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Beyond Crime and Punishment: Metaphor of Violence in Iain Banks's *Complicity*

Summary

Trying to decide on the place of art/literature in the network of codes and its relationship to what we recognize as reality, we are offered a number of interpretations, some of which support the theory that perception of reality in a text is influenced by social circumstances and by a number of factors relating to them. Therefore, "reality" cannot be seen as a reflection of any particular "natural" state, order or organization. Literature questions the assumption that coding is natural, much in the same way that language questions the assumption that there is an intrinsic order governing the world as a natural structure. It engages different voices and ideologies in a dialogue inside the same text, achieving the effect opposite to habitualization, i.e. defamiliarization. Corresponding to the culture of excess, Iain Bank's *Complicity*, pinpoints representations of postmodern "reality" within the framework of postindustrial consumption culture. It deploys defamiliarization strategies of juxtaposing violence and power, taking advantage of the conventions of generic fiction of which violence is a mandatory constituent.

Key words: violence in fiction, mystery genre, Iain Banks, *Complicity* (book)

Onkraj zločina in kazni: metaforika nasilja v romanu *Complicity* Iaina Banksa

Povzetek

Umeščanje umetnosti/literature v njeno povezanost z realnostjo odpira množstvo interpretacij, od katerih nekatere podpirajo teorijo, da je ugledanje realnosti v besedilu pogojeno z družbenimi okoliščinami in s številnimi z njo povezanimi dejavniki. "Realnosti" potemtakem ne gre razumeti kot premislek o nekem določenem "naravnem" stanju, redu ali ureditvi. Literatura postavlja pod vprašaj, ali je kodiranje naravno, nič manj kot se jezik sprašuje, ali obstaja notranji ustroj, ki nadzoruje svet kot naravno strukturo. To pomeni vključevanje različnih glasov in ideologij znotraj istega besedila, kar povzroča nasprotje učinka podomačenja, tj. defamiliarizacije. V skladu s kulturo viška roman *Complicity* Iaina Banksa določa upodobitve postmoderne "realnosti" v okviru postindustrijske porabniške kulture, razvija defamiliarizacijske strategije sopostavljanja nasilja in moči in se pri tem opira na ustaljene oblike generičnega leposlovja, katerega obvezni sestavni del je prav nasilje.

Ključne besede: nasilje v leposlovju, kriminalni roman, Ian Banks, *Complicity* (roman)

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1. Modeling reality

At the moment when I thought he had already fallen asleep in his part of the shade, the guard raised his hand and showed me the moth hovering somewhere above the porch of the burial chamber; it had come out of our garments or out of the Persian rugs inside the building.

'You see,' – he addressed me without much interest – 'the insect is high in the air under the white wall of the porch and it is visible only because it moves. One could think that it is a bird deep in the sky, if the wall is to be taken for the sky. That is, probably, how the moth sees it, and only we know it is wrong. The moth is not aware that we know it, either. It is not even aware of our existence. So, try to communicate with it, if you can. Can you say something to it, anything, but in such a way so it understands you, and you are certain it understood you completely?'

'I don't know', I replied, 'Can you?'

'Yes, I can,' the old man replied calmly, clapped his hands, killed the moth and showed it to me, crushed in his palm.

'Do you think it did not understand what I was saying?' (Pavić 1985, 95–6)

This anecdote originates from a hypertextual postmodern dictionary novel, *The Dictionary of Khasars*, and in a nutshell illustrates some of the key issues concerning limits of representation, interpretation and communication in the light of *Geistesgeschichte*, and at the same time corroborates the assumptions: first, Barthes' assumption that society is a network of codes speaking through all kinds of media, and second, largely Foucault's, that the system of power relations underlies all other [social] affairs. Trying to decide on the place of art/literature in the network of codes and its relationship to what we recognize as reality, we are offered a number of interpretations, some of which support the theory that perception of reality in a text is influenced by social circumstances and by a number of factors relating to them. Therefore, "reality" cannot be seen as a reflection of any particular "natural" state, order or organization; it is rather, as Joyce's account of Aristotle points out, that art imitates nature not in objects or actions so much as in the underlying law of which both objects and actions are the expressions. Language is what shapes experience: it encodes two distinctive varieties of meaning - the *natural* one, coded according to the biological disposition of humans, (colors, spatial relations, etc.), and the *social* one which reflects systems of social organization. In the light of the first assumption, and the major ideas of Roger Fowler's *Linguistic Criticism*, language may not be understood as a medium for literature, but literature is to be seen as a component of language, because its substance, meanings, what it communicates is "uniquely constructed by the text in its interrelations with social and other contexts" (Fowler 1996, 14). Literary text, therefore, is to be understood as a

