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Into the Rabbit Hole: The Realism of Simulation

Summary

In the first half of the 1980s, at the height of the postmodernist theoretical debate, the actual literary production already showed signs of fatigue from the postmodernist dictum. Especially the works of American authors from the 1980s onwards show an increasing tendency to abandon the dead-end loops of postmodernist autoreferentiality, and to focus on various aspects of tangible reality instead. The paper argues that such practice should not be considered or theorised in terms of falling back on the great tradition of realism but rather as a necessary literary response to the mechanisms governing the changing of the epochs. My intention is to show that the allegedly realistic modes of contemporary American writing correspond to the epochal social, cultural and political changes accompanied by the rise of digital media. As such, these works effectively reflect, comment on and contribute to the contemporary reality that can no longer be adequately described or theorised about in terms of Cartesian metaphysics.

Key words: Neo-Realism, Postmodernism, Postmodernity, Hypertext, Hyperreality, Real vs. Fictive

Po zajčji luknji nizdol: realizem simulacije

Povzetek

Ko je teoretična debata o postmodernizmu v prvi polovici osemdesetih let prejšnjega stoletja dosegla vrhunec, so se v dejanski prozni produkciji že kazala prva znamenja izčrpanosti literarnega postmodernizma. Zlasti v proznih delih ameriških avtorjev lahko vsaj od sredine osemdesetih let naprej opazimo tendenco odmikanja od neskončnih zank postmodernističnega samonanašanja in vedno večje zanimanje za razne vidike otipljive resničnosti. V članku trdim, da teh praks ne gre obravnavati v smislu vrnitve k tradiciji realizma, ampak kot neizbežen literarni odziv na menjavo zgodovinskih dob. Namen članka je pokazati, da domnevno realistični modeli, ki prevladujejo v sodobni ameriški prozi, ustrezajo družbenim, ekonomskim in političnim spremembam, ki so posledica menjave epoh in vzpona digitalnih medijev. Kot taka ta dela učinkovito zrcalijo in soustvarjajo sodobno resničnost, ki je ne moremo več zadovoljivo opisati ali ovrednotiti z novoveškim pojmovnim instrumentarijem.

Ključne besede: neorealizem, postmodernizem, postmoderna doba, hipertekst, hiperrresničnost, resnično vs. izmišljeno

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1. Postmodernism and Beyond

It is hard to think of a literary tradition that would go through quite as lengthy and as meticulously recorded agony as postmodernism. Nevertheless, literary criticism is still largely at a loss when it comes to identifying and evaluating instances of contemporary literature which significantly depart from the postmodernist mode. One of the reasons for this is certainly connected to the usage and understanding of the terms postmodernism and postmodernity, which especially English and American authors use synonymously. The problems, however, persist even when the two are used as separate categories, the first referring to a specific literary period and the second to the epoch succeeding the modern age.

When speaking of the extent of the agony, one is reminded of the problems with conception and the labour pains accompanying the formation of the theoretical groundwork for the treatment of postmodernism. Various, often contradictory, definitions abounded in the critical discourse of the 1970s and 1980s. As initial empirical analyses and other text-based approaches[1] failed to provide the *differentia specifica* of postmodernist production, the mid-1980s debate increasingly focused on the more metaphysical aspects, foregrounding the social, economic and cultural changes accompanying the rise of the postmodernist tradition. In this respect the most productive answer was offered, in my opinion, by the methodologies close to the *Geistesgeschichte* approach, defining literary and historical periods according to the intrinsic 'spirit of the age' by examining the structure and interrelation of the four basic paradigms (the Subject, the Transcendence, the Truth and Reality) specific to each artistic and historical period. In the case of postmodernism, the examination of the status of the four paradigms reveals that it represents the final phase of metaphysical nihilism and, with that, the definite disintegration of the modern-age-specific metaphysical frame. Its successors should therefore move away from Cartesian metaphysics entirely and abide by a new, postmodern structuring of the world.

