't a decent novel in this world that isn't; their humanity derives from their reverence for language, their precision, their intellect and, more than anything, from their humour."⁸

Postmodernism is the actual state of affairs in culture. Considering the 1960s as the landmark from where the most of the specialists in arts initiated the tracing of the line between postmodernism and modernism, in spite of the fact that many of the postmodernists' experiments are to be found in modernists' works, those from the literature included – stream of consciousness, fragmentation, multiplication, ambiguity, simultaneity, referentiality to these some of the basic tenets of the postmodernism, such as: self-reflexiveness, embracing irony and parody, textual manipulation of the references and tropes, effacing the distinction between high and low cultural forms, fascination for styles and mode(l)s from the past, visuality, simulacrum, temporality, late capitalism, disorientation, secondary orality, etc are to be added.

The theorists have tried to define the phenomenon; for instance, in her books Linda Hutcheon delineates the main aesthetic traits that typify the postmodernist literature, mainly the notion of historical metafiction. In the Preface to her *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988), Linda Hutcheon, maintains that "postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges"⁹.

In contradistinction to Hutcheon, Jean Baudrillard, featuring a somber image of the future, criticizes what he considers to be the exhaustion of the entire materiality into a culture

⁸ Zadie Smith, "This is how it feels to me", *The Guardian* online, Saturday, October 13, 2001, <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/oct/13/fiction.afghanistan>>.

⁹ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, London & New York: Routledge, 1988, p. 3.

more and more governed by the postmodern simulacra. Equally, Frederic Jameson offers a critical approach to the actual epoch, especially to the dangers represented by the multinational capitalism, as well as of the risks resulted from what he sees as the annihilation of the horizon in which history defines the turmoil of those trying to create it. Jean-François Lyotard considers postmodernism as a historic-cultural “condition” with profound roots into the dissolution of the great literary narratives or metanarratives, a crisis of the ideology that abandons the transparency in order to redefine itself as a constructed contingency.

The term “postmodern” could be understood as: after modernism (it subsumes, assumes, and extends modern or the actual tendencies already existent in modernism, not necessarily in a chronologic progression), against modernism (it disrupts, opposes or counterpoises modernism tenets), the equivalent of the “late capitalism” (a culture dominated by post-industrial, multinational and transnational capitalism, by consumerism, by globalization commencement), artistic and stylistic eclecticism (aesthetic postmodernism – forms and genres hybridization, combining high and low cultural sources, mixing different cultures or periods of time, de-historicizing and re-contextualizing styles in art), the “global village” phenomenon: cultures, races, images and capital globalization (redefining nation-states that constituted the foundation of the modern era, disseminating images and information beyond national borders, the sentiment of erosion or breaking national, linguistic, ethnic, and cultural identities, the sentiment of a global amalgam of cultures on an unknown scale to pre-information era societies), the crisis of the history representation – the problem of the historic and cultural identities representation: history as “what really happened” (external to representation or mediation) versus history as “narrating what happened”, a “mediated representation” with cultural or ideological interests. And last, but not least, the art works are absorbed into the representation and mediation problems entirety – what, for whom, from what ideological point of view.¹⁰

Summing-up, we may say that none of the above mentioned specialists managed to offer a single comprehensive and generally acceptable definition for postmodernism. Still, there are more or less attempts to defining notions as postmodern, postmodernity, postmodernism. To exemplify, postmodernity is considered a cultural condition and a mode of existence, a way of living and perceiving oneself and the world in a cultural period. Yet, postmodernism is the aesthetic or cultural manifestation deriving from this period and this existence, its tenets being: death of the grand narratives, metafiction, intertextuality, hybridity, fragmentarism, dissolution, self-referentiality, contradiction and a move toward totalization, and so on. “Postmodernism is both academic and popular, élitist and accessible.”¹¹ In Hutcheon’s terms:

*[...] postmodernism in fiction paradoxically uses and abuses the conventions of both realism and modernism, and does so in order to challenge their transparency, in order to prevent glossing over the contradictions that make the postmodern what it is: historical and metafictional, contextual and self-reflexive, ever aware of its status as discourse, as a human construct.*¹²

¹⁰ Cf. Martin Irvine, *Approaches to Po-Mo* <<http://www.georgetown.edu/faculty/irvinem/theory/pomo.html>>.

¹¹ Linda Hutcheon, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

¹² *Idem*, p 53.

As for realism, according to the definition from Oxford Dictionary, the electronic edition, “While realism in art is often used in the same contexts as naturalism, implying a concern with accurate and objective representation, it also suggests a deliberate rejection of conventionally attractive or appropriate subjects in favour of sincerity and a focus on the unidealized treatment of contemporary life.”¹³ And such is the case of hysterical realism, too.

Realism came into existence in the 19th century, as a reaction against romanticism and neo-classicist academism. As the main principles of the realism we shall enumerate: detailed description of the immediate reality, with an accent on verisimilitude; characters are considered to be more important than action and plot, appearing in all their complexity of their nature and motivation, being into an explicable relationship with nature, with one another, with their social class, and with their own past; events are always plausible; vocabulary is natural-autochthonous, and not elitist or poetic; the tone can be comic, or satirical or realistic; presentation is objective, tending to make of the literary work a canvas of the society from that period of time, and this is what could be called traditional realism.