complex structure which through the network of codes communicates a representation of a world in a process of interaction between the author and the reader who provide the necessary context. Communities which form and embody the experience of both author and reader, share systems of institutional and social knowledge, thus, evoking the words of Richard Rorty, “reading texts becomes a matter of reading them in the light of other texts, people, obsessions, bits of information, or what have you, and then seeing what happens”. Twentieth-century postindustrial culture produced its own set of codes; power shifted to structure in all its shapes and manifestations having become the foremost principle – postindustrial culture no longer tolerates the subjective, personal, almighty vision of the author.

“A literary text, like any other text is primarily the realization of a mode of discourse or a number of modes of discourse...its basis can be found in ways of writing (styles, registers, genres) that precede it...Whatever is created by the individual writer, it is not the whole being of the text, because nothing is possible without the pre-existing discourses: and they are rooted in social economic, political and ideological conditions which go far beyond the consciousness and control of the writing subject, ‘the author’” (Fowler 1996, 223). The author is forced into the background, culture is forced into mass production; it demonstrates a need for excess as does almost any other aspect of living. Literature, in a traditional sense, became depleted. There are no “great stories” left untold, or better yet, left unheard. Story takes place in the realm of expectation, and if literature is a way of communicating the universal inside the particular then what is being communicated largely depends on who is listening rather than on what is being heard. As Umberto Eco points out, “the text’s intention is not displayed by the textual surface... One has to decide to ‘see’ it. It is possible to speak of the text’s intention only as a result of a conjunction on the part of the reader” (Eco 1992, 64).

Language, the speaker’s idiolect, embodies his experience of reality largely in his vocabulary, also in his syntax, and Fowler claims such experience is *uncritically* exchanged between the members of a community by means of “conversation”, establishing habitual experience. As opposed to conversation, literature’s creative power lies in the ability to produce new discourse – one that will stand outside the habitual experience. Literature questions the assumption that coding is natural, much in the same way that language questions the assumption that there is an intrinsic order governing the world as a natural structure. It engages different voices and ideologies in a dialogue inside the same text, achieving the effect opposite to habitualization, i.e. defamiliarization¹ In the process literature becomes a technique of criticism – it deliberately analyzes relationships between signs and meanings they construct and intentionally sets up defamiliarization strategies.

2. Age of Reason vs. Age of Doubt

The habitualized social reality of a “speaker” coming from a postindustrial culture is saturated with power, understood both literally as “energy supply” and as a more elusive, abstract notion

¹ Terms used according to V. Shklovsky as quoted in Fowler 1996.

involving domination. Such social reality stretches further beyond the limits and the limitations of the physical world, expanding into the electronically generated virtual one; it is no longer driven by the forces of production, but by rather impalpable fluctuations of a number of factors, politics and economy being the most influential ones. Power became habitualized to the point when it is no longer visible. Power is speaker. Speaker is power. Reality shapes identity; “Existence is Identity, Consciousness is Identification.” (<http://www.aynrand.com>) therefore, identities too are largely susceptible to the comprehension of power structures. Yet, there is no clearly established distinction between the key terms which describe such structures: “power”, “force”, “authority” and finally “violence” all denote distinct, particular phenomena; however, their use is often randomized. Hannah Arendt, contemplating violence provides some explanations for that: the reason for it partly lies in the fact that it is assumed that one of the most relevant political issues is the answer to the question: Who rules over whom? She believes that power, strength, force, authority and violence appear only to be denoting different means which secure domination of man over man. These words are taken for synonyms because they serve the same purpose. At the point when public matters are no longer reduced to the roles in the play of domination, she believes that the variety of meaning will be restored. For the purposes of her study *On Violence*, Arendt gives definitions of key terms, power and violence, which will here be adopted. Therefore, *power* is denoted as the human ability of action in concordance, it never belongs to an individual, but to the group, and it exists as long as the group holds together. Someone “has the power” in a situation when a group of people has authorized him to act on their behalf. *Violence* stands out because of its instrumentality, and I would add, its *visibility*. Power is recognized and accepted in any social reality, violence is not. To a certain extent, violence is an instrument of preserving power. However, it does not come from power, nor can power come from violence. “Power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent. Violence appears where power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power’s disappearance” (Arendt 2002, 71).