In the US, the beginnings of the terminal crisis of postmodernism can be traced back to the first half of the 1980s, when a surge of quality young authors[2] swept the scene. In their fiction, they abandoned postmodernist abstractions and metafictional loops, focusing, instead, on concrete everyday reality and addressing various contemporary social and economic issues. The trend of using realistic modes of representation has been gaining momentum ever since and has resulted in a very diverse spectrum of seemingly realistic works, ranging from the distinctly marginal and Avant-Garde to critically acclaimed masterpieces and global bestsellers. Despite the variety, these works have been more or less collectively categorised as examples of post- or neo-realism,[3] and treated theoretically in terms of the revival of the realist tradition as charted back in the second half of the 19th century.[4] From the point of view of *Geistesgeschichte*, such falling back on a tradition

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1 For example, David Lodge's, Douwe W. Fokkema's and Ihab Hassan's enumerations of formal and thematic characteristics of postmodernist writing, which, due to the intertextual nature of postmodernist writing, can also be found in works pertaining to other traditions.

2 E.g. Tom Wolfe, Brett Easton Ellis, Tama Janowitz, Jay McInerney, Paul Auster.

3 In the existing critical treatments, the term is not used in the sense of a historical, unified literary movement or period, but rather ahistorically, pointing to certain similar features. In this article I use the term with reference to the American literary production since the mid-1980s, which moves away from the postmodernist formal and thematic paradigms to the conventions associated with the realist modes of writing. The article therefore also considers a number of authors who have not appeared in the hitherto critical treatment of the phenomenon, but whose writing fits the profile.

4 The statement is primarily based on the seminal collection of critical essays on the subject titled Neo-Realism in *Contemporary American Fiction* (1992), edited by Kristiaan Versluys. The contributors, who include some of the most distinguished names

which emerged as a result of a very specific spiritual historical environment signals the impotence of this production to adequately reflect and comment upon the existing reality. In this respect, literary neo-realism could hardly be considered a herald of a new era but rather an essentially retrograde literary phenomenon. Nonetheless, most of the fiction labelled neo-realist should not be dismissed as a mere curious instance of literary epigonism, and there are several reasons for it.

The most obvious one would certainly be the diversity of the neo-realist production. Alexander Weber, for example, proposes four subcategories of late 20th century neo-realism: postmodern neo-realism, ex-centric neo-realism, minimalist neo-realism and integrative neo-realism. The distinguishing feature of postmodern neo-realism is, he says "the 'postmodern legacy' of preoccupation with language and other forms of representation. […] Language and representation become parts of the themes of novels – without the works themselves being necessarily metafictional or metanarrative" (Weber 1999, 6). Representative authors of this subcategory are, for example, Don DeLillo, Paul Auster and Walter Abish. Ex-centric neo-realism refers primarily to "minority literatures and feminist or rather female literary production" (ibid., 7), which frequently makes use of folklore, oral history, dreams etc. Its main representatives are Alice Walker, Louise Erdrich, Leslie Silko, Marilynne Robinson, Amy Tan, etc. In the centre of minimalist neo-realism are usually households of white working middle-class characters afflicted by doomed relationships, addictions, unemployment and so on. Descriptions of surface reality often escalate to what Weber humorously compares to "a film script financed mainly by product placement" (ibid., 9). Authors primarily associated with this type of writing are Bobbie Ann Mason, Raymond Carver, Ann Beatie and to some extent also Brett Eason Ellis. Integrative neo-realism refers to fiction which contains all of the abovementioned categories. Such are, for Weber, Russell Banks' novel *Continental Drift* and the writing of Robert Stone (ibid., 10). Further suggestions for this category might, in my view, also include Ronald Sukenick, Jonathan Safran Foer and Don DeLillo's *Underworld*.

If the diversity of neo-realist production is the most obvious reason against automatically writing it off as epigonic, the most pressing reason is certainly the fact that some of the most critically acclaimed works defy, in some segment at least, a satisfactory application of the established critical apparatus.[5] In other words: they are realistic, but not quite so. What follows will concentrate on the 'not quite so' in an attempt to show that this alleged neo-realism is primarily a consequence of the social, cultural and economic changes taking place after the Second World War and connected to the changing of the epochs. What is more, some of its works may already be considered the first instances of literature of the new era which, on top of it all, recognises no distinction between the real and the non-real.