On the other hand, postmodernist literature, which has been called by many critics “the death of the novel”, together with the modern one, represents the rupture from the 19th century realism, where narration follows an (epic) action, approached from an objectively or omniscient point of view, both exploring the subjectiveness, under the relevance of the characters, through renunciation to the external reality in favour of examining the inner state of conscience and, equally, fragmentarism in narration and construction.

It was in 2001, when, reviewing Sadie Smith’s debut novel, *White Teeth*, the British writer and critic James Douglas Graham Wood coined the phrase “hysteric realism” in order to describe what he considered to be a literary subcurrent/genere characterized by a strong contrast between the absurd, prolix prose and the action of the novel, or between characters’ description and the attentive, detailed examination of the specific social phenomena. In his article, “Human, All Too Inhuman”, which was published by *The New Republic*, Wood introduced that phrase which denotes the contemporary conception on “big, ambitious novel”¹⁴ “that pursuits of vitality at all costs”¹⁵, and which, consequent on, “knows a thousand things, but does not know a single human being”.¹⁶ In his own words: “In that essay I say something like they are not exactly stories that can never happen, because they do involve human beings, but they are in some way inhuman stories.”¹⁷ He presents the genre as an attempt to “transform fiction into social theory”¹⁸ and of telling “how the world functions instead of telling us what does one feels about something”.¹⁹ The critic considered Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon to be the pioneers of the genre, followed by David Foster

¹³ <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/realism>.

¹⁴ James Wood, “Human, All Too Inhuman”, *The New Republic* online, Thursday, August 31, 2001 <http://www.powells.com/review/2001_08_30.html>.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ Robert Birnbaum, “James Wood”, *The Morning News* online, (an interview), <<http://www.themorningnews.org/article/birnbaum-v.-james-wood>>.

¹⁸ James Wood, *ed.cit*.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

Wallace and Salman Rushdie. Later on, Wood continues this idea in his collection of essays, *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel*, published in 2004.

Without defining the hysterical realism, James Wood keeps in some of the particularities of this literary subcurrent/genre as resulted from the analysis of the texts of the above mentioned writers: an excess of main and secondary stories: permanent story-telling, equivalent to a grammar structuring and bringing novels into play. The critic ascertains that the principles of the realism have not been abolished, but on the contrary, used and abused and as such, he does not object at the level of verisimilitude, but at that of morality. Accordingly, this style has no fault in lacking the reality, *per contra*, it seems to escape reality, while it borrows from reality itself. The narrating mode seems incompatible with tragedy or moral suffering, the existence of vitality is taken for a drama of vitality. Narratives are excessively centripetal – the characters are always searching for connections, relations, patterns, and comparisons – and in all that uninterrupted search there is something essentially paranoiac as concerns the belief that everything is mutually determining and interacting. The characters are not really alive, not fully human, imposing connections that, finally, are rather conceptual than human. The excess of narrative enshrouds in magnificence a minus – what is missing is the humane – the crisis of characters and the way it can be represented in literature.²⁰

Having as a starting point the idea that beginning with John Dos Passos and Sinclair Lewis all the American writers (and not only them, it might be added) have been dreaming about the “Big Social Novel”, which strives to seize the times in order to form a document of the American history, Wood considers, though, that the dream about the big American novel has been resuscitated by Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997), a novel with epic social power. Subsequently to that, the critic maintains, all the young American writers emulated DeLillo, imitating his tentacular ambition, his effort in precisely defining an entire misconstrued culture, of being a great analyst of systems, crowds, and politics, of creating at the highest possible level, all being tributary to the “parent”, Charles Dickens. And in saying that, the connection has been established, an arch between traditional realism and hysterical one.

Responding to the British critic in the article “This is how it feels to me”, published in *The Guardian* in 2001, Zadie Smith, in her turn, describes hysterical realism as being “a painfully accurate term for the sort of overblown, manic prose to be found in novels like my own *White Teeth* and a few others he was sweet enough to mention”.²¹ Smith marked the term explaining the fact that, still, “any collective term for a supposed literary movement is always too large a net, catching significant dolphins among so much cannable tuna”.²²

Concerning the queries brought into discussion by the writer and critic Dale Peck to his contemporary fellow-authors, to a great extent, they are similar to those of John Wood, only the denomination of the sub-current being different – *recherché* postmodernism. Peck insists that the maximalist novel (genre under which he frames the works of the analysed authors) is too long and too digressive, and that it is a novel about ideas and not about people, with the difference that he considers it to be elitist, while Wood opinionates that it is not enough attenuated. The critic affirms that by means of his acid criticism “he’s saving the novel

²⁰ Cf. James Wood, *ed. cit.*

²¹ Zadie Smith, *ed. cit.*

²² *Idem*.

from its enemies, practitioners of '*recherché* postmodernism,' 'recidivist realism' - the elitist, esoteric, 'exclusionary' literature. [...] Their massive literary advances and domination of display and review space have crowded out competitors. The lavish praise critics bestow on contemporary fiction renders them complicit in its mediocrity."²³

