

HOREA POENAR, *From Resistance to Theory to Resistance as Theory*

Horea Poenar* is Associate Professor at the Babeș-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. He started teaching in 1997. He is currently teaching Literary Theory, Aesthetics, but also courses on the Romanian political novel. He has published many studies and articles in academic and cultural journals and his latest contributions in book form to the broad field of Theory include *Teoria peștelui fantomă*¹ [Ghost Fish Theory] (2016). A theorist, a writer, and a man of culture, Horea Poenar manages to take both literary theory and literature outside academia, being a moderator of cultural talk-shows (*Cap de Afiş* [Headliner], *Gustă Transilvania* [Taste Transylvania], *Călătorii Interioare* [Inner Journeys], or *Linii de dialog* [Dialogue Lines]), produced and broadcasted by the Romanian National Television (TVR) since 2008. He is the founder and coordinator of the Palombella Rosa Film Club debate group. Since its inception in 2013, this interdisciplinary debate group has become the longest-standing community within the Faculty of Letters, merging the love for cinema with a passion for theory. He is a member of various associations such as Uniunea Scriitorilor din România [Writers' Union of Romania], Asociația de Literatură Generală și Comparată [The Association of General and Comparative Literature], or several academic centres of research.

Amalia Cotoi: In your last book, *Teoria peștelui fantomă* [Ghost Fish Theory] (2016), you state that literary theory should not be employed for a specific purpose. While theory can take on various forms, none of them necessarily equate to a method. According to you, theory works "through, alongside, between philosophy, ideology, aesthetics," "without sharing its identity with them." It seems to me that what you imagine and create appears to be a theory construed as an artistic expression, akin to Barthes' definition in *Le Plaisir du Texte*² (1973). This theoretical framework not only functions as a link or substance crafted at the intersection of literature and reality, but also extends beyond them, into the expansive realm of form and historicity, where theory begins to take on a life of its own. Although I really like the hypothesis, and even though it aligns with the studies that, today, discuss a weakening of theory, a descent from its status as a science, I believe that such a theory is very fragile in the face of an increasingly aggressive inventory of methods and an incessant inflation of concepts in the theoretical market. It seems that every theorist is tempted to come up with a name for their theory – I am thinking here of examples like *metamodernism*, *autotheory*, *new sincerity*,

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¹ Horea Poenar, *Teoria peștelui-fantomă. Zece studii și șapte scurt-metraje despre teorie* (Bucharest: Tracus Arte, 2016).

² Roland Barthes, *La Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1973). English version: Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, transl. by Richard Miller, with a note on the text by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975).

postcritique, etc. How would you name your theory, if such an endeavour were necessary? And what are your thoughts on the likelihood of a theory today that refrains from asserting absolute truth?

Horea Poenar: Not claiming an absolute truth or even the production of a reliable or “scientific” method does not mean that the only option left is a weakening of theory. I certainly do not place my views in the camp of what was called the “new modesty” in humanist studies, a line that includes authors like Rita Felski, who had a certain success (even in the journalistic press) with her book, *The Limits of Critique*.³ I consider this direction and most of her ideas to have contributed a lot to the adjustment of theory to the neoliberal system by cutting off the radical imagination and alternatives proposed by what was once called High Theory. The New Modesty and what was termed as post-theory were immediately embraced by the system because in fact and in truth they contributed a lot to the marginalisation of humanities and the acceptance of what Mark Fisher calls “capitalism realism”. Post-theory has always sounded to me like a Fukuyama-styled “end-of-history” celebration that leads to a dead end for any critical or imaginative thought. And although the fashion of distant reading, data-driven methods, quantitative analyses and digital humanities (understood as the adjustment of humanities to the technological craze of our times) has not receded that much, authors usually invoked in the support of this *cool* new way, like Franco Moretti, have repeatedly talked about the need now to concentrate on the noise around structures rather than the structures themselves, and even of the urgency of a resolute return to theory. I have always been suspicious of the anti-theory trends, precisely because they claim to hold a certain scientific legitimacy and a post- or outside-ideology position through the demise of theory (and it is symptomatic that what they attack as theory is primarily critical theory). It is only an apparent paradox (and a telling sign of how little or how badly these post-theory authors have actually read the texts they attack) that theory has never claimed to be scientific. On the contrary, its position has, from the very beginning, been one of assumed weakness. It is just that this weakness is understood as the necessary risk for the actual work of thinking. It is an assumed weakness necessary in order to be even more radical and imaginative rather than the opposite. I would very much refuse the positioning of such thinking (in authors like Walter Benjamin, Maurice Blanchot, Roland Barthes and others) in the “artistic” box, as Susan Sontag and other writers have done with somebody like Barthes. Barthes is a profound thinker, perhaps one of the most important in the field of literary studies, because he knew very well that authentic thinking is an act of nuance, of contrasts, of detours, rather than an ideological pretence to a fixed truth or empiric reality. A lack of trust in the ability of methods does not imply a lack of organising thought. For example, I would define my writing as a *work* (in the sense of a working of hypotheses) of theory in the following manner: an articulation between several historical detours and a rational construction. The singularity of theory (and it is this element that I was trying to define in *Ghost Fish Theory* that you are referring to) stands in the word *articulation* of the phrase

³ Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

above. The rational construction is not something extracted from the data of history, nor is it a method that explains the historical data. This was the mechanism that Kant used to define critical thought and, in my view, what we need, now more than ever, an era so devoid of imagination and radical alternatives and so well adapted to the neoliberal system, is precisely such a form of critique, or at least the working inside the heritage of such forms of thought. I consider that the authentic political and ethical force of thought is in a position that, defining itself outside the anti-theory new modesty and the fashion of data-driven algorithms, rediscovers this singular articulation between history and rational construction.

AC: For those who know you, it is not unexpected that you articulate your understanding of literary theory through the lens of cinema, particularly by referencing your favourite filmmaker, Jean-Luc Godard. In your view, the singularity of literary theory aligns with the singularity of Jean-Luc Godard. If I recall correctly, during the last Palombella Rossa gathering, you expressed something along the lines of, and I hope I have captured it accurately, that even if the entire history of cinema were erased, having Godard alone would allow us to reconstruct it. Can you elaborate further on this interdisciplinary approach and share how Jean-Luc Godard has shaped your perspective on literary theory? When did this influence take root, and how did your outlook on theory differ before encountering Godard's films?

HP: For me, the key importance of Godard has always been as a thinker, a philosopher that thinks through specific cinematic forms. As one of the main features of my own definition of theory has been that each art develops a work of thinking through its specific form (the form is the actual area where thinking takes place, not the content), authors like Godard (among others, certainly) have naturally been important to me. This is not new, as most of the key French philosophers (from Deleuze to Badiou and from Nancy to Rancière) have treated Godard in the same manner. I have often developed my own theoretical views and concepts through a process of thinking *after* him (in the sense of meditating on openings and points of intensity made possible by his works). As such, to take only one example, I have often revisited his complex work from the end of last century, *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, and the theoretical and philosophical dimensions that it itself has explored or has made possible in works written by Jacques Aumont, Georges Didi-Huberman, Alain Bergala and others. You will certainly notice here a French flavour, and this is a dimension that I have explored over the last decades more and more. In my view, it is this specific cultural framework that has protected me from the adjustments and limits of the more academic and Anglo-Saxon forms of (post)theory. The important French authors have consistently shown little inclination to embrace discussions on post-theory or post-critical methods, and for me this is not a sign of provinciality or conservative thinking, but rather a resistance to this fashion-like academic US system in which one has to be up-to-date in Kansas (Jonathan Culler's expression) or, why not, Cluj-Napoca. To return to Godard, you will obviously perceive that my half-joking assumption that his work would be enough in order to reconstruct what the form of cinema has offered in the last century (please note that I could probably say the same thing about Eisenstein or Rossellini or

others, and it will still be valid each time) refers to this particular interest that I have for cinema as a thinking form, not to any canonical study of the history of films. I think that authors like Godard have helped me to better understand literary and artistic forms by teaching me how shifts in the form produce philosophical and political shifts in perception and behaviour, and to explore theory in its more complex dimensions that are easily lost when the focus is on a method or an organisation of meanings more interested in, as Barthes would put it, signifieds rather than signifiers.

