

MAXIMALISM: CONCEPTUAL DELIMITATIONS

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*Abstract: The aim of the present paper is to survey some of the tenets of a more (or less) new literary movement. Maximalism, as opposed to minimalism, is considered to be a response to the declining relevance of literary fiction in a cultural landscape dominated by media such as television, video games, and the Internet. The apex of minimalist fiction was the decade of the 1980s. Yet, beginning with the 1970s, in the United States of America a new style emerged and that was maximalism. In his book, *The Maximalist Novel: From Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow to Roberto Bolaño's 2666*, Stefano Ercolino looks over a number of seven post(post)modernist novels and elaborates on the maximalist paradigms: length, encyclopaedic mode, dissonant chorality, diegetic exuberance, completeness, narrative omniscience, paranoid imagination, intersemiocity, ethical commitment. As such, we shall see, along with the author, that maximalism – the tendency towards excess – creates a world in and of itself.*

Keywords: *maximalism, contemporary novel, hybridization, derived omniscience, the art of excess*

In *The Encyclopedia of the Twentieth Century Fiction*, Robert Rebein submits a definition of the concept of maximalism as opposed to minimalism: “maximalist fiction or maximalism denotes fictional works, particularly novels that are unusually long and complex, are digressive in style, and make use of a wide array of literary devices and techniques. Among the novelists associated with this style are David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, Richard Powers, Rick Moody, William T. Vollmann, and, from a slightly older generation, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and Paul West. In their separate ways, both minimalism and maximalism have been explained as responses to the declining relevance of literary fiction in a cultural landscape dominated by newer media such as television, video games, and the Internet. The heyday of minimalist fiction was the decade of the 1980s.”¹

Stefano Ercolino’s article, *The Maximalist Novel*, published on the summer of 2012, focuses on the novelistic genre, 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. 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, in a number of seven contemporary novels.²

In 2014 Ercolino published his book, *The Maximalist Novel: From Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow to Roberto Bolaño's 2666* in which he elaborates on the maximalist paradigms. As a support for his enterprise, the author reviews some other theoretical approaches to narratives: Tom LeClair’s “systems novel”, Franco Moretti’s “world text”, and Frederick R. Karl’s “Mega-Novel”, all having a “common focus on investigation: long, superabundant, hypertrophic narratives, both in form and content”.³

¹Robert Rebein, *Minimalist/Maximalist Fiction*, in *The Encyclopedia of Twentieth Century Fiction*, ed. Brian W. Shaffer, Wiley Blackwell, 2011.

²Cf. Stefano Ercolino, *The Maximalist Novel*, *Comparative Literature*; summer 2012, Vol. 64 Issue 3.

³ Stefano Ercolino, *The Maximalist Novel: From Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow to Roberto Bolaño's 2666*, translated by Albert Sbragia, Bloomsbury, London, 2014, p. 1.

A lengthy novel is both a possibility and an indispensability for experimental fiction as long as the procedure or the new genre emerges from the quantum of details of the text, because it offers the space for a diversity of procedures/rhetorical devices – encyclopaedism, chorality, digressions, a multitude of narrative threads.

According to Ercolino, quoting Stephen J. Burn, modernism witnessed the origins of the “encyclopedic narratives”⁴ in Gustave Flaubert’s *Bouvard et Pécuchet* and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the “encyclopedic novel” being considered by the latter a genre of the Western novel.⁵ Anyway, the goal of encyclopedic narratives is a “synthetic representation of the totality of the real”⁶, thus responding to the novelists’ desire of conceptually mastering the more and more complex and elusive reality, of representing it and the fields of knowledge necessary for its synthesis. Yet, in order to specify the criteria on the basis of which a novel is considered encyclopedic, a specific modality has to be taken into consideration and that is the encyclopedic mode, defined as an instrument, “a particular aesthetic and cognitive attitude, consisting of a more or less heightened and totalizing narrative tension in the synthetic representation of heterogenous realities and domains of knowledge, ascribable, in essence, to the powerful hybridization of maximalist narratives with the ancient epic.”⁷

Another maximalist trait, chorality refers to the plurality of voices, none of them being the dominant one. In the novels circumscribed to the genre, narration is fragmented, i.e., fragments of different lengths, separated one from the other by typographical spacing (signaling a change of scene, variation in point of view, transition in time/space, introduction/recommencement of a narrative thread, introducing a new character) co-exist with the traditional partition into parts and chapters. This is a multilinear diegetic organization – in the maximalist novel it is the collectivity of characters and the plurality of stories that counts; the autonomy of the parts is the procedure permitting a synthesis of the world.⁸

The maximalist novel is polyphonic, insists Ercolino, as it is heterogeneous, and represents a large diversity of knowledge, languages, registers, styles, genres, characters, voices; yet polyphony never degenerates into chaos as long as there are ordering criteria to the story.