Let us now look back at the anecdote from the beginning and consider the meanings it constructs. What would be habitually seen and understood as an automated action of no significance, killing of a moth, is presented as a completely new code – killing becomes a way of deliberately communicating a message. A taboo, a disturbance in “the order of things”, becomes a medium through which codes of power speak, and at the same time violence becomes objectified. On the one hand the story pictures a scheme of hierarchy, but on the other, it provides a framework for justification of domination.

The way literature treated these issues changed considerably under the influence of changes in social reality, and it is possible to argue that the treatment of violence presents an indication of the mode of social reality accepted by a particular literary model, which in turn needs to be interpreted in the historical context it was created in. The particular influence of the issues regarding power and violence in the making of unique worldviews becomes apparent but obviously related to the social and historical circumstances a particular literary model originates from. Also, a different treatment of violence, arising from those circumstances, sets

up a different context for the critical approach to the literary interpretation of social reality allowing for different defamiliarization strategies to be explored. The treatment of violence in literature, or even more in popular culture, can be interpreted as a marker of social consciousness regarding the structures of power, therefore as one of the projections of social reality.

The twentieth century saw the greatest fluctuations in power structures so far, and the greatest exercise of institutionalized violence – two world wars, revolutions, perpetual civil wars, the Cold War – a substitute for peace, and a total world peace disrupted by the “oases of war” deployed as means of preserving the balance of power, rather than creating space for the actual change in it. Age of Reason gave way to the Age of Doubt. Social reality started moving away from the subject, consequently providing a slot for ideology to fill – since “there is no ideology except by the subject and for the subject” (Adams and Searle 1989, 239).

3. Mystery fiction: supporting the order of things?

In terms of literary equivalents corresponding to the social reality, we are able to trace similarities between generic fiction and elements of an ideology. Barthes argued that it is in relation to other texts within a genre rather than in relation to lived experience that we make sense of certain events within a text. Semiotically, a genre can be seen as a shared code between the producers and interpreters of texts included within it. Traditionally, genres, particularly literary ones, tended to be regarded as fixed forms, but contemporary theory emphasizes that both their forms and functions are dynamic. In trying to determine how literary models of social reality changed over the century and what influenced the dynamism of change, it is particularly interesting to observe how the detective genre evolved since it best evokes the power play. It revolves around an enigma concerning the crime and punishment paradigm, and it unmistakably reflects the *Zeitgeist* in characterization and in the functional elements of its structure. It is modern man’s morality play desiring to reestablish the clear cut difference between good and evil. It assumes that the world and life inside a mystery book are built as a puzzle, originating from a significant and meaningful discrepancy between truth and appearance, and the general assumption is that a person persistent enough and intelligent enough will be able to finally solve the puzzle, establishing reason as the ruling principle.

“One of the mystery genre’s central features is the kind of light it sheds on particular cultures. The criminal act disrupts social fabric and the detective’s role is to repair the damage and set the order of things back in place, whilst the detection process brings to light aspects of culture that otherwise remain hidden” (Cawelti 1999, 44). Such a perspective presumes that one can rely, with a considerable amount of certainty, on the intrinsic, underlying order of things, which allows us to unambiguously distinguish heroes from villains. At the turn of the twenty-first century *Geistesgeschichte* is run out, the *Zeitgeist* of the postmodern period would be disdain for any expressions of certainty in general.