2. Hypertext and the Changing of Paradigms

One may speculate why other arts were faster in responding to the Zeitgeist.[6] The intimacy between the traditional literary canon and European social, political and cultural conscience should certainly be considered in this respect. Another reason that comes to mind would perhaps be the rigidity of the literary academia when it comes to phenomena diverting from established, traditional patterns.

in contemporary literary criticism, unanimously hail the return of American fiction to its natural environment of the realist tradition. This stance also prevails in the treatments of American neo-realism by German literary critics Alexander Weber and Heinz Ickstadt (cf. Weber 1999, 2–4), for example, and in two influential studies of contemporary American fiction, Rebein's *Hicks, Tribes, and Dirty Realists* (2001) and Millard's *Contemporary American Fiction* (2000).

5   Take Don DeLillo, for example, who, despite his popularity with the literary academia, is constantly subjected to criticism regarding the sloppiness of his character creation (cf. Cantor 1991, 39–40).

6   One of the first artistic reactions to the epochal changes in society – triggered by the change in production relations defining the postindustrial stage of capitalism – emerged as early as the 1960s with Pop Art, for example.

However, in my opinion, the decisive factor is on the one hand much more prosaic, on the other, much more complicated, at least as far as the future of our understanding of the literary in general is concerned.

The most convincing reason for literature's delay in transcending the modern age historical and metaphysical paradigms seems to be connected to its medium, the rise of which coincided with and heavily contributed to the development of the defining categories of modernity. As Bolter observes, "[w]hen the printed word supplanted and marginalised the codex, the writing space took on the qualities of linearity, replicability and fixity" (Bolter 2001, 22). These qualities lie at the very core of the modern age structuring of the world; also, they establish the notion of the author as an authority, a God-like creator of finite and unchangeable (fictive) worlds, and the ultimate metaphor of the Cartesian subject. If we remember Marshall McLuhan's famous words that "[s]ocieties have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication" (McLuhan 2001, 8), it appears that the only solution for literature to productively abandon postmodernism and modernity with it should involve a drastic modification of its medium.

At this point, the neo-realist candidature for succession seems highly unlikely as practically all of its production appeared in printed books. However, the temporal proximity and the nature of the medium, which has taken over most global communication over the last two decades – the hypertext[7] – demands a consideration of the neo-realist writing in terms of its spiritual and historical background, and especially through the lens of this new medium. It goes without saying that in the second half of the 1980s, when the first instances of the writing in question appeared, the hypertext was far from being the *sine qua non* of everyday reality that it is today. Nevertheless, as I will show on the following pages, its logic and its structure correspond to the theoretical and philosophical systems developed by all major theoreticians of postmodernity.[8] As such, it is an embodiment of the mechanisms governing the development of society and culture since the 1950s. It is, furthermore, essentially text-bound and therefore suitable for literary artistic expression, which would make it the obvious successor of print.

The task at hand is, therefore, first to provide the hypothetical framework of the alterations brought by the new medium to the traditional aspects of literature,[9] and then to apply it to the neo-realist writing, especially to those segments which the existing critical discourse pinpoints as problematic. If such a framework proves more productive than the existing approaches, then the neo-realist production might be considered a significant and original departure not only from postmodernism but also from the exhausted literary institution of modernity. It would also mean that the new medium allows the actualisation of its logic within any given medium, which might provide some consolation to those fearing the disappearance of the printed book.

7   My usage of the term corresponds to Jay David Bolter's definition of the hypertext as a model for any kind of electronic writing:
       At present, electronic (or digital) writing describes a larger category than hypertext or hypermedia. Electronic writing includes word processing, e-mail, listservs, chat rooms, and MUDs and MOOs, none of which have the node and link structure of classic hypertext […]. All electronic writing shares important qualities with hypertext (flexibility, instability, interactivity), so that hypertext, once again in the form of the World Wide Web, serves a paradigm for our cultural experience with electronic writing. (Bolter 2001, xiii–iv)

8   I'm referring to Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality (1981), Jameson's concept of culturalisation of all the aspects of social life within the postmodern situation (2000) , Lyotard's model of the self as a node in an information network (1984), Debord's theory of society of spectacle (1999) and Deleuze's and Guattari's rhizome concept (1987).