AC: I have recently come across a great book titled *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy*,⁴ by Dan Edelstein (2010). I bring this up, because, much like your exploration of the singularity of literary theory, Edelstein suggests a quest for the singularity of the Enlightenment that should concentrate on both *what* was transmitted and *how* it was transmitted during that era. More than that, in your books, both you and Edelstein revisit one of the prominent figures of The Frankfurt School, namely Jürgen Habermas. You assert that Habermas overlooks the "internal conflict of modernity," an idea that aligns with Bruno Latour's effort to highlight the contradictions within modernity. Can you explore this "internal conflict of modernity" in more detail? Additionally, could you express your perspectives on the idea of modernity, considering its diverse interpretations across various fields such as epistemology, cultural studies, political sciences, and, of course, literary studies?

HP: When I speak about the internal conflict of modernity, I refer, on the one hand, to the tendency to distinguish and define specific arts according to specific mediums (painting tends to be defined as pure paint on the canvas, literature as a work of language no longer decodable through all kinds of symbols and no longer secondary to a reality or a content that is represented, cinema as moving images without a direct relation to a reality, etc.) and, on the other hand, the interest for accessing, in spite of this focus on the singular or even the particular, a universal. This conflict is not a negative one; on the contrary, it makes possible and visible a new form or a new *dispositif* of knowledge and perception (or, in Rancière's terms, a new distribution of the sensible). It is this conflict that makes possible the articulation, in the case of writers like Flaubert, between an obsessive focus on form and a democratisation of the visible, and thus a complex and profound politics of art. It is through this conflict that form becomes political and thus authentically effective in changing perception. Habermas' idea of a public sphere in which particular identities have to rationally negotiate in order to live and exist together (and this is pretty much the philosophy of what is called multiculturalism) is not only pragmatically impossible, but, much more importantly, it abandons this essential tension between what is particular and what is universal. That is why, in my opinion, his project (although I completely agree with him that modernity is not finished) lacks force, from a political point of view. Although he is probably today's key inheritor of the Frankfurt School, he has abandoned its radicality and that has contributed both to the (albeit short-lived) fashion of

⁴ Dan Edelstein, *The Enlightenment. A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

postmodernity and to the current hegemony of neoliberalism and its cohort of emerging academic methods that have almost obliterated the very existence and any deep effect of critical thought. To put it shortly, what we need now more than ever is a return to radical forms of critique and in this act neither Habermas, nor authors like Latour, Rita Felski, Stephen Best, Sharon Marcus, Graham Harman and others are our allies.

AC: Two of the most widely revisited and mentioned figures from the Frankfurt School and critical theory in the field of Modernist Studies today are Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, both of whom you cover in your first-year teachings. I distinctly recall being captivated by Benjamin after attending your class. What is your connection to them as a literary theorist? How do you perceive their interpretation of modernity? Do you consider their ideas relevant in today's academic context and perhaps, if fortunate, beyond it?

HP: I have never believed in the academic trend of focusing only on contemporary authors. This fashion has the effect of treating past authors through quite rigid frames and always reducing their often complex thought to a thing that, although considered admirable in some cases, belongs to a certain past. It is for that reason that when I teach I combine authors from the past with those from the present and often treat them as contemporary. To me, a writer like Walter Benjamin is extremely important in order to both understand the present and imagine possible openings in and for the future. There are very few things "outdated" in his works and I think that, in understanding what theory is, or at least the way I define it, an essential step is that one thinks through articulations. I am not interested in understanding authors and artists only in relation with their time (let us call this, in art, the Panofsky method), but in the articulation with our times (and this would obviously be the Warburg manner). That is why I do not believe in a history of theory and philosophy that aims for a chronological structuring of authors and mechanisms. It is obviously important to know the context and plural dimensions of an author's own present, but the theoretical gain (not only the academic one) that we can explore and obtain by revisiting their work is always in an articulation with our present. This incidentally is one of the fundamental lessons of Benjamin's thought and I find it hard or at least uninteresting to treat it as an idea of the past that feels too confuse or speculative for our data-obsessed era. I am pretty certain that most forms of post-theory have gained traction because, on the one hand, "dealing" with complex authors like Benjamin and Adorno could be avoided by positioning them in a past that is no longer ours (nothing to see here, move on) and, on the other hand, of course, because their views would derail or at least question the often-triumphant adjustment of humanities to the neoliberal system. The tide is however turning. There is very little talk about postmodernism in academic circles these days and the fashion of post-theory, post-history and post-critical seems itself at least a bit outdated. There are more and more authors that are now pointing out that modernity has not ended. What was called postmodernity (along with all the *post-this* and *post-that*) is no longer perceived as an Event, but rather as a reactionary stance towards an authentic Event. In this

