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MINIMALISM - INTERPRETING FICTION

Comprehensive studies more often than not describe the course of American fiction over the last decades as a return to realism, and the triumph of realistic novel over the self-referential, theory-ridden (and theory-based) metafiction of post-modernism (Ruland, 356-357, Hilfer, 11-12, 163); however, this phenomenon is neither a sudden change nor is it limited to the era of Y2K. According to narratives representing literature as history the naturalist fiction of the 1920's and 1930's is succeeded by novels of symbolic modernist realism from the 1940's, telling stories of psychologically and politically failed characters. These deterministic plots often include revolt against social inequalities and are frequently nihilistic. While seeing the period after the war as culturally homogenous would be a mistake, collective tendencies of culture seem to gain strength in the years following WWII. Nevertheless, the attention of the authors turning from politics to interpersonal relations to provide means of solution to the evident discrepancies of everyday life (even if this solution often results in unavoidable and complete failure and loneliness on the level of plot) along with a realistic story sub-textual symbolism representing these relations becomes the most important level of meaning in the fiction of the 1940's. This modernist realism becomes the dominant mode of writing and reading fiction in the 1950's and 1960's (Hilfer, 1; 10-11). Details of this shift, or, rather, change of paradigm are not yet clear, nevertheless there are strong arguments suggesting that it is this realism, against which the first wave of literary post-modernism is formed and articulated in the middle of the 1960's.

Looking back from the turn of the century metafiction, and, the critical discourse on it have one major thing to say: literary texts and criticism are means to (re)present and study structures – the structure of their subject and the structure of their own. Thus while sociological, psychological, philosophical and technological advancements of the 1970's enrich the world and writing techniques of the authors, showing new possibilities in experimental representation, these experiments usually concern the form, and an increased interest in formal issues occupies the centre of interpretation as meaning seems to emerge from the dynamism of textual structure through elements of symbolic representation. Surprisingly, it is this very notion that has saved metafiction – the technique that almost single-handedly renewed some of

the most important avant-garde traditions - from sinking into a paranoid and solipsistic, fruitless tone not much after it was conceived as a trend that put reality on the death row. This was achieved by a set of techniques including the denial of traditional narrative forms, scepticism about the transparency of language, the rejection of the imperative of taking a moral standpoint, an emphasis on intertextuality, constant changes of viewpoints and practicing alienating effects throughout the narrative. While authors and critiques, writers and readers of metafiction (two poles that are not at all distinct, rather conjoined in the text due to the characteristic of this borderline prose) experience that society, technology, politics are fields of life outside of the realm and interest of literature (a notion derived mainly from the insights of post-structuralist literary theory and critical practice) it turns out that there is an apparent similarity between fiction, fictional representation and social rituals, ideologies, narrative and history, recollection and narration. Thus, what had originally been a theoretically based inward movement and self-referential interest, evolved into a mode of writing capable of representing a wide range of „reality” – at least so it seemed to Vladimir Nabokov, John Barth, William Gass, Raymond Federman, and David Sukenick.

Baroque text-structures, allegorical plots, narrative playfulness disorienting time relations, experiments with the form, irony and metalanguage (which, paradoxically reinforces the belief in the stability of the speaking subject via the contrast of the enounce and enunciation) in many ways generated more problems, and could not find adequate answers to burning questions such as the ones regarding the modes of representing the extreme *depthlessness* of post-modern reality (and the experience of that), the textual consequences of the disintegration of the subject, or the place and role of technology and pop in the cultural environment of post-industrial capitalism and in the textual net of fiction. While post-modern metafiction and post-structuralist criticism that provided it with a context and a voice, if you like, had legitimate questions concerning the modes of representation, rhetoric tropes of self-referentiality (in their self-deconstructive dynamics) hindered any attempt to answer, or even to articulate these questions. Thus metafiction, or, in a broader sense, the *literature of exhaustion* did not only deny answering these questions (sometimes implicitly, sometimes as a program, explicitly), but also refused to address these issues, and developed a somewhat solipsistic, nevertheless pragmatically totalising rhetoric, which made any attempt to answer these questions unnecessary. It is fair to say that discourses capitalizing on modernist traditions were hindered by the rhetoric of self-reflection in answering crucial questions, because the post-modern text has

proved to be unable to pass the contradiction present between the concept of the heterogeneous „I” and the imperative of constructing a metaperspective.