9   The technical aspects of the actual hypertext fiction, appearing since roughly the 1990s, will significantly contribute to the purely theoretical speculations.

3. Into the Hyperised Reality

In my outline of the theoretical foundation, which will provide an insight into the processes governing the development of the economy, society and culture commonly associated with the epoch of postmodernity, I will largely rely upon Jean Baudrillard's theoretical system. The reason is simple: his categories provide the most accurate description of the processes connected to the formation and the observable functioning of the existing society. Also, his key concept of hyperreality – a notion also central to what follows here – summarises the observations of his colleagues with ingenious practicability. Hyperreality refers to the reality of the third-order simulacra (Baudrillard 1994, 121–7) conditioned by the shift of production relations which signalled the beginning of the postindustrial stage of capitalism after the Second World War. It is a reality of models, in which consumption is no longer bound to the functional value of the products. Objects of consumption, in turn, "assume their meaning in their differential relation to other signs" (Baudrillard 1981, 66), and ultimately function as signifiers. With that, they acquire social meaning and function as a basis of identity creation. All the aspects of reality and, consequently, subjectivity are then fundamentally network systems of differential signs that can be arbitrarily manipulated according to one's preferences, which in a mediagenic society generally correspond to media-transferred trends. The logic anticipates the processes literally embodied in the World Wide Web and the system at its core – the hypertext.

From the perspective of my argument, the most important feature of hypertext-based communication is the changed status of the receiver of the text. His or her position is no longer *a priori* submissive; within the space of the hypertext, individuals can randomly construct their identity as well as reality. When browsing websites, playing games, reading hyperfiction and blogs, participating in various social networks or visiting chatrooms, the users manipulate the content according to their own inclinations in their own immediate realities through the selection of links and the possibility of a direct response. The medium replaces the principles of linearity and hierarchisation implicit in print by fluidity and rhizomatous decentralisation. Additionally, its interactive and immersible nature enables the creation of a new sociality, social consciousness, and consequently of a new culture, which, has been actively interfering with the non-virtual environments for quite some time.

That brings us to the core question of this essay: how do the traditional categories of literature translate into the new medium? Owing to a comprehensive corpus of digital literature already in existence, the answers are not purely speculative. The most drastic consequence of employing the hypertext as the medium for literary expression is the disappearance of the paradigmatic distinction between the author and the reader established with the invention of print. The meaning is literally realised by the so-called wreader,[10] who, through the selection of links and his or her own responses, constructs fictional realities as well as fictional identities according to his or her interests and desires. This is only rendered possible with the disappearance of textual anatomy, within which literary worlds appear as independent, finite and clearly demarcated units. In the Internet hypertext, the dividing line between the literary work and its environment is completely blurred since the very principle of hypertext functioning enables constant users interventions within the work. With that, another traditional category, the concept of fictionality, is relativised as there is no essential difference between literary and non-literary hypertext environments.[11] Such arbitrary creation of realities and identities from the information available corresponds to Baudrillard's basic categories of postmodernity, at the same time indicating a productive alternative to the impotence of Cartesian subjectivity.

10 The term was proposed by Landow to denote a reader who "creates the story apart from authorial control in choosing links" (Landow 1994, 14).

11 To illustrate: a random browsing can result in entering an instance of hypertext literature without realising it, and vice versa – a link in a hypertext novel, for example, can take one onto a random Internet page, which thus becomes part of a literary work.

4. The Generators of Reality

The following pages are dedicated to the examination of the three categories which in the case of neo-realist and other deviations from postmodernist modes prove the most difficult to adequately tackle with the traditional tools of literary criticism: the concepts of literary subjects, literary worlds and stylistic features. As I believe that the problems are very probably connected to the epochal change of paradigms metaphorised by the new medium, I will first speculate on the possible actualisations of the three areas within the new circumstances, and then apply my findings to the actual production.