sense and in this context, there is more to explore in writers like Benjamin and Adorno than Felski and co.

AC: Who do you consider to be the most significant theorists today? In what manner do their works resonate with us and with our world? I recall that a few years ago, your concluding courses focused on Slavoj Žižek and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. What are the last courses focused on now?

HP: My courses change every few years, not only in the authors they cover, but also in their structure and aim. For example, I am now preparing a new course for the first year students that will deal with the sense of literature in contemporary times. We will investigate different points of tension in our age, from the status of imagination in a world dominated by AI, to debates on cultural appropriation, forms of identity (or dis-identification) and so on. The key question that will guide our work (a plural that refers here to my desire to co-opt students to what is at least partially a dialogue and a form of imagining what *common* could mean nowadays) is what can literature (and an education that deals with the complexity of literary and artistic forms) teach us. The hypothesis, from the start, is that literature is now needed more than ever, precisely because of its model of imagination, which would be of great help in an increasingly more violent world that has lost the ability to imagine what an alterity is and what an alternative to the present would look like. I believe that literature has a strong power as a critique of ideology, and immersion in literary texts could still have an emancipatory effect. The course is thus constructed through a montage of authors - some writers (like Arundathi Roy, Michael Ondaatje, George Saunders, but also Herman Broch, WG Sebald, Marcel Proust etc.) and some that would be called theorists. Your question being more interested in contemporary theorists, I would name Georges Didi-Huberman, Jacques Rancière, Ariella Azoulay, David Joselit, Ben Davis, Hal Foster, Robert T Tally Jr or Hito Steyerl. I believe that their work would help students to better understand both the world we are entering into and the literary and aesthetic tools that we still have and could still use in it.

AC: Concerning your pursuits, it is worth noting that, in addition to your role as a theorist, you also excel as a writer – a distinctive quality in the realm of theorists. Your novel, *Locuri blânde pentru Aura*⁵ strikes me not as the work of a mere theorist, but rather as that of a cinema enthusiast and an avid reader of modernist writers. In the opening chapter, I discern echoes of both Godard and Proust when the narrator says:

“He recorded everything in a memory that astonished him with its unusual hunger, the way it accepted and preserved each object. In the evenings, because he fell asleep with difficulty, and sometimes in the mornings, when the noise of the rain woke him up very early, he would reconstruct details with the precision of a film reel on which

⁵ Horea Poenar, *Locuri blânde pentru Aura* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 2018).

the lines of images had been imprinted, each isolated frame, without connection to the others and shielded from the warp of narratives in which everything can be lost.”⁶

What is your *ars poetica*? Are you particularly drawn to Proust or other modernist writers? Do you think modernism continues to be relevant in today's context?