Wood insists that the contemporary novel is:

*[...] a perpetual-motion machine that appears to have been embarrassed into velocity. It seems to want to abolish stillness, as if ashamed of silence — as if were, a criminal running endless charity marathons. Stories and sub-stories sprout on every page, as these novels continually flourish their glamorous congestion. Inseparable from this culture of permanent storytelling is the pursuit of vitality at all costs.*²⁴

Peck, instead, is more concerned with the praise the authors receive on the part of the readers, and with the fact that they are so easily published and acclaimed, and sees only the zaniness, the slapstick, and “the same one-dimensional commentary on contemporary society”, minds the deeper, darker aspects of the works of the writers he annuls and referring to Pynchon, for instance, he also says he dislikes the hallucinatory grandeur of his vision, being unimpressed by “a thirty year writing career [that] hasn’t produced a single memorable or even recognizably *human* character.”²⁵

“The Maximalist Novel”, Stefano Ercolino’s article published in *Comparative Literature* in 2012, focuses on the maximalist novel, attempting at defining the new aesthetically hybrid genre of the contemporary novel which emerged in the United States of America in the 1970s and spread to Europe at the beginning of the 2000s, and it originates in the classical literature of the 19th century, hence in the very traditional realism. The author analyses the powerful symbolic identity of the maximalist novel and explores its traits, such as: length, encyclopaedic mode, dissonant chorality, diegetic exuberance, completeness, narrative omniscience, paranoid imagination, intersemiocity, ethical commitment.²⁶

According to some critics (and their followers) the British and American writers wielding their pens under the umbrella of hysterical realism or *recherché* postmodernism are tributary to the “parent” of this sub-current, namely Charles Dickens, one of the epitomes of realism. Analysing the manner in which the postmodernist British and American novels fall under the literary postmodernist current and specific set of concerns, affinities, sensibilities and forms, and, especially, examining the way hysterical realism is reflected in the literary works of the writers enumerated above, these novels vouch to be related to the literary works of the 19th century coryphaei. In other words, Zadie Smith, Salman Rushdie, Thomas Pynchon, Jonathan Franzen, David Foster Wallace, Don DeLillo, and the lot of them are postmodernist writers, but they are alike Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, George Eliot, Henry James, John Steinbeck, etc, at least in terms of describing reality, even if the reality of the 19th century is not the reality of the 21st century.

²³ Dale Peck, *The Hatchet Jobs*, The New Press, New York, 2004, *apud* James Atlas, „The Take Down Artist”, *The New York Times* online <<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/26/magazine/the-takedown-artist.html>>.

²⁴ James Wood, *ed. cit.*

²⁵ Eric Ketzan, “In Defence of Joyce and Pynchon. A Response to Dale Peck's *Hatchet Jobs*” <http://thenewpress.com/index.php?option=com_title&task=view_title&metaproductid=1104>.

²⁶ Cf. Stefano Ercolino, *The Maximalist Novel*, *Comparative Literature*; summer 2012, Vol. 64 Issue 3.

As an argument, Franzen's essay, "Perchance to dream in the age of images, a reason to write novels", considered to be a literary manifesto, renders his concernment regarding writers and writing in our world:

Then again, there has always been a gulf between ideologues, whose ideas abound with implicit optimism, and novelists, whose pessimism reflects their helplessness to ignore the human beings behind ideas. [...] a novelist has a responsibility to stay close to life in the mainstream, to walk the streets, rub shoulders with the teeming masses, etc. the better to be able, in Sven Birkerts's words, to bring readers "meaningful news about what it means to live in the world of the present." [...] Expecting a novel to bear the weight of our whole disturbed society - to help solve our contemporary problems - seems to me a peculiarly American delusion. To write sentences of such authenticity that refuge can be taken in them: isn't this enough? Isn't it a lot? [...] Writing is a form of personal freedom. It frees us from the mass identity we see in the making all around us. In the end, writers will write not to be outlaw heroes of some underculture but mainly to save themselves, to survive as individuals.²⁷

The interest focussed on the hysterical realism/*recherché* postmodernism stopped at a certain point (around 2008) only to be continued in 2012, brought under the attention of the literary world by Stefano Ercolino's article about maximalism, for "realism, in all its multiple incarnations, is not really a literary form or genre or movement at all but a contested space, the scene of an unfinished argument"²⁸, followed in 2014 by his book, *The Maximalist Novel: From Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow to Roberto Bolano's 2666*.

To conclude, it might be said that, although being rooted in the very core of traditional realism, hysterical realism, subsumed to maximalism, falls under the literary tendencies of postmodernism with its amalgam of styles, genres, and literary techniques. The auctorial style practised and sometimes professed by the (post-)postmodernist writers – a hybrid/hyper realism – a synthesis and an antithesis of the three aspects of realism, referential, magical and hysterical, appropriately depicts the complexity of the contemporary world as it is, fragmented, turbulent, alienated, hysterical, paranoid, and equally offers a synthetic and totalizing representation of that universe, models the state of literature, the arc covering more than two centuries – with its returning and revisiting the past in a critic, parodic or satiric manner.

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