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THE POETIC OF MATEI VIȘNIEC’S NOVELS

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KEY WORDS

Postmodernism, poetics, novel, 80's generation, Matei Vişniec, character, author, reader, narrator, intertextuality, meta-text, self-reference, biographical references, technological interference, surrealism, exile, communism, capitalism, democracy, train, railway station, the city of Rădăuți, death, love, childhood, pluriperspectivism and hybridization.

ABSTRACT

In this analytical endeavour, I propose an unprecedented journey into Matei Vişniec's Romanesque work, a field still not fully explored by literary criticism, as there is not yet a monograph dedicated exclusively to his prose – a literary area that the author has actively engaged with in recent years. The research's aim is to highlight the poetics of Matei Vişniec's novels, an umbrella-concept that reunites the literary devices which define and particularize the author's oeuvre, composed of the following works: *Pas-Parol Café*, *Panic Syndrome in the City of Lights*, *Mr. K Released*, *Preemptive Disorder*, *A Merchant of Novel's Beginnings*, *Shoe-Type Loves*, *Umbrella-Type Loves...* and *A Century of Mist*. Still prolific, the author may at any time add to this list with another new inciting title for the reader. In the absence of other substantial academic articles on Matei Vişniec's novels, the purpose of the present research is to analyse in depth Matei Vişniec's novels and to uncover the red string that pervades the subsurface of every novel and makes possible the unveiling of Vişniec's Romanesque poetics. In this respect, the research explores a field of study that is yet to be approached by the contemporary exegesis, an advantage and a disadvantage at the same time, one that I have accepted from the beginning. The main approaches used in this paper to ascertain the poetics of Matei Vişniec's novels are investigation, analysis, case study and comparison.

The research opens with the chapter *Postmodernism and the 80's Generation*, in which I introduce, on one hand, the concept of postmodernism, its history and characteristics of this literary movement and its association with modernity. I will be considering some definitions of postmodernism introduced by outstanding personalities such as Brian McHale, Linda Hutcheon, Jean-François Lyotard, Gianni Vattimo, George Bădăraş, Ştefan Stoenescu, Virgil Nemoianu, Matei Călinescu, Ciprian Mihali and Ioana Em. Petrescu. On the other hand, in another subchapter, I map out a short history of the 80's generation, an association which marks the beginning of the Romanian postmodernism within which the creative personality of the writer Matei Vişniec formed. The analysis continues with the presentation of the 80's generation not only after the Revolution, but also in today's context, the literary production of the members of this literary circle not being done consistently in this period. From 1989 until

today, there were others that asserted themselves simultaneously with the 80's generation – the 2000's generation.

After depicting the main moments of the Monday Literary Circle and Junimea Literary Circle, which played an essential role in shaping and the growth of the young people that were part of the movement, I gave exclusive attention in the following subchapters to Matei Vişniec's personality with the purpose of portraying him as a writer against the background of his generation, examining his attitude during the first meeting of the literary circle, and also during the following sessions. I have also presented the way his literary language distinguished from his colleagues, and I have carried out a trajectory of his career by bringing to light the way he has become a household name with world-wide notoriety.

In the second chapter, *The Postmodern Novel*, I have analysed the postmodern literary devices specific to prose (such as intertextuality, autoreferentiality, metatextuality, fragmentation, themes and motifs, autobiography, autofiction, globalization, irony and parody, hybridity, authenticity, constructivism or non/reality, anti-mimetic narratives, ontology/new humanism, fiction and non-fiction, cinematic/television/radio interference, technology interference, the connection with history/the past, the interrelation between author-narrator-character-reader), based on which I built my critical analysis of Vişniec's novels. Additionally, in another subchapter, I have contextualized Vişniec's novel by explaining the evolution of this literary genre via its transition from the 80's novel to post-80's novel.