Recapping the existing theoretical treatments,[12] we can describe the postmodern subject as a fluid, ever-changing network of mediated data. Their validity depends on the stability of the potential systems they might create between themselves and in connection to the systems already confirmed in hyperreality. These may be considered the core of identity, which, however, is still fluid and prone to alterations: if the clusters of data entering the system create a more stable structure, the core is replaced or updated. The most obvious result of translating such a concept of subjectivity to the field of literary subjectivities is that the 'author' is reduced to a source of data which the 'reader' manipulates into the building of his or her own realities. At the same time the author is also an individual defined by the hyperreal logic of his own identity creation. With that, the autobiographical mode of writing becomes the only possible mode – whoever you are writing about is essentially linked to your current systems of subjectivity. However, such 'autobiographicality' is yet to be actualised as hyperreality, so it effectively points to the future; furthermore, it is shared by all participating in its system. As we all select from the same pool of data, there is no essential difference between narrative perspectives since the logic of literary character creation is synonymous and simultaneous with the building of any given identity.

Casual leafing through the works of what might be considered contemporary 'realistic' writing reveals the absolute primacy of first person, often seemingly autobiographical, narratives, which are frequently combined with sudden and ostensibly unsubstantiated changes of narrative perspectives.[13] The specific nature of the first person narration occurring in the works in question is in my opinion epitomized in Mark Leyner's 1990s fiction,[14] which fully corresponds to the characteristics of Weber's postmodern neo-realism.

The main protagonist of most of his prose is writer Mark Leyner. Consequently, the works strike us as autobiographical. The style of narration is realistic, events are palpable and provide an impression of a coherent structuring of the world. However, the very world into which Leyner places his 'autobiography' simultaneously disqualifies and generates the autobiographical moment. The literary 'Mark Leyner' constantly moves within the mediagenic reality, randomly selecting the elements from it to manipulate his identity. The data seem credible; they are part of our experiential reality, although most individuals will still have to verify them in their everyday practice. Credible is also Leyner's 'autobiographical' identity – the autobiography is constructed along the way, and the reader places individual pieces of information on 'Leyner' within systems of information, whose probability and stability depend on their connectivity. Leyner's authorial existence is thus entirely fluid and depends on the reader's capability of connecting the information

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12 I am primarily referring to Baudrillard's, Jameson's, Deleuze's and Guattari's (see footnote 8 of this article) and Nash's (2001) concepts.

13 Cf. Don DeLillo, Ronald Sukenick, Douglas Coupland, Mark Leyner, Michael Hornburg, Bret Easton Ellis, Jonathan Safran Foer, Philip Roth, etc.

14 I.e. *Et Tu, Babe*, *My Cousin* (1993), *My Gastroenterologist* (1993) and *Tooth Imprints on a Corndog* (1995).

provided. His identity is realised through the readers' selection of the characteristics they choose to pursue, and thus relies completely on the readers' experiences. Leyner's example also reveals the nature of another feature which frequently appears in the production of authors digressing from the postmodernist modes, namely the dissolving of the difference between literary and non-literary subjectivities. These works are permeated by celebrities and real-life personalities, who sometimes even appear as protagonists. In contrast to the previous cases where real people were introduced into the stories, they function as trademarks, completely open-ended third-order simulacra, liable to change and reconstruction just as easily as any other character.[15]

The existence of postmodern identity as the fluid, ever-changing network of data depends on the continuous influx of mediated data from the environment, and is thus essentially enabled by it. In view of that, a postmodern literary identity would essentially be actualised and defined by the stability of the systems which the information on the environment creates for the reader. To accomplish this task effectively, literary environments should, on the one hand, consist of data that have been already confirmed in hyperreality, which would provide a relatively stable core. On the other hand, consistent with the logic of hyperreality creation, postmodern literary locations would prove to be completely fluid systems, where places would no longer be combinations of a finite number of characteristics, but would only emerge according to the placing of these characteristics within the systems of more or less stable environments. Since these features would be simulacra in themselves, copies without an original, intended for further copying and evaluation in hyperreality, the status of the 'actual' and 'fictive' environments would be completely the same.