Among others, these were the causes that led to what can be described as a realist turn, a return to “referentiality”. In the 1970’s, parallel with post-modern experimentalism and metafiction a new narrative voice drew more and more attention: this new writing is either conceived in critical discourse as a clear and evident revolt against post-modernism, or as a new aspect, an extension of that, but it is seen (that is, celebrated or condemned) more or less unanimously as a comeback of (some sort of) realism in contemporary American fiction (Ruland, 356, Abádi Nagy, 1994: 224, 271, 342; 2001: 129-130). The era of the 1960’s vibrant with experiment and fresh from the new tones of metafiction can now be seen (as many argue) as a prelude to a form of neo-realism in fiction, (Abádi Nagy, 1994: 270), which unlike metafiction now seems to be able to understand, or, at least to address adequately the questions present in the post-modern realities of the end of the millennium (Bradbury, 264).

The most interesting aspect of theorizing the relation between post-modernism and the new forms of realism is that unlike a series of shifts in literary paradigms before, the comeback of realism is not preceded, or caused by a radical change in the social sphere, or „reality”. At least, critics usually do not constitute this shift as an abrupt and fundamental change leading to new methods of representation or new techniques of interpretation. There are two reasons for this phenomenon. On the one hand theoretical implications of post-modernism have made it clear that a changing reality is but a changing way of interpretation. On the other hand, literary neo-realism is not a discrete phase in literary history. It is interconnected with post-modern fiction, and post-modern features are not hard to detect in it. Also, just as realist fiction has never truly disappeared from literature (what is more, it has gained prevalence in several art forms, e.g. mainstream Hollywood cinema) (Baudrillard, 45-46), there is no reason to believe that post-modern fiction is about to do so. Distinguishing between the two methods and set of techniques thus represents a serious theoretical issue and a grave practical problem. It is also important to notice that there are several (though not equally practical and valid) definitions of post-modern fiction widely used in critical and theoretical discourses on literature.

A consequent study of the stylistic characteristics and signifying practices of contemporary American fiction (specifically the novels of two “Generation X” authors: Douglas Coupland and Bret Easton Ellis) shows that allegorical levels of meaning are not characteristic of the interpretation of the texts in question, or if they

are, allegorical interpretation is carried out more or less against the dynamism of other rhetorical, narratological characteristics of these texts. What is a central experience of reading these works, however, is a metonymic structure of understanding, a phenomenon I attribute to the paramount importance of intertextuality (defined here as repetition) (Frow, 45) in neo-realist fiction.

Analysing the tropes which „host” intertextuality in the structure of the post-modern neo-realist text, and are tropical manifestations of repetition shows that these rhetorical tropes are fields of depthlessness, “referentiality”, repetition, and are bases for the double-coded nature of these pieces of writing. They make signification and understanding possible for different interpretive strategies, which is apparently the effect achieved by the perfect functioning of the illusion of simulation, still, it is in itself an interpretive process, and, being so it is the continuous de- and reconstruction of the reading subject. The metonymical nature of these texts so often associated with minimalism is not a result of an abundance of metonymies and a lack of metaphors and other tropes in the case of neo-realism, but of a structural characteristic of narration and text-structure hindering allegorical interpretation – that is, it is the effect of the text-structuring function of metonymical repetition. The metaphorical and allegorical interpretation is a possibility, these attempts, however, are mostly unable to present coherent levels of meaning that would be supported or justified by the overall experience of reading these texts. The metonymical structure of meanings is thus not a result of the lack of metaphors in neo-realist fiction (though counter-examples are not hard to find), rather the metonymical structure of repetition opening the text up for intertextuality - and interpretation. As a proof of this argument theorizing the differences between metaphorical and metonymical construction of levels of meaning might be a useful means of describing the relation of post-modern metafiction and neo-realist prose.