Identifying them and playing with key stereotypes of popular culture, the Scottish writer Iain Banks fuses conventions of the detective genre with the spirit of the Age of Doubt, and from the

perspective of the postmodern state of affairs, uses them as tools to deconstruct the unchallenged order of things reflected in the mystery genre throughout the twentieth century. Corresponding to the culture of excess, his novel *Complicity* pinpoints representations of postmodern “reality” within the framework of postindustrial consumption culture. It deploys defamiliarization strategies of juxtaposing violence and power taking advantage of the conventions of generic fiction of which violence is a mandatory constituent; it exposes the age of uncertainty by playing with narrative constructs of fictional worlds and finally brings an end to the myth of a subject, of a supreme rational being, completing the circle, elaborating the genre, but simultaneously returning to the starting point, emerging out into the Kafkian universe.

4. *Complicity*: Beyond crime and punishment

The work of Iain Banks embodies in the best sense of the word values of the culture he belongs to, and at the same time, he is its most devoted critic. He is a writer who entirely belongs to the western culture of mass production and excess; he complies with it and takes advantage of it. His work itself is the embodiment of mass production. Writing as Iain Banks in mainstream fiction, and as Iain M. Banks in science fiction, since his first novel, published in 1984, *The Wasp Factory*, he has produced ten other mainstream, and nine science fiction novels. His mainstream literary texts revolve around models of postindustrial society, and like postindustrial first world culture, they are a pastiche made of masterfully crafted popular genres and philosophical reflections on human state in its totality. “Banks’ macabre tales belong to a long and fertile tradition of the Gothic and reviewers have compared his work to that of Edgar Allan Poe and Franz Kafka in its delineation of abnormal psychology.”

[\(<http://homepages.compuserve.de/Mostrall/artikel/bio2.html>\)](http://homepages.compuserve.de/Mostrall/artikel/bio2.html)

On a deeper level, all of his stories deal with the issue of power, in all its concrete forms, and with the possible courses of action an individual takes once s/he realizes the omnipotence of mechanisms set in motion.

In terms of formal analysis, *Complicity* provides some interesting insights into the literary paradigm functioning as a means of representation, that is, it presents a specific approach to genre and to the combining of popular and literary genres, and an excellent example of plot development in an elaborate narrative structure for the purpose of expressing a standpoint about social reality mirrored by the work of art. Depending on the choice of key elements, *Complicity* may be interpreted as a mystery novel or as a *Bildungsroman*, or even as a gothic horror story. Here, I am dealing with the most obvious, taking into account the assumption that readers interpret texts in the light of other texts and their own worldviews, and I shall focus on the elements of the mystery genre and on the way they affect understanding of the novel as a whole. Genre literature raises readers’ expectations, which is particularly true of the mystery genre, regarding its pattern that includes compositional scheme: a puzzle at the beginning, solution at the end; character typology: there is only one culprit, and only one investigator; persistent narrative perspective; no unwarranted twists or turns in the structure of the plot, etc.

A well-written crime story demands that the pattern be respected, but on the other hand it offers numerous opportunities for the making of a genre text into a singular experience by expressing the author's talent in domains that do not belong to the pattern – in style, choice of topics, motivation, or character development. *Complicity* in many respects follows the pattern.

Structurally, according to the categorization by Stanko Lasić (1973, 91), the pattern of *Complicity* would most closely fit into the compositional scheme dominated by jeopardy, although there are elements that belong to the compositional scheme of investigation; however, here it has been deployed as a decoy. In the compositional scheme of jeopardy, all the events are related to the potentially perilous situation that places the protagonist(s) in situations of anxiety, insecurity, even fear, supplying them with peculiar clues and sudden twists and turns. The character in jeopardy aspires to resolve the situation and provide an explanation for the action: to transform secrets into truths. The action of *Complicity* revolves around a series of mysterious attacks on the people who have the reputation of pillars of society, all of whom were listed in an unfavorable article written by journalist Cameron Colley. He is the main suspect for the police, but they are not really the investigators, they are just an instrument of compulsion, since it is the hero at whom the conflict is pointed and he is the one who has to resolve it. The bottom line of jeopardy is always a criminal act. As it turns out, this particular crime comes from the past and it brings to the surface issues against which humanistic values in general have been set. Unfortunately, the very moment of resolution in the generic sense brings a disaster to the order of things, polemicising the nature and the purpose of punishment. According to generic conventions, punishment functions as the element of a crime novel which best points to the author's understanding of social reality. The culprit should be faced with a *just* punishment, which means that the culprit will be punished according to the norms of a society, of an organization or of a cult he belongs to and which represents the setting of the action. These novels reaffirm the established values: crime needs to be punished, and usually, it is quite obvious what a crime is.