Translating these hypothetical assumptions in the actual neo-realist production seems tricky at first: these works function realistically primarily because their literary worlds consist chiefly of elements from our everyday experiential reality. It is the nature of this reality, however, which enables us to examine these works in terms of the above suppositions, and, on the other hand, to provide productive explanations for the hitherto problematic deviations from the traditional realistic modes. Analysing the creation of neo-realist literary worlds in terms of their mediagenic and hyperreal potential, one observes two general patterns: they are either created through the constant influx of information provided by television, advertisements, radio, newspapers, etc., or they take place in environments already existing as hyperreality. A paradigmatic example of the former would be the world of Don DeLillo's *White Noise.* The action mostly takes place in a small university town, Blacksmith. DeLillo provides virtually no information on the town; instead, its features emerge through the references to the existing geographical locations and events. These enter the story via pieces of media-transferred information, which compose more or less stable systems of the realities upon which the protagonists develop their characteristics and corresponding actions. The only constant in the perpetual construction and disintegration of systems formed by the data received via television, radio or newspapers is the idea of the medium, which provides a meaning for each action and functions as its organizing principle. Let me illustrate my point with an example:

> That night, a Friday, we gathered in front of the set, as was the custom and the rule, with take-out Chinese. There were floods, earthquakes, mud slides, erupting volcanoes. We'd never before been so sensitive to our duty, our Friday assembly. Heinrich was not sullen, I was not bored. Steffie, brought close to tears by a sitcom husband arguing with his wife, appeared totally absorbed in these documentary clips of calamity and death. Babette tried

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15 To name just a few more obvious examples: Don DeLillo's treatment of Lee Harvey Oswald and other historical personalities involved in Kennedy's assassination in *Libra* (1988), or – through the character of Jack Gladney – of Hitler in *White Noise*, Sukenick's usage of Elvis in *Mosaic Man* (1999), Jonathan Safran Foer's naming of the main protagonist after himself in his debut novel *Everything is Illuminated* (2002), etc.

to switch to a comedy series about a group of racially mixed kids who build their own communications satellite. She was startled by the force of our objection. We were otherwise silent, watching houses slide into the ocean, whole villages crackle and ignite in a mass of advancing lava. Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping. (DeLillo 1999, 64)

Because the reality in the novel is constructed chiefly according to media-transferred information, it is not really surprising that, only a few chapters later, a similar disaster takes place in Blacksmith, which is only recognised as a catastrophe by the protagonists when it is proclaimed as such by the television and the radio**.**

To employ environments which already exist in hyperreality is a tendency shared by virtually all the authors of the fiction associated with neo-realism. Relying upon our media-enhanced ideas of places16 certainly adds to the realistic feel, but it is essentially simulacrous. The logic is, again, best described by the work of Mark Leyner: unlike DeLillo, Leyner does not place the action into a 'fictive' town, which gains its 'non-fictive' or hyperreal status only through its placement within a medium. His environments emerge in the process of reading according to the characteristics they are comprised of. These are stereotypical notions about American cities, which – according to how they appear together – inform us of the place of the action. The decision on where a certain segment is taking place thus completely relies on both the author's and the reader's familiarity with these stereotypes. In Leyner's case, these cliché characteristics rely upon the information one might receive via movies, TV series and tabloids, which means that the data entering Leyner's systems of reality are at the same time also parts of other systems of hyperreality. That makes the reading of his stories essentially hypertextual as it corresponds to the logic of using the Internet.