The third chapter, *Postmodernism in Matei Vişniec's Romanesque Works*, opens with a subchapter titled *Matei Vişniec – Prose Writer. Matei Vişniec – Novelist*, anatomizes the writer's entire prose, outlining its progress, from his first novel, *Pas-Parol Café*, to his last published novel, *A Century of Mist*. It is worth mentioning that between 1992 and 2021, the author published many other books of the same literary genre, such as *How I Trained a Snail on Your Breasts*, *Love Letters for a Chinese Princess*, *Cabaret of Words*, *Exercises of Pure Musicality for Beginner Actors* and *The Last Days of the Occident*. Despite the amplitude of his works, as Matei Vişniec had given each literary genre a try – from lyric to epic texts and dramatic works – the novel is the literary genre that showcases his literary maturity and perfects his literary career, an argument that I have endorsed in subchapter *From Matei Vişniec, A member of the Literary Circle, to Matei Vişniec, the Novelist*. I have allocated hereinafter a subchapter for each of his novels, within which I have attempted a critical approach by analysing all postmodernist literary devices discovered in each text and have given notice, where applicable, of the interference of surrealism.

In Matei Vişniec's first feat, *Pas-Parol Café*, a society characterized by lethargy and disorientation and devoid of any sensitivity lives in a city built on a foul, infertile and swampy field, which is suffocated by the filthy water that seeps in every direction. The threat of an unknown identity takes over Vişniec's characters who become incapable of showing their thoughts, ideas or feelings. The unknown identity of the constant threat haunts the novel's protagonists; they are in a constant quest to uncover the mystery, fighting time, the rain and the logos. The characters live their lives on a rift between chimera and factuality, between the intention of initiating a rescue mission and their incapacity of carrying it out. In the chaos that follows, Manase Hamburda believes that only knowledge, through his messengers, the intellectuals, can save the world from the peculiar threat that looms just around the corner. After the supernatural being retreats, the author does the same thing, the text becoming a machine in which the characters live their nonessential existence in two dimensions, without any significant events. Eventually, panic reaches its maximum levels, the rural city being abandoned by its citizens who cannot find resources to rectify the situation or to fight the unseen Evil.

Matei Vişniec's debut novel is a transitional piece of literature, a text that opened the path to further well-structured novels, with an amazing Romanesque architecture, such as *A Merchant of Novel's Beginnings* and *A Century of Mist*. *Pas-Parol Café* is a novel in which the playwright, the poet and the novelist shake hands and in which the communicating vessels law, so present in Vişniec's creations, is elucidated. The first Romanian work by Vişniec surpasses the norms of the 1980s, negates the rules of the classic novel, and presents serious surrealistic accents (the disappearance of the frozen train), but also some postmodern characteristics (self-referentiality, intertextuality, the mix of reality and imagination, the mix of genres, and fragmentation). *Pas-Parol Café* offers the reader the possibility to meet characters outside the realm of normalcy, being a novel that depicts a world shaken by absurdity, where individuals cannot surpass the sphere in which they exist because they have lost their meaning and connection to transcendence. In this disorganized and dehumanized society, the role of the intellectual is null, regardless of the efforts they employ.

The novel *Panic Syndrome in the City of Lights*, a text that proposes a radiography of the status of the artist in a society that succumbed to death from a literary point of view, is a novel written in the style of the 1980s (through its narrative construction), a textualist novel (through the author Matei Vişniec's dramaturgical texturing, self-referentiality, and authenticity achieved in writing) with surrealistic accents (evidenced by the chapter where words take over Miss Faviola's bookstore), but also a postmodern novel (among other things, through the

humorous or ironic approach to the chosen theme, the chaotic fragmentation of the novel, and intertextuality). In summary, *Panic Syndrome in the City of Lights*, a crucible where different literary tendencies intersect and intertwine with autobiographical elements, contains, among other things, several novel beginnings, a personal diary, the diary of a cat, the diary of a hump, an erotic story, a textualist novel, and a controversial poem.

