

GHEORGHE CRĂCIUN AND THE VICIOUS FACE OF POSTMODERNISM

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Abstract The paper analyses the evolution of Romanian theories concerning the concept of postmodernism, from the first (enthusiastic) contributions of the 1980s to the recent sceptical views. The case of Gheorghe Crăciun is very relevant in this respect, given the fact that he is considered one of the most important Romanian theorists of postmodernism and his articles (mainly those dating from 2006) describe multiple “vitiated” aspects regarding this cultural paradigm. My aim is to give a critical analysis of these texts and also to place them in the larger context of Romanian theories on postmodernism.

Keywords postmodernism, communism, Gheorghe Crăciun, consumerism, alienation

Given the fact that Romania was under a communist regime during the 1980s, a Western concept such as postmodernism was not entirely clarified in this cultural climate. It was only in 1986 that a special issue of the magazine *Caiete critice* (*Critical notebooks*) provided a general view upon the subject, gathering studies from numerous Romanian theorists, and also published articles, translated into Romanian, from authors such as Jean-François Lyotard, Guy Scarpetta or Ihab Hassan. After this first, insufficient, clarification of the concept, theories have evolved (and the process continues to this day) giving a broader understanding of postmodernism and postmodern society. I shall focus on the evolution of these theories, from the first enthusiastic (and, in a sense, speculative) approaches, to the recent sceptical (critical) understandings of postmodernism. Topics such as consumer society, the alienation of the postmodern man, media culture and the *vices* of the postmodern world are the main topics of a series of articles written by Gheorghe Crăciun in 2006; therefore I will analyze these texts, trying to place them in the larger context of Romanian culture.

In the special issue of *Caiete critice* from 1986 (an issue dedicated entirely to the concept of postmodernism), most of the contributors defined postmodernism as an ambiguous paradigm (Andrei Pleșu, Radu G. Țeposu, Nicolae Manolescu and others), a cultural movement that had not yet, at the time, been absorbed by Romanian culture. It is obvious that this delay

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was caused by the dictatorial communist regime, which did not allow a free circulation of Western books in Romania, letting in only a few titles that had no theoretical relevance concerning postmodernism. Thus, many of the articles are unclear, speculative, or discuss the ambiguity of postmodernism, rather than trying to clarify the theoretical concept. There are cases, however, of enthusiastic approaches of the subject, one of the most interesting, in this sense, being that of Mircea Cărtărescu. In his article, entitled *Against the Typewriter* (*Cuvinte împotriva mașinii de scris*), Cărtărescu associates the metaphor of the typewriter with the entire modern(ist) paradigm. He continues by arguing that Romanian culture can no longer stay within the limits of this paradigm, and must shift towards the very promising postmodernism: "Poetry will have to escape modernism. Therefore, postmodernism is not, for me, a concept, but a vital necessity. We shall have to abandon the typewriter".¹² Cărtărescu's confidence in the possibilities of postmodernism is not singular among Romanian theorists of that time. However, there were others that preferred a more critical approach towards the concept.

In 1986 Alexandru Mușina wrote an article entitled *Postmodernismul la Poțile Orientului* (*Postmodernism at the Gates of the East*) for the special issue of *Caiete critice*. His text, however, was not published in that issue, so Mușina published it two years later in the literary magazine *Astra* – it was also republished in 1996 in a book entitled *Unde se află poezia?* (*Where is Poetry?*). The article was seen as highly controversial at that time, mainly because of the fact that the author accuses many Romanian theorists of a wrong use of the term postmodernism. In his opinion, both Romanian literature and theory seem to have serious gaps concerning this subject, and only a few writers prove to be sufficiently accurate. It is relevant to note here that one of the authors that Mușina favours is Gheorghe Crăciun, mainly because of his (postmodern/textualist) novel *Acte originale. Copii legalizate* (*Original papers. Legalized copies*), but also for his original view concerning the art of writing itself: "For Gheorghe Crăciun (an excellent theorist [...]) to write/to text means to know, to free, to realize and value the body [...]. This point of view is entirely original, thus textualism is saved from sterility and transformed into something else: an instrument for exploring the self and the world, not just objectively, but (more recently) culturally".³ In fact, at that time, Romanian culture saw textualism and postmodernism as similar concepts, even though textualism is mainly a (literary, limited) branch of the postmodern paradigm. Intertextuality, the awareness of the author (as an author), the degrees of independence of the text (related to its author or to the reader) were the main topics in the discussions concerning postmodernism, even though these topics are related only to the isolated, textualist aspect of postmodernism.