The majority of the authors associated with neo-realism, of course, do not employ such drastic measures in their environment construction as Leyner does. The underlying principle is, however, the same: operating with locations with significant media coverage automatically triggers the creation of hyperreal systems. The reason is certainly not some conscious effort on the part of the writers to produce something drastically new. Rather, the alterations are a logical consequence of the changes on the level of society, economy and culture that can be traced back to the 1950s but had culminated to the level of everyday experiential reality by the 1980s.[17]

In the domain of style and especially I the use of imagery, radical deviations from established models can already be observed in the production of the literary cyberpunk at the beginning of the 1980s. The most obvious characteristic of cyberpunk metaphors is the reversal of the relation between nature and technology, technology being used for description of natural phenomena. Such metaphors are essentially simulacrous since technological notions in themselves function as copies without originals and the meaning is generally ascribed to them through verification in reality. The shift coincides with the spread of high technology to the level of everyday existence at the beginning of the 1980s, and with the formation of the technosociety, which rapidly progressed to a fully mediagenic one over the next five years. In a media-governed society, each event – or, for that matter, individual – is technological, which eradicates the boundary between nature and technology, or rather, technology becomes the guarantee of nature's existence.

With that in mind, it is only logical that cyberpunk's strictly technological metaphors should

16 These as a rule include cities and landscapes which keep reappearing in the media in very specific contexts, for example New York, Seattle, Detroit, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Washington, etc.

17 For a more detailed discussion, see Krevel 2011, 7–10.

eventually extend across the entire spectrum of media phenomena, which form the foundation for the creation and understanding of the more complex segments of everyday hyperreality. In other words, if metaphors essentially define the unknown with the familiar, the vehicles of postmodern metaphors should be elements that have already become an integral part of various hyperreal systems: media personalities and events, commercials, movies and TV series, heavily advertised consumer goods and so on.

Examining the prose associated with neo-realism, one indeed observes the absolute dominance of mediagenic imagery. Similes and metaphors like the one from Douglas Coupland's *Generation X*,[18] "Silly-Putty-coloured espalier of scars" (Coupland 2001, 40), or Don DeLillo's "Another postmodern sunset, rich in romantic imagery" (DeLillo 1999, 216), fundamentally contribute to the realistic feel of these works, directly connecting them to our everyday reality.

Another feature to be expected in the literature of the third-order simulacra would be the abundance of neologisms, as the logic of their formation is not only fundamentally simulacrous,[19] though in fact paradigmatic of hyperreality creation. The beginnings of the trend can, in fact, be observed already in the production of literary cyberpunk, but cyberpunk neologisms remain strictly within the field of technology. Judging by the development of society and culture in the following years, one could expect neologisms which would, on the one hand, rely on the artifacts of the mediagenic society, and, on the other, contribute to the formation of its hyperreal systems.

A brief inspection of fiction associated with neo-realism reveals an unusual frequency of neologisms which rely upon artefacts of popular media culture. In the majority of these works, our understanding of the neologisms significantly defines how we follow and what we make of a story. Such an approach is best illustrated and even thematised by Coupland's system of footnotes in *Generation X*, which provide more or less random explanations of hip terms and neologisms, albeit without appearing in the body of the text *per se*. However, when the reader encounters a concept described by the neologism, he or she names it with the word provided, and so the neologism, up to that moment just a piece of information, starts functioning as a third-order simulacrum and becomes part of hyperreality.

It seems, however, that in terms of style the most radical alterations brought about by introducing the (modus operandi of) hypertext into literary writing are to take place in the domain of narrative techniques. Hypertext functioning and the logic of its organization are based on procedures traditionally pertaining to the field of the non-realistic, the abstract, allowing manipulation associated with fragmentation, decentralisation and montage. In this regard, the literary production conditioned by the medium of hypertext might be expected to move away from the traditional realist presentation modes. However, taking into account that according to the metaphysical structuring of postmodernity literature is one of the media, and as such generates information for the construction of hyperreality, hypertext conditioned literature would paradoxically create and at the same time mirror the experiential reality of individuals. In other words, its 'realism' would be realised by the usage of techniques traditionally regarded as 'abstract'.

Some of the best works associated with neo-realism have had their style compared to the changing of TV channels (cf. DeLillo, Leyner, Sukenick, Ellis), with individual episodes appearing collage

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18   Coupland's *Generation X* may be added to the rather limited group of representatives of integrative neo-realism. Its formal organisation and preoccupation with language correspond to postmodern neo-realism, its themes and style to minimalist neo-realism, while the inclusion of stories, fairy-tales and dreams partly correspond to the defining features of ex-centric neo-realism.