HP: I am perfectly aware that literary critics and historians love to put things in their proper place. I am also quite certain that such a manner of treating literature does not have too much to say that would be of any interest. So, we either use our energy in treating the past like this, deciding on the accurate tags and creating boxes in which everything fits like IKEA pieces of furniture, or we treat literary texts by testing them, again and again, not only in relation to different presents, but in connection to different forms of imagining the future. In this second case, some works of the past will reveal themselves as unfinished, or far from being exhausted. In the case of Modernist literature, another important element is that such texts, in spite of their careful attention to what literature or literariness is, are much more than that: forms of perception, acts of thinking, reworkings of identities and of what reality is, etc. If we read them with this mindset, they will certainly still feel relevant. We have not yet found or enacted a real break with the Modernist paradigm. For me, contemporary authors like Michael Ondaatje, Arundhati Roy, WG Sebald and many others still work - and do it exceptionally well - in the openings enacted by the modernist Event. I feel close to such writers and they are probably key influences on my literary work, along, of course, with authors like Proust and Godard that you have mentioned.

For me, literature is a form of philosophy though literary means. I am interested in analysing perception, affects, mechanisms and processes of knowledge, the way memory works and the way we interact with and understand others, etc. I like telling stories, but I do think that part of what a story is, its richness and its ability to move and change us, lies in the way it is committed to words and in the time that it demands from us in order to confront and understand it. There are different temporalities and different rhythms at work in the act of reading. Being aware of that is not only essential in order to understand a text, but also in exploring what we are and how we think. My novel is an exercise in that. I believe that literature should avoid easy traps, like adapting to and in fact mimicking what is around us. I understand that for some readers and for many critics the satisfaction is mainly obtained through recognising things they already know and think as important: their form of reality, their taste, etc. For me, a literary text that mimics, for example, the technology around us or constantly reaffirms the sometimes brutal and miserable surface of reality has in fact very little

⁶ Original text: “Înregistra totul într-o memorie ce îl mira prin foamea neobișnuită cu care accepta și păstra fiecare obiect. Serile, deoarece adormea greu, și uneori diminețile când îl trezea foarte devreme zgomotul ploii, refăcea detalii, cu precizia unei role de film pe care s-au imprimat liniile unor imagini, fiecare cadru izolat, fără legătură cu celelalte și ferit de urzeala narațiunilor în care se poate pierde totul” (Ibid., 9).

to say. I do not read literature or watch movies or analyse contemporary art in order to recognise in it my world. I want those works to do something more, ideally to be able to invent and make possible an emotion or a perception that have not existed, at least for me, up to that point. I write literature with a similar goal, otherwise I see no point in doing it.

AC: Last but not least, I am eager to hear your perspective on the current state of literature and contemporary literature. Additionally, I would like to pose a question similar to the one I asked Jean-Michel Rabaté – what are your reflections on how academia and the world beyond might look like by 2050?

HP: This question about academia takes us back to the effects of post-theory. Perhaps unwittingly, many of the academics attacking theory, critique, and meticulous interpretation have greatly contributed to the demise of the humanities. Another key factor has been the attempt to justify our disciplines and fields of knowledge in terms imposed from exterior. This has been a losing battle. The minute you try to justify literature or philosophy in financial, positivist and scientific terms (and thus you instrumentalize it), you have grossly handicapped these very disciplines. There is a trend now to *sell* literature to a public (customer) assumed to be interested only in digital things, unable to keep their attention focused for long and certainly unwilling to try to understand anything remotely complex. In my opinion, this is not the right path to go because it will not bring this public back to what we think literature is and what it could do. In short, with the help of many academics more interested in their own individual careers rather than knowledge in itself, the current state of literary studies, but also the perceived meanings and uses of literature in a social context are nowadays in a dire condition. The antitheory, anti-interpretation and ultimately anti-literature trends of the last few decades have clearly not only failed, but they have immensely helped the system to enact a complete marginalisation of our disciplines and of the very act of thinking. Perhaps it is time to trust critique, and theory, and interpretation once again. It is essential now to reignite theory, even High Theory. The resistance to theory has had its day. It is time now to consign it to the bin of history. The only way we could imagine a better world—academically, socially, and politically—is through an authentic act of resistance and imagination. We should return to the real force of literature and literary studies: imagining alternatives against what is presented to us as the only way, doing ideology critique in order to expose the mystification and manipulation all around us, revitalizing thinking as an act of nuance against this obsession with data, numbers and algorithms. The forms of resistance that we now need are not *against* theory. What is urgent is a form of resistance *as* theory.

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