The diegetic material of the maximalist novel is extremely abundant: a hypertrophic narration, innumerable characters and stories, themes and digressions – a discursive excess like an overflowing river, as LeClair, quoted by Ercolino, maintains: “Because the material of systems novel often seems to grow, rather than to be built, the noise, gaps, and the gratuitousness in the texts imply an open and natural system rather than a closed and artificial ordering.”⁹ The main procedure by which the diegetic exuberance manifests itself is the digression, which, according to Portelli “contains all the world within one text.”¹⁰

⁴Edward Mendelson, “Encyclopedic Narrative: From Dante to Pynchon” in *Modern Language Notes* 91, 1976 in Stefano Ercolino, *The Maximalist Novel*, p. 37.

⁵Cf. Stephen J. Burn, “The Collapse of Everything: William Gaddis and the Encyclopedic Novel”, *Paper Empire: Gaddis and the World System*, eds. Joseph Tabbi and Rone Shavers, Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 2007 in Stefano Ercolino, *The Maximalist Novel*, p. 2.

⁶Stefano Ercolino, *The Maximalist Novel* p. 31.

⁷*Idem*, p. 39.

⁸Cf. Stefano Ercolino, *The Maximalist Novel*, pp. 57-59.

⁹Tom LeClair, *The Art of Excess: Mastery in Contemporary American Fiction*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1989 in Stefano Ercolino, *The Maximalist Novel*, p. 71.

¹⁰Alessandro Portelli, *The Text and the voice: Writing, Speaking and Democracy in American Literature* [1992], New York, Columbia University Press, 1994 in Stefano Ercolino, *The Maximalist Novel*, pp. 72-73.

The completeness of a text is given by the relation at the level of the arrangement of the plot and the mechanisms of its production into specific structures, “imitative forms”, as LeClair names them. These structures are: geometrical, temporal and conceptual. Also, the omnivorous relationship with time is to be mentioned. As concerns the conceptual structures, they are: leitmotif, myth and intertextual forms.

Another characteristic of maximalist novel, narratorial omniscience, may vary from a more overt, “traditional” form of omniscience to a more complex one, which Ercolino defines as “omniscience through recomposition or derived omniscience”.¹¹ According to Pouillon/Todorov classification, to which Genette added the notion of “focalization”, there are three different narrative instances in which the reader perceives the narrated facts through the narrator’s agency: the narrator knows more than the character and zero focalization – classical omniscience; the narrator knows as much as the character and internal focalization – story with a point of view; the narrator knows less than the character and external focalization – in behaviourist stories. In most of the cases, the three focalizations co-exist and it may change within the same fragment. Besides, in maximalist novels it is necessary to construct a narratorial gaze apt at perceiving from above.¹² This omniscience is a form of the complex and diverse occurrence, in other words, the return of the author.

One of the recognized most characteristic of the postmodern narrative is paranoia. This is because world, fiction included, is so very deeply obsessed with conspiracies, intrigues and schemes, so consequently it became a trait of the maximalist novel, paranoia being the motor of the maximalist literary imagination, playing the role of poësis of fiction and constructing the plot, as Ercolino demonstrates in his book.¹³

Contemporary literary imagery rests upon a semiotic exchange – a hybridization for the maximalist novel with cinema, television, video, painting, comics, pop icons – a hybrid imagery.

Another trait – ethical commitment – as Stefano Ercolino maintains:

[...] should be situated within a seam of continuity with the best engagé literary tradition of the twentieth century and not under the banner of a rupture with the postmodern literary system [...] the maximalist novel can be seen as a postmodern *recuperation* of postmodernist elements, or better still as a genre of contemporary novel generated by an *interference* between modernist and postmodernist aesthetic codes [...] an *aesthetically hybrid genre* of the contemporary novel.

As concerns the thematic field of the maximalist novel, recurrent themes of great historical, political and social importance are pervasive, and thus the maximalist novel is perfectly inscribable in the tendency of (re)turning to the realism of the nineteenth century.

Maximalism – the tendency towards excess – creates a world in and of itself, as long as meaning is not inherent in the world and must be (re)created, but it lies deep inside, and not on the surface. Maximalism uses great details to set up scenes; it allows the writers to experiment with as many different themes, symbols, and literary motifs as they wish, and elaborate more on characters, to alternate – due to its flexibility and richness of the language – rhythms, plans, even realities. Moreover, its lengthy narration is more appropriate to the professed tendency of revisiting the past the more so as the nineteenth-century epitomic

¹¹Stefano Ercolino, *The Maximalist Novel*, p. 97.

¹²Cf. Stefano Ercolino, *op. cit.*, pp. 97-99.

¹³*Idem*, pp. 105-106.

novels of Balzac, Dickens, Flaubert, Dostoyevsky, et cetera, were, similarly, hundred-pages long.

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*** **The Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction**, Shaffer, Brian W., ed., London, 2011.