Matei Vişniec is a novelist passionate about the unsuspected power of words, and his text, *Panic Syndrome in the City of Lights*, is a novel about words and their existence, about their creators (writers), and about their handlers (editors, readers, booksellers). In the temple of letters at the Saint-Médard café, Mr. Cambreleng, an editor without a publishing house, exhausted from reading countless pages received from various aspiring writers, comes to one gloomy conclusion: words have died, and with them, the books that contain them. In this situation, bookstores and libraries acquire the status of literary morgues, and writers are mere ghosts wandering in search of creative inspiration. In his attempt to solve this dilemmatic situation, like a true literary guru, Mr. Cambreleng intends to bring several failed writers out of obscurity by using various creative writing strategies.

The process of writing Vişniec's third novel was a lengthy one. The author confessed that, driven by creative fervour, he wrote this book passionately in the first part of 1988. However, not knowing how to end it, he took it with him to London (during the period when he worked at the BBC) without being able to continue it. Leaving his work to mature for a while, Matei Vişniec found the ending of the text amidst the historical events unfolding in the country: the Romanian Revolution of 1989. Completed, the 'drawer' novel *Mr. K. Released* would see the light of print only after 20 years. Just like in Kafka's work, uncertainty looms over the entire novel; Kosef J. fails to understand what is happening around him and cannot grasp the meaning of the lexeme "freedom." One morning, Kosef J. realizes that he has been released, without being notified, without wanting it, and without being given any explanation. Kosef J. does not know what freedom entails and what this new state brings; for him, the tranquillity of life lies in the prison with its precise rules. Being released, he is bewildered by the new state, feeling lost, not knowing which way to turn, with freedom becoming a mechanism that weighs him down incessantly. *Mr. K. Released* is a postmodern novel through the intertextual relationship it establishes with Franz Kafka's novel *The Trial* (using the technique of rewriting, the author invites readers to make connections beyond the immediate narrative presented in the pages of his novel) and through its ironic discourse directed at communism. It is also a surreal and even absurd novel (evident in the behaviour and actions of the characters).

The novel *Preemptive Disorder* exhibits, on the one hand, the strategies for manipulation of a journalist who is eager to obtain the expected audience and, on the other hand, the exploration of the inner human being whose elements are being investigated. The first part of the novel shows journalist Mathieu Caradin and his friends from the editorial office of a Parisian radio station (George, Hélène and Leily) as they face daily the horrors and calamities that take place worldwide (wars, crimes, floods, politics, economic crisis, etc.). In this part of the novel the human being is depicted as a depraved consumer of grotesque and brutal news, becoming in Matei Visniec's conception, a swamp-man. Gradually, the ghastly news that swamp-man feeds upon seem more and more trivial and the journalist is required to change his manipulative strategies (in his news report he provides the daily reports in captivating succession, in which tension plays with the public's mind, or uses different lexemes with a strong emotional impact on the listener, such as *war, blood, typhoon, death, crime*, etc.) to gain the craved audience. Allegedly unidentical, the two parts of the novel are united by the force of the poetic words capable to save the destinies of the individuals (of Mathieu Caradin). At the end of the narrative text, the journalist Mathieu leaves to Avignon to take classes of poetry because lyrical creation is considered to be the only salvation from the tyrannical attack of news. It is alluded that the salvation of the swamp-man from *Preemptive Disorder* lies in reading the poems of the volume *Dining with Marx*, written by the same author (the ending proving the operativity of two postmodern concepts, fragmentation and intertextuality).

In *A Merchant of Novel's Beginnings*, Matei Vişniec sketches a world in anarchy where the discourse is focused on the act of writing, its main actors (the author, the narrator, the characters, and even the reader/readers), as well as on the changes in their status. Following the "writing revolution" foreshadowed in the novel, the hypothesis of the individual novel can be discussed. Thus, with the help of patches and a writing program, each individual will be able to "self-write"/"trans-write" their life into their own novel, created according to the mechanisms imposed by their existence and needs. The individual will delegate the role of writer to a machine set to their liking and capable of capturing in an impersonal way the existence in all its forms.