19   I.e. the sign (word) precedes and thus creates the concept.

like, without any obvious connection. It is, furthermore, hard to define the central episodes, as there are either many, or none. There are stories within stories, novels without an ending – or at least lacking an ending that would connect individual episodes into a coherent whole – sudden cuts and changes of perspective, slogans from commercials, etc. It has all been done before, certainly, but there is a fundamental difference from the previous cases, in which such techniques served the non-realistic, abstract interpretations of reality. In literature from the mid-1980s onwards, by contrast, such presentation modes are directly connected to the principles that form the very core of mediagenic reality. They reflect our hyperreal experience and function completely realistically.

5. Into the Desert of the Real

The practice of conditioning the realistic feel by employing techniques traditionally considered abstract, non-realistic or even 'avant-garde' is paradoxical only as long as we discuss it in terms of established notions and instruments of literary criticism. These, with their attachment to categorisations, hierarchisations and classifications based on clearly demarcated binary oppositions, most intimately relate to the metaphysical foundation of the modern age. Bearing in mind the observations I have made so far, the obvious practical consequence is that at least some of the so-called neo-realist literature (most certainly the works and authors discussed in this article) can no longer be relevantly described or evaluated by the existing literary-theoretical categories and tools except for oxymoronic pooling of previously incompatible notions.

If we, however, discuss this production in terms of the metaphysical framework deducible from both the existing theories on postmodernity as well as the discernible mechanisms governing the functioning of contemporary society, economy and culture, the paradox disappears. Translation of these concepts into the basic *Geistesgeschichte* categories results in a metaphysical foundation which radically differs from the existing models. The concept of Transcendence as the basis for and the guarantee of identity and reality creation most accurately corresponds to the media, the essence and logic of which are on the one hand summarised and on the other accelerated into the everyday reality of individuals by the Internet. Internalising the media logic and principles, facilitated by the media, the Subject is *a priori* a simulacrum, a fluid system of signs that incorporate and are incorporated into different systems of reality. The paradigm of Reality is established through constant corroborations of the stability of systems of signs accepted by individuals into the structure of their subjectivity. The relation between the Subject and Transcendence, establishing the category of Truth, anticipates perpetual rhizomatous, web-like decentralisation, metaphorised by the logic of hypertext functioning.

Within the framework presented, and keeping in mind that before the actualisation in hyperreality all data have the same value, the traditional notions of the real and the fictive are in essence obsolete. One may speculate that the fictive is that which has not yet been confirmed in hyperreality, pure data which have not yet been manipulated by either the writer or the reader. But, of course, here the 'fictive' is not 'unreal', as it is potentially about to become part of hyperreality. Literature is, essentially, a medium and as such it creates and conditions the postmodern 'real' just like television, radio, the Internet or newspapers and magazines. The 'realistic' mode of writing therefore seems the only logical and possible manner of literary expression, regardless of the author's intentions, as the 'realism-ness' relies upon the very act of data manipulation by both the author and the reader.

Let us conclude by returning to the central question of this discussion, namely whether the deviations from postmodernism generally discussed in terms of neo-realism may be considered as a

productive step forward in the history of literature. According to what can already be observed when considering contemporary literary production in the light of the actual mechanisms governing our economy, society and culture, the production in question predominantly seems to be the result of completely different spiritual and historical circumstances than postmodernism as well as all the modern age literary periods preceding it. As such, it relies upon a metaphysical foundation which has absolutely nothing in common with that of its supposed 19th-century model. From the point of view of literary history, the name used by literary criticism with reference to this production is therefore completely inadequate. Referring to the utterly ahistorical formal properties, it tempts theoretical research, which should be – and which indeed set out to be – historical, to treat its subject ahistorically, which relativises the relevance of its findings. On the other hand, it enforces an artificial connection between this production and an already obsolete tradition, which results in the usage of inappropriate, obsolete tools and categories for its handling. It seems that the greatest challenge literary scholarship will have to tackle in the coming decades is abandoning the comfortable binaries and hierarchisations upon which it rests, and developing a scientific apparatus enabling adequate and productive treatment of its subject.

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