Unlike Mircea Cărtărescu, who was very enthusiastic about a shift in Romanian culture towards postmodernism, Mușina sees this new paradigm in a less favourable manner: "My

¹ Mircea Cărtărescu, "Cuvinte împotriva mașinii de scris" ("Against the Typewriter"), *Caiete critice* 1–2 (1986): 130–132, 132.

² All Romanian quotations have been directly translated into English by the author of this paper, Robert Cincu.

³ Alexandru Mușina, *Unde se află poezia?* (*Where is poetry?*) (Târgu Mureș: Arhipelag, 1996), 108–109.

belief is that after modernism we should be witnessing a return to 'humanism' – just like modernism was a 'dehumanization' – to a new classicism, a new anthropocentrism. [...] A new synthesis is imposed, but not one facing the past [...] like that of postmodernism, but one evolving from a new vision, a new existential commitment. We are frequently quoting Malraux with his 'The 21st century will be religious or it will not be at all', without giving the real meaning of his words much thought".⁴

Therefore, the 1980s seemed to be a time for familiarization with the concept of postmodernism. Postmodern novels and poetry that were not yet labelled as such, (more or less) speculative theories concerning the subject, a few relevant translations from Western articles, enthusiastic approaches or sceptical views that favoured a more spiritual change in culture (in comparison to the new postmodern change), discussions about textualism or even deconstruction have all contributed to a general perspective towards the concept of postmodernism in Romanian culture.

After the Revolution in December 1989, in a confusing, yet calmer cultural and political context, theories have evolved and we are no longer dealing with a familiarization with the concept of postmodernism, but a very broad clarification. The 1990s are a time in which the most relevant Romanian theoretical books on postmodernism were published. Also, in 1995 the literary magazine *Euresis* had dedicated an entire issue to the subject, this issue being frequently quoted to this day by most Romanian theorists of postmodernism. Due to the newly available Western bibliography and also because of the continuous evolution of literature, theorists have started taking into consideration not just the literary aspects of postmodernism, but also to discuss the broader understandings of this paradigm. One of the real issues of the 1990s, from this point of view, is related to the topics of postmodernity, postmodern society, consumerism, media culture etc. Even though Romania had a very solid tradition of postmodern literature (labelled frequently as textualist literature or 1980s literature), after 40 years of communism it is clear that it did not have a postmodernist social, cultural and political climate. Consumerism, media culture, massive advertising, globalization, *the age of speed or information* were part of the postmodern paradigm, but they were absent from the day-to-day Romanian life. This is the reason why one of the most important Romanian theorists entitles his article (published in *Euresis* in 1995) *D'un postmodernisme sans rivages et d'un postmodernisme sans postmodernité* (*A shoreless postmodernism and a postmodernism without postmodernity*). In this article, originally written in French, Mircea Martin observes that there are different types of *postmodernisms* from one culture to the other: "Le postmodernisme colombien, par exemple, est autre que celui français ou tchèque"⁵. In the case of Romanian culture, Martin observes that postmodernism lacks a very important aspect, that of the postmodern society: "Toujours n'est-il que les formes de la culture postmoderne en Roumanie – pour autant qu'elles existent – ne correspondent nullement à

⁴ Ibid., 114.

⁵ Mircea Martin, "D'un postmodernisme sans rivages et d'un postmodernisme sans postmodernité" ("A shoreless postmodernism and a postmodernism without a postmodernity"), *Euresis* 1–2 (1995), 3–13, 5.

une société de type postindustriel, comme c'est le cas de l'Europe de l'Ouest, des Etats-Unis et du Canada. Autrement dit, le postmodernisme roumain n'est rien moins que le produit d'un postindustrialisme roumain. Non seulement entre ces forme artistiques et la base économique locale n'y a-t-il pas de rapport de détermination (aussi médié qu'il soit), mais il n'y a, non plus, nul synchronisme réel. [...] Il conviendrait donc de parler – pour ce qui est de la littérature roumaine et probablement, des autres littératures de l'Est de l'Europe – d'un *postmodernisme sans postmodernité*".⁶ In other words, even though Romania had a postmodern tradition in literature or in the arts, Romanian society (or Romanian culture, in a broader sense) was not yet functioning according to postmodern principles. This is one of the cases, but not a singular one, in which Romanian theorists approached the subject from a critical point of view, admitting that there are still serious gaps concerning this topic as far as Romanian culture is concerned.