Some of the post-modern neo-realist texts are often classified as minimalist fiction, yet discussing these texts together seems justified for other reasons too. On the one hand, as far as I know, these works are among the first ones in the history of 20th century American fiction to use the signs of popular culture and technology (a technique of realism not new to the history of fiction, but in contrast to modernist works) not as a tool of implying alienation but as a means of authenticity, and to be able to maintain fast and accurate references. These signs are the guarantee of understanding, steady and "exact" interpretation. Thus depthlessness (a concept widely discussed as a post-modern phenomenon and one that seems to play a crucial role in the rhetoric and signifying practice of neo-realist fiction as well), incompleteness, reduction, and an obsessive concern for surface detail become the

consciously chosen means of accuracy. This has a fundamental structure-forming role in the experience of reading – and is closely related to the metonymic nature of „realist renewal”. On the other hand, there is an easily definable interpreting and reading public associated with these works. This public is generated through its consumer-identity, generational characteristic, but these are only of secondary importance behind the common cultural background knowledge, and the language use constructing and conveying this knowledge.

It is not only a referential interpretation or source-analysis that relies on the cultural background in the reading of the neo-realist texts. Although the most evident narrative strategies of this fiction seem to support referential interpretive strategies, this technique (which is apparently useful in deciphering the referential meaning of these works) is unable to describe and account for the most eminent aesthetical experiences of reading these pieces of literature. Even if its conclusions, insights are more or less correct, its arguments are controversial and inconsequent. The cultural knowledge forming the context of a textual analysis of these works is mostly a culture of the media, and the manifestations of that culture. It is the post-modern media-culture that provides the subcultures with discursive spaces and techniques, signs and signifying practices used in the process of interpretation. Post-structuralist cultural theories might be the discourse which – in the course of interpreting the neo-realist texts in question – may help describe the most important levels of meaning, sign-values, structural characteristics and rhetorical forms of the discourses of post-industrial capitalism, and, while doing so, it maintains the dialogue with the rhetoric of the implied reader and its subcultures.

Identifying intertextuality, repetition, and depthlessness as central to hyperrealism and neo-realist prose does not imply that these features are structural characteristic of these pieces of the most recent fiction only. This is of utmost importance to remember, given that I consider characteristics of rhetoric "products" of the reading process, and not those of style or worldview of the text, even if I (perhaps somewhat inconsequently) speak about hyperrealist rhetoric, or, in a broader sense, neo-realist fiction. The difference between these two stances might be located somewhere along the divide between *view* and *rhetoric*, but the existence of this divide seems problematic to maintain.

Importance and significance of certain pieces of literature are evident even in the synchronous reception, and its horizons, their canonization has started, still, the landscape of fiction is so complex that future trends are hardly visible at this point. One cannot claim to be able to predict which trends will prove to be the most

productive, the most innovative, and which will have the effect of overcoming post-modernism. What seems important though, is that neo-realist texts use certain elements of the rhetoric of realism in order to achieve characteristic and specific aims: accuracy of signification, speed of interpretation and textual economy. While neo-realism is characterised by a radically different prose style and rhetoric, its context of reference and view of the world is based on post-modern realities. It is articulated from within the socio-cultural context of post-modernism and it is interpreted within that structure. Post-modernism (as an experience of reality) provides the signs for the signifying practices of neo-realist fiction and this has apparent consequences for interpretation.