The subject of the novel alludes to the idea of a glass painting whose beauty was enjoyed only by the selfish writer. Wanting to challenge the reader to a reconstruction game, the writer shattered it into thousands of pieces, mixing them up. It is then the reader's task to reassemble the fragments to discern a partially coherent message and to be enchanted by the overall beauty of the text's image. *A Merchant of Novel's Beginnings* fictionalizes the process of writing a novel from the first heavily debated lines to the final product, which, at first glance,

does not seem successful. Easy, the literary software, continues the work started by Guță on his own computer, but dead for about three years, a sequence typical of surrealism. Besieged by pigeons entering through the window, Easy creates a dystopian, fragmented, and partially coherent novel. The text is based on the idea of alienating the authentic act of writing and replacing it with programs/machines that mass-produce literary works without the need for the inspirational state/atmosphere on which authors depended in the past. The texts written by Easy are meant to satisfy the tastes of readers eager for adventure and suspense, without being considered works of real literary value. *A Merchant of Novel Beginnings*, a manifesto novel for the artisanal novel, is a postmodern text due to the multitude of narrative planes and voices, intertextuality, self-referentiality, the nature of a meta-novel, auto-biography, the blurring of boundaries between literary genres, the confusion of narrative instances, etc.

Matei Vișniec's penultimate novel, *Shoe-Type Loves. Umbrella-Type Loves...*, published in 2016, introduces two ways of living right from its title – shoes and umbrellas (metaphors for the concept of deviation), each with defining traits that extend globally. Giving the impression of a disparate structure where micronarratives evolve independently without establishing connections, the novel hides its meanings like a treasure in a secret chest, the code of which is represented by the two metaphors that will organize the entire fictional world and contaminate everyday existence. Everything, both animate and inanimate, will fall into one of these two categories, including loves and readers. *Shoe-Type Loves. Umbrella-Type Loves...* is a true labyrinth of ideas in which the reader progresses step by step, ultimately choosing one of the two existential paths—umbrella or shoe (the demarcation is not clear, as readers under the seal of one category will also take on traits of the other, thus grasping the cognitive meanings of the novel). The boundaries between the author's two concepts are malleable or even extendable, with some shoes exhibiting traits of umbrellas and vice versa, such as Matilde (a philosophy professor who dedicates herself to acting at the age of 62, accompanied throughout her life by her twin, lost at birth) and Tony Galante (whose being is a mix of machismo and courtesy).

Shoe-Type Loves. Umbrella-Type Loves... is a reflection on how the assimilation of new cultural elements (Western, French) and the survival of native cultural elements (Balkan, Romanian) leave marks on the author's personality. The essence of the novel *Shoe-Type Loves. Umbrella-Type Loves...* is identified by the reader at the confluence of the everyday (to which the author has devoted extensive pages in previous novels as well) and the tools of surrealism and postmodernism. Much of Matei Vișniec's literary expression within the labyrinth proposed in *Shoe-Type Loves. Umbrella-Type Loves ...* is of a postmodern nature due to the intertextual