Even without taking the local cultural climate into consideration, some theorists had discussed postmodernism from a sceptical point of view, while others preferred a more enthusiastic approach. In his book entitled *Poetica postmodernismului (The Poetics of Postmodernism)*, published in 1996, Liviu Petrescu sees television, the computer, globalization, the ever growing advertising industry as great opportunities for the development of the postmodern paradigm and, implicitly, for the development of society itself: "There are more and more magazines, radio stations and TV channels 'destined for smaller markets, with specific interests, regional or even local'. However, the great revolution was, according to Alvin Toffler, cable TV: 'cable de-massifies the audience, dividing it into numerous smaller groups'. Thus, standard information and opinion disappear, in favour of more individual means".⁷ For Liviu Petrescu, postmodern society is highly beneficial for the individual, allowing him to guide his existence according to his own beliefs and preferences.

After the year 2000 it is quite safe to say that Romania had evolved to new cultural, political and social standards. It had forgotten, condemned or changed the mechanisms dating from the communist period, it was no longer an isolated culture *at the gates of the East*, it had embraced postmodernism in literature or arts and, most importantly (because of the internet, advertising industry, capitalism, TV, international partnerships, mobile phones and so on), it had become a postmodern society. At this point, Gheorghe Crăciun's articles are quite interesting for two reasons: 1. The articles describe and analyze Romanian postmodern society at a time when this society was just starting to take form. 2. He provides an extremely pessimistic view on the postmodern society, which was very rare at that time in Romanian literature – excepting Alexandru Mușina's aforementioned article, some similar views are mentioned in Mircea Cărtărescu's book *Postmodernismul românesc (Romanian Postmodernism)* from 1999, or in Ion Bogdan Lefter's *Postmodernism. Din dosarul unei "bătălii" culturale (Postmodernism. A Cultural "Battle")* from 2000. Similar to Crăciun's pessimistic view

⁶ Ibid., 8–10.

⁷ Liviu Petrescu, *Poetica postmodernismului (The Poetics of Postmodernism)* (Pitești: Paralela 45, 1998), second edition, 90–91.

concerning postmodern society, Romanian philosophers have also started debating the subject, especially after the year 2000 (the works of Aurel Codoban, for example, are very interesting from this point of view).

These pessimistic articles written by Gheorghe Crăciun (that share some similarities with the works of authors like Jean Baudrillard or Slavoj Žižek) were gathered together in a book published posthumously (edited by Carmen Mușat in 2011), entitled *Viciile lumii postmoderne* (*The Vices of the Postmodern World*). The lack of spirituality in postmodernism mentioned by Mușina in the 1980s had become for Gheorghe Crăciun a day-to-day experience. He describes the impact that postmodern society has on the individual and, unlike what Liviu Petrescu believed, the result seems to be alienation and the fact that the diversity of options does not exclude standardized living: “if the people of the past were grey shadows, the ones at the subway are colourful ghosts, indifferent, absorbed in other undistinguishable forms. I should ask myself if every form of diversity carries a great deal of deception. [...] postmodernity is a form of insomnia of the conscience. Its monsters merge with its artificial pleasures and they dissolve like soap bubbles.”⁸ In order to fight the feeling of alienation and the effects of deceitful diversity, the postmodern man is inclined to resort to personalization, although this direction can prove to be equally deceiving: “You refuse to let yourself be dissolved in the surrounding world [...] thus, the need for personalization. [...] *To have* becomes once again more important than *to be*. Brands, labels, inscriptions are specially designed for you. When it comes to serial products, what is more important than singularization? [...] Culture makes room for civilization. Civilization proves to be an indefinable bundle of forms of culture: teenagers’ culture, gay culture, feminist culture etc.”⁹