John Mepham comes up with four answers to the question: "what is post-modern in post-modern fiction?" The first one is a historical answer and defines post-modern fiction as one that surpasses, or, possibly denies, revolts against the paradigmatic characteristics of modernism. The second is a philosophical one and sees post-modern theory-based fiction as a literature evoked and inspired by post-structuralism. The third answer is ideological and defines literature based on its aims: thus the central characteristics of post-modern fiction defined as a conscious disorientation of the reader, problematization of reality, scepticism about language etc., and sees the main difference between modernism and post-modernism in the latter's emphasised self-referentiality (Mepham, 138). I propose a fifth answer to Mepham's question, from a rhetoric point of view and apply that to neo-realist fiction – a literature that responds to the same experience and view of reality but offers characteristically different answers from those of metafiction. The fundamental reading experience of these texts is the results of the meaning-generating role of metonymically structured rhetorical elements. That is, the generational and subcultural features of these texts are results of discursive strategies. It is for this reason that while most of the criticism on Ellis's, Coupland's and McInerney's work is right in their conclusions, their argumentation is incoherent and inconclusive, as their authors are unable to comprehend the structure-building role of repetition and depthlessness.

The notion of textuality is justified and practically sound to be used in the context of commodities and other non-verbal systems. This insight helps the interpretation understand the intertextuality of neo-realist fiction. The signifying chains of these texts symbolise (lingual) experience in strategies whose interpretation (that is the decipherment of the intertextual net) can be attempted via comparative interpretive strategies. Using the notions of subculture, generation and consumer society it becomes clear that intertextual analysis can go further than merely locating these "links" and describing their structural function. It is

indisputable that intertextuality is always "relocation" as well, and thus repetition implies changes in position, context and meaning too. Carrying out a research into how reality-effects of the text gain new sign values in the altered context might be the next stage of my research project.

I suggest a specific use and meaning of the discursive term: *post-modernism* here. The duality present in the meaning of *post-modernism* is generated in the horizon of reception, which is informed by the context and textual manifestations of post-modernism itself. I agree with Zoltán Abádi Nagy in that neo-realist texts, while employing rhetoric and narrative strategies surpassing those of metafiction, are parts of a post-modern context and are interpreted in the same cultural sphere. On this basis I intend to consequently illustrate and prove Zoltán Abádi Nagy's insight that the minimalist, neo-realist fiction's main levels of reference are contemporary post-modern realities, they are products of that socio-cultural context, while it creates its own possible worlds both in the writing and in the reading process.

Definitions of post-modern literature, no matter how insecure or flexible they seem to be, usually consider metafiction the eminent and paradigmatic trend of post-modernism, thus more often than not, they are simply not useful when one is to use them as a tool in positioning neo-realist or minimalist fiction - a phenomenon observed by many theorists. Thus my claim that neo-realist fiction has a similar epistemological look at the world as postmodernist fiction and is interpreted in post-modern cultural contexts refers to the possibilities inherent in the interpretation of these texts, though it also has implications concerning the narrative and signifying features of this fiction.

A rhetorical interpretive technique is needed to address the questions present in the signifying practices of the neo-realist texts that would identify "links" between images, metonymically structured textual manifestations of culture as its basic notions. The most important task left in this respect, then, in my view is to describe the ways in which discourses of popular culture (music, magazines, TV) position the consumer subject and create subject-positions to identify with in the interdiscursive field of the text. The aspect of interaction could become the focus of attention of such a research. Studying forms of social behaviour could thus rely on the techniques, ideas, notions and sources of textual analysis, and could discuss effectively the lingual structures of the actual world as a text: this might lead in certain experiments to a theoretical transgression of the borders between interpreting texts of (sub)cultures and researching social experiences.

Cultural structures of post-industrial capitalism manifesting itself in ever-changing discursive strategies and in subcultures characterised by a dynamic

signifying relation with the socio-cultural sphere of post-modernism are multileveled, very complex sets of reference for the authors and readers, and for the pieces of neo-realist fiction (sometimes referred to as minimalist prose, or lifestyle fiction). This phenomenon has crucial consequences for the signifying practices and interpretations of neo-realist fiction, which as a means to find accurate ways of signification employs the strategies of hyperrealism: authenticity, superficiality, depthlessness, obsessive concern for surface detail, etc. These elements open up the textual structure for intertextuality through a set of rhetoric figures, which, in turn enable non-referential interpretation. Thus interpretation might remain productive in a situation characterised by an excess of signifiers, dynamism of simulation, metonymical structure of repetition, and as a result the possibility of the text's (self) deconstruction.

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