relationship with other works (e.g., *Pockets Full of Bread*), the confusion caused by multiple narrative planes/possible worlds, the proliferation of narrative voices (including: the primary narrator, the textual vampire, Brian's sisters, Aisha, Tony Galante's seventh knife, the urban climber/spiderman, Clever the dog, Zerbinetta the cat, etc.), pluri-perspectivism, metatext, characters in search of their creators, the technique of suppressing/removing characters, biographical/autobiographical elements (the text retrospectively renders, among other things, significant episodes of Matei Vişniec's writing journey), fragmentation (turning the work into a seemingly chaotic one with the appearance of a puzzle, with cohesion between the novel's fragments being ensured by the reader who will reorder them, as well as by the umbrella/shoe dichotomy, these two ways of being leaving their mark on everything that is or isn't spoken), the presence of irony or sarcasm, the mix of reality-fiction (through the inclusion of supernatural elements of theatrical spectacle, fairground, or circus), the fantastic and the artificial (e.g., the Festival of Avignon captured in the text), self-reflexivity, the impression of unreality (due to surrealism), and the textualization of the author himself (who self-critiques his own work). The blend of surrealist imagination is revealed by the presence of the two objects that greet the reader from the title (the umbrella and the shoe), as well as other elements (e.g., the fountain, Clever the dog, the dream, the climber, the mirror, the black cat, and the chat between croissant and coffee).

In Matei Vişniec's latest novel, *A Century of Mist* (2021), history shows signs of recurrence, and the dense fog captured by the author in the novel seems to rise again from the dark depths of human minds to dominate previously lost territories. The haze that engulfs life in all its aspects also takes over the individual, who is gripped by an inexplicable blindness, with reason frozen. *A Century of Mist* is a novel about the political and social evolution and involution of a world, about the differences in perspective between East and West (captured due to the author's cultural shuttle), about the annihilation of communists and their return, about resistance and human alienation, about the HUMAN who was and who will be. Nonetheless, *A Century of Mist* is a novel filled with autobiographical fragments from a consciousness that has not been blinded by the dense fog and which sounds the alarm for the youth to see what needs to be seen.

A Century of Mist is nothing more than anatomy of 107 years, from the possible encounter with the Two-Headed Evil to the pandemic period. Structurally, *A Century of Mist* is composed of two parts, which could constitute two distinct novels: "Minodora" (whose title was suggested by G., Mathieu's friend) and "Evil Always Has a Twin Brother" (consisting of a quarantine journal and other chapters that aim to clarify and complement the first part of the

novel). *A Century of Mist* is a postmodern work: through the exchange of letters between M. and Georges (which reveals the mechanism of the work's writing), through the intertextual relationship established with *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde (where the portrait becomes, at one point, a substitute for the true Stalin), through the disorganization observed at the level of narrative communication instances (not only do the characters gain awareness of their own status (Georges), but the novel itself also communicates with its author), through pronounced fragmentation (a volume which the author proclaims, in his characteristic style, as imperfect, a puzzle that the reader must reconstruct), and through its meta-novel nature. Unlike other Vişniec novels, *A Century of Mist* departs from postmodernism, acquiring a dreamlike, fantastic, and surreal dimension. A conclusive sequence for these characteristics is found in Chapter 3 of the first part, where Arcadie Sclipa dialogues with Stalin's portrait placed above the station, a conversation intended to temporarily halt the natural course of history.

After completing the individual interpretation of the novels, the critical approach continues in the subchapter *The Poetics of Matei Vişniec's Novels*, where I aim to identify elements of cohesion that contribute to shaping Matei Vişniec's unique writing style in his novels, which is also the objective of this work. By meticulously analysing, through a postmodern lens, Matei Vişniec's novelistic work, I have identified a series of recurring elements and techniques that make up an undeniable Vişniecian poetics, whose affiliations are perceptible both in the playwright's dramaturgy and in his poetry.

In the course of the research, I have found that, in Matei Vişniec's novels, the relationship between the creator and their literary work suffers, leading to a narrative disarray in which the narrator stumbles through their own text, the characters discover their fictional status, take on narrative prerogatives, hunt down their own creator and plan to kill them or intend to intervene decisively in the text to change their fictional fate, as established by the author. In this narrative chaos, even the words do not retain their former status; they manage to leave their hosts (whether individuals — forming "humps," i.e., sedimentations of rebellious lexemes — or books on library or bookstore shelves); they become characters, assume the right to lead the fictional world, and adopt a predetermined existence based on the semantics they possess.