For Crăciun, the postmodern world is functioning based on three essential ingredients that are responsible for its lack of morality and order: excessive speed, deceiving diversity and the shift from object to product; all of these, however, are interrelated: “speed is subordinated to economy, diversity is subordinated to economy and the product is economy itself”.¹⁰ The texts often appeal to an alarming (or even apocalyptic) register of discourse, especially when the author poses rhetorical questions: “Is this the postmodern, posthuman, posthistorical world that today’s philosophers talk about?”,¹¹ “Is the old God, the traditional and impersonal God, a conductor without an orchestra?”,¹² “Why can’t postmodern man remain alone with himself anymore?”¹³

It is true that many of these texts do not share the strict, theoretical approach of common literary theory, most of them being closer to the essay genre. Even the titles can be very revealing from this point of view: *How do you play your last card?*, *To be consumed before*

⁸ Gheorghe Crăciun, *Viciile lumii postmoderne* (*The Vices of the Postmodern World*) (Bucharest: Tracus Arte, 2011), 16–19.

⁹ Ibid., 55–56.

¹⁰ Ibid., 24.

¹¹ Ibid., 21.

¹² Ibid., 63.

¹³ Ibid., 57.

expiration date, God is a DJ, Hyper-mega-super-trans, The loneliness of the mobile phone user. Nonetheless, the texts have a visibly solid theoretical background and, more importantly, they provide a view on postmodern society that actually brings the discussions concerning postmodernism in Romanian culture up to date. It is also worth noting that a less rigid type of discourse is, in fact, quite compatible with the postmodern paradigm. In other words, these articles written by Crăciun are not only texts about postmodernism, but they are also postmodern texts, intentionally ignoring the borders between genres like theory, essay, journal and literary criticism.

It would seem that Crăciun's theoretical approaches towards the topic of postmodernism correspond to the evolution of the postmodern paradigm itself within the limits of Romanian culture. In the 1980s, the textualist branch of postmodern literature was the main topic and in this case Crăciun proves to be one of the leading theorists and fiction writers of the genre. Even more, as critic Mihaela Ursa observes, Crăciun pushes the limits of textualism to a less sterile approach in his novels: "chronologically speaking, his fictional works mark a turning point [...] from the enunciation of several textualist theories to the reinvestment of the text with meaning and to the reinstatement of corporality."¹⁴ The first years after the Revolution (the early 1990s) were mainly responsible for a broad clarification of the concept and alongside the special issue of *Euresis* 1995, one of the most relevant theoretical sources concerning postmodernism, is the anthology *Competiția continuă. Generația '80 în texte teoretice* (*The Continuous Competition. The 1980s Generation in Theoretical Texts*). This anthology was edited by Gheorghe Crăciun mainly with the purpose of consolidating the theoretical understanding of Romanian postmodernism. After the year 2000, as I've pointed out, it seems that the topic of postmodern society becomes more than relevant in the Romanian cultural climate, and so Crăciun's articles gathered under the generic name *Vices of the Postmodern World* give a broad critical analysis of this new climate that could be, according to the author himself, a last, alarming, yet fragile, face of postmodernism: "by everything it says and does, this world seems to be playing its last card. Its last chance."¹⁵

The process of clarifying the concept of postmodernism was, without a doubt, a long and difficult one in Romanian culture, and it was mainly Western bibliography that filled the gaps, long before Romanian theorists would have done it. However, as many of these theorists have observed, there are specific features of postmodernism that developed within the local cultural climate, original manifestations of this paradigm that were closely analyzed and lengthily debated. The writer, editor, critic and theorist Gheorghe Crăciun was a visible presence in many key-moments, in different stages of the development of Romanian postmodernism and, in addition to his direct contributions to the field, it is most relevant to notice the perfect timing of these contributions, the permanent emergence of the concept, not just towards the Western theoretical standards, but also towards creative reinterpretations,

¹⁴ Mihaela Ursa, *Gheorghe Crăciun – monografie* (*Gheorghe Crăciun – monograph*) (Brașov: Aula, 2000), 14.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

critical detachments and (regarding *Vices of the Postmodern World*) towards sceptical awareness.