Banks here plays the readers – who is the culprit, what is his crime? The answer to these questions may arise from the answer to the question: Which story are we in? and Who is in power? And the story of *Complicity* runs through a series of micro-narratives that exist on separate planes in time and space, deploying different sets of characters, that all become unified inside the consciousness of the hero, Cameron Colley. Time and space slip into linearity at the point when Cameron solves the mystery. He, at that point, emerges from a quest he never intended to embark upon, and he is revealed as the story's theme and its outcome.

Narrative, understood as a mental representation, consists of a world (setting), populated by individuals (characters), who participate in actions and happenings (events, plot), through which they undergo change [temporal dimension] (Ryan 1996). The novel opens with a narrative belonging to the murderer, that is, with the narrative populated only by the murderer and his victims at the moment the crimes take place. It functions on a parallel temporal and

spatial plane with the narration belonging to the hero, and no references exist to the events which took place before or after, suggesting that the existence of the characters before and after the acts of violence continues somewhere else, that is, within the framework of the main narrative. This narrative is presented in a series of episodes which interrupt the flow of the main narrative and up to a point when two narratives share one of the characters and tell from different perspectives about the same event, there seems to be little, if any, connection between them except for the hints about the hero's possible involvement, which is, of course one of the conventions of the genre. The focal character here is obviously the murderer, since the readers know everything he sees, does or feels, but formally, it is a second person narrative. The story is being told in the second person at the same time using the point of view of a character, which simultaneously prevents immersion on the subconscious level and enhances identification on the rational level. This is a world inhabited by the perpetrator, his victims, *and the reader*. A faceless character is telling his own story, he or she is "you", however, his story has the intensity, not only of retelling, but of reliving of the event, s/he becomes intimate with the reader to the point of achieving the impression that the reader is there at the moment the events take place, so the reader is pulled in, he becomes a silent witness, completely deprived of the capability to change the course of events, and absolutely conscious of the meaning and the implications of the actions taking place. The psychological effect of this fairly simple device is immense and the reader is placed in a position inside the story as an independent "underlying" observer sharing consciousness with the character but not identifying with him. Episodes possess an Aristotelian perfection of beginning, middle, and end. A definite and single problem is set, worked out, and solved; each of the episodes is a perfect whole in itself in terms of composition. At the point the murderer is identified among the characters of the main narrative, the episodes cease to exist as such, and the actions of the murderer are integrated into the main narrative.

The narrative belonging to the hero functions as a mental representation of the "real world". It is being presented through the consciousness of the main character and told in first person, up to the last chapter. The course of events is rather linear, save for the flash backs, which start as dream fragments and grow into full size recall of the two key events happening in the past involving both the hero and the murderer. The last chapter slips back to the second person narration, this time sharing the perception of the hero, again invoking the witness reader in hero's attempt of closure.

The capital crime of all of the participants in all of the sequences is their complicity but the punishment does not always come from the outside – and here Banks places power alongside with violence accomplishing the transformation of interpretation. In switching perspectives and worlds, crime and its nature become relativised, so do criminals and victims and it becomes difficult to tell the difference between a criminal act and a just punishment. Both exhibit violence; both, or any of them, are the metaphors of captivity.

However, the core of the novel is Cameron's story which belongs to all of the narratives.