Many of the characters in Matei Vişniec's novels have a dramatic origin, lacking exceptional qualities (being antiheroes), mediocre, powerless, overwhelmed by anxiety, torn from the everyday, brutalized and dehumanized, incapable of effective communication or action against their fate, lacking detailed physical portrayals (with the reader's attention focused on behaviour) and devoid of a sense of purpose in life. Vişniec's fictional worlds are populated

with characters borrowed from his plays, writers who served as literary models, renowned historical or cultural figures, atypical characters (with a providential behaviour for humanity), alter egos such as M./Mathieu, and other fictional beings inspired by the reality of Rădăuți or specially created for the author's imagined universe.

In Matei Vișniec's novels, reality is replaced by its simulacra, television, the radio, and the internet (via computers) facilitating this process. Literary subjects are overtaken by technology, which suffocates the individual and replaces their activity. The pseudo-reality of news manipulates individuals, pinning them in front of screens, unable to live without their daily dose of macabre. This false reality is concretized, in several of Matei Vișniec's novels, through the portrayal of socialist realism, which wore the cloak of simulacrum (in communism, individuals lived in a counterfeit reality where the single party imposed the rules).

Almost every Vișniec novel is replete with evocations, with the author reminiscing about significant sequences from his childhood, student years, and the communist period (when he made his first literary attempts), or from his adjustment to Parisian exile. The reader can piece together a substantial part of Matei Vișniec's biography from these passages of memories. Thus, the personal map initially discreetly initiated in the early novels (*The Pas-Parol Café* and *Panic Syndrome in the City of Lights*) will be completed in later novels (true ego-biographies), with *Shoe-Type Loves. Umbrella-Type Loves...* and *A Century of Mist* also depicting sequences from his own family history.

Examining Vișniec's novels, I observed the author's penchant for postmodern techniques such as: fragmentation (the narrative threads are deliberately tangled by the author, and it is up to the reader to reorder the puzzle pieces to uncover the text's meanings/messages), intertextuality (there is noticeable intertextual communication between Vișniec's novels and other texts by the author – for instance, his plays, as well as between Vișniec's novels and works of universal literature like *The Trial* by Franz Kafka; *The Plague* by Albert Camus; and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde), self-referentiality (the texts reveal their own writing mechanisms), the presence of multiple narrative voices and perspectives, the mixing of literary genres, etc.

Exile offered Matei Vișniec the opportunity to position himself in an intermediary space between two cultures (Romanian and French) and to view them with a critical eye, denouncing their possible social or political deviations. Considering exile a favourable place for reflection and self-discovery, Vișniec frequently places his characters in such transitional spaces from which they are unable to withdraw. Vișniec's novels either depict the stories of exiles (e.g.,

Pas-Parol Café) or narrate events preceding and following exile, with the author managing to adapt to the new culture, one that would favour his international recognition.

From exile, the author Matei Vişniec diagnoses communism (using subversive discourse, irony, and pamphlet-like writing to portray socialist realism and the mundane existence of individuals, with frequent returns to the past aimed at avoiding the repetition of historical disasters) and capitalism (which offers no real solutions for rescuing individuals from miserable existence, instead propagating a new form of manipulation – marketing).

By analysing Vişniec's novelistic work, I also noted the recurrence of certain literary themes/motifs and preferred subjects that ensure the cohesion of the novels and complete the author's poetics: the train/station/railway, the city of Rădăuţi, the café, death, love, everyday life, communism, wild capitalism, exile, words, autobiographical references (various evocations from Matei Vişniec's life), the intrusion of technology, and the relationship between author-narrator-text-characters as well as the author-book association.

Thus, the aim of the research has been achieved, as this work represents the first monograph dedicated exclusively to Vişniec's novelistic oeuvre, outlining the poetics of Matei Vişniec's novels – a conceptual umbrella that groups elements and techniques characterizing and individualizing the author's writing.

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