The hero is introduced inside a model of his own world. For a long time he remains absolutely unaware of the crimes taking place. He is an educated professional with no immediate interest in solving crimes *per se*, however, as a journalist he is someone who wields power. His opening scene depicts him documenting the return of the British nuclear submarine which is an actual event that did take place in the actual world. For the author it provides an opportunity to define time in the story, but also to define some of the character's political views, and the world he lives in. He is a loner, a chain smoker, a techno fan, an anti Tory, an adulterer, an agnostic and a substance abuser, to state the most obvious. He follows the clues of one constructed mystery only to find himself being a part of another, undergoes change in the process and discovers some rather unpleasant truths about himself. In the end he becomes a personification of the absurd hero – the one who realizes the futility of his toil but still keeps toiling, completely liberated from hope. Thus he transcends the timelessness of a typical investigator – he remains firmly rooted in what he sees and understands as the real world, accepting his own boundaries. His greatest crime is his complicity in the state of affairs, his complacency. His punishment is grave – he loses his life, not in a physical, but in a social sense, he had lost his carefully constructed identity and needs to start over – the metaphor of his catastrophe best conveyed by his description of the status of his favorite computer game *Despot* after the police released it to him:

It's a wasteland. My kingdom is gone. The land is still there, some of the people are, and the capital city, designed in the shape giant crescents of buildings around two lakes, so that from the air it says 'CC' ... but something terrible seems to have happened. The city is crumbling, largely abandoned; aqueducts fallen, reservoirs cracked and dry, districts flooded, others burned down; the activity taking place within the city is about what you'd expect from town... The worst of it is there's no head man, no *_Despot_*, no me. I can look at all this but I can't do anything about it, not on this scale. To start playing again I'd have to trade this omniscient but omni-impotent view for that of... God knows, some tribal warrior, village elder, a mayor or a bandit chief (Banks 1992, 306).

But he is not allowed to start again, life is different from the game. Banks robs his hero of any optimism he may have left, making sure he stays within the boundaries of the "real". This is where *Complicity* leaves genre conventions; the hero underwent change and stopped being larger than life. Individual crimes are shrunken compared to the dimension of collective guilt. It discloses tears in the fabric of society that are beyond repair instead of just punishing those who venture beyond the socially acceptable. Finally, in doing so, it becomes a testimonial about the personal horrors of our times. Cameron sums it up telling about the walled-in city under the Edinburgh castle:

But in those moments of blackness you stood there, as though you yourself were made of stone like the stunted, buried buildings around you, and for all your educated cynicism, for all your late-twentieth-century materialist Western maleness and your fierce despoliation of all things superstitious, you felt a touch of true and absolute terror, a consummately feral dread of the dark; a fear rooted back somewhere before your species had truly become human and came to

know itself, and in that primaeval mirror of the soul, that shaft of self-conscious understanding which sounded both the depths of your collective history and your own individual being, you glimpsed - during that extended, petrified moment - something that was you and was not you, was a threat and not a threat, an enemy and not an enemy, but possessed of a final, expediently functional indifference more horrifying than evil (Banks 1992, 310).

5. Conclusion

Mystery genre, in this case, supports the author's (and readers') vision of their own culture. It is the most highly represented genre in most public libraries. Violence became modern man's entertainment – whether it is fictional or documentary, it is certain to attract the audience's attention. At the same time people grow less and less sensitive to violence and more willing to look for excuses to justify victimization, politically or otherwise. *Complicity* treats violence differently within each of the narrative sequences and that becomes a prism reflecting the perception of reality within that sequence. Ultimately, the story discloses the institutionalized violence – the state apparatuses (school, army, politics), the economic system (earning shareholders their profits at any price), the self inflicted violence sanctioned by the society because of the economic interest (smoking, drinking) – and instead demonstrating the scope of power, violence becomes a metaphor of being un-free. It becomes a symbol of captivity in the “free world” and a testimonial of the lack of power. It is a symbol of human insignificance. It is a dark vision of the world, which deconstructs the traditional understanding of mystery literature. In a postmodernist world, the genre invented to rationalize the lack of logic in the state of affairs now serves as its best model, reflecting the scope of [d]evolution of the social circumstances. Art and reality are at play uncovering the illusion, as put by Georg Lukacs, “[T]he universal appears as a quality of the individual and the particular, reality becomes manifest and can be experienced within appearance, the general principle is exposed as the specific impelling cause for the individual case being specially depicted” (Adams and Searle 1989, 789).

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