

THE QUEST FOR UNITY

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Abstract

This article deals with a novel approach of looking at postmodernist writing. It suggests that postmodernism in literature constitutes a complex and chaotic phenomenon that prohibits its deeper exploration by conventional means that postmodernist literary theory has at its disposal. Instead, a different view at this issue is suggested. Firstly, two of the most dominant postmodernist literary theories – metafiction and intertextuality – that have strong ties to postmodernist literary discourse are explored separately with regard to their capacity to interact with postmodernist fiction. After identifying their respective strengths and weaknesses pertaining to their ability to deconstruct postmodernist writing a connection of both, metafiction and intertextuality, is suggested. This paper shows how the joining of these two postmodernist theories of textuality can be fruitful in the deconstruction of postmodernist writing on the account of the fact that they both possess the capacity to eliminate each others weaknesses; therefore, it is suggested that together, metafiction and intertextuality may be further examined as a unifying theory of textuality in terms of postmodernist literature.

Key Words: postmodernist literature, intertextuality, metafiction, unifying principle,

Abstrakt

Tento článok sa sústreďuje na nový spôsob nazerania na postmodernú literatúru. V článku naznačujeme, že postmodernizmus v literatúre predstavuje veľmi komplexný a chaotický fenomén, ktorého charakter zamedzuje jeho hlbšiemu preskúmaniu prostredníctvom bežných metód, ktoré má postmoderná literárna teória k dispozícii. Namiesto toho autor tohto článku navrhuje iný pohľad na danú problematiku. Najskôr izolujeme dve teórie textuality, ktoré sú v postmodernej literatúre najdominantnejšie – intertextualitu a metafikciu. Tieto teórie následne separátne skúmame v kontexte ich vhodnosti stať sa zjednocujúcou teóriou textuality v postmodernej literatúre. Po tom, čo sú identifikované ich silné a slabé stránky vzťahujúce sa na ich schopnosť dekonštrukcie postmoderného literárneho diskurzu, navrhujeme spojenie metafikcie a intertextuality. Tento článok vo svojom závere poukazuje na plodnosť spojenia týchto tendencií v kontexte dekonštrukcie postmodernej literatúry, pretože spojením metafikcie s intertextualitou dokážeme vzájomne eliminovať ich slabé stránky; a teda je možné tvrdiť, že spojenie metafikcie a intertextuality je možné ďalej skúmať v intenciách hľadania zjednocujúcej teórie textuality v rámci postmodernej literatúry.

Kľúčové slová: postmoderná literatúra, intertextualita, metafikcia, zjednocujúci princíp

Introduction

During the period of modernism, fiction as such appeared to stand on the precipice of tipping over into instability. Modernist fiction, characterized by a growing concern for the truth value of knowledge, became a shifting composite established on the foundation of uncertainty. This uncertainty was, first and foremost, of an epistemological nature because “*modernist and structuralist thought [was] problematic by virtue of language’s inherent inability to represent or refer to the external world accurately*” (Heginbotham 2009, p.11). It was no longer the question

mere acceptance of knowledge; it was about the relativization of the very core of humanity. Then from the ashes of modernism emerged another successor and possible savior of the cultural zeitgeist – postmodernism. However, as time progressed, modernism has proven to exhibit distinct signs, not only of the epistemological instability so characteristic of modernism, but it has also become further complicated by the inclusion of ontological uncertainty. Postmodernist writing has started to problematize the very concept of being and existence, not only of individuals, but objective reality as well as, in this context, literature.

Postmodernism is probably the most controversial movement that has taken roots in virtually every aspect of contemporary cultural life. It is controversial mainly because literary theory and also culture in general has always had a tendency to generalize, box, and assign labels to cultural periods which were no longer dominant at the time of their naming. For example, while modernism in literature has its origins in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the term only came to light in the late 20th century, when it was believed that the period of postmodernism had taken over cultural life. Modernism was characterized as a period of general confusion, alienation and isolation of the individual from the outside world. It was radically different from today's ambience because, as Brian McHale puts it, "*the dominant of modernist fiction [was] epistemological*" (1987, p. 9). Although the struggle of an individual within the confines society could be ascribed to postmodernism as well, it is imperative to understand that the general feelings of the divergence that took place around the turn of the 20th century escalated to a point at which a mere cultural divide turned into a huge rupture and general confusion became fragmentation. The pillars of modernism began to crumble and the need for change grew more and more pronounced. In his book called *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism* (2004), Steven Connor writes:

For postmodernism has indeed shown an extraordinary capacity to renew itself in the conflagration of its demise. One might almost say that the derivative character of postmodernism, the name of which indicates that it comes after something else – modernism, modernity, or the modern – guarantees it an extended tenure that the naming of itself as an *ex nihilo* beginning might not (p. 15).

Naming a literary period within the period of its continuing existence may be perceived as very unconventional, but the ontological fragmentation has gradually escalated beyond the scope of modernism. As Connor aptly points out, the postmodern era has not been artificially created, as he puts it, *ex nihilo*; instead, it evolved naturally with the increasing amount of disorder manifest in today's chaos of a world.

1 A Different Glance at Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a concept whose very term is synonymous with chaos, confusion and alienation that accompany its inner workings. In his famous treatise on postmodernism, simply termed *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), Brian McHale writes: "*‘Postmodernism’? The term does not even make sense. For if ‘modern’ means ‘pertaining to the present,’ then ‘post-modern’ can only mean ‘pertaining to the future,’ and in that case what could postmodernist fiction be except*

fiction that has not yet been written” (p. 4)? And he continues in a similar spirit of the nonsensical with the claim that “*Whatever we may think of the term, however much or little we may be satisfied with it, one thing is certain: the referent of ‘postmodernism,’ the thing to which the term claims to refer, does not exist*” (p.4). Of course McHale later on admits that postmodernism as a literary-historical period is a well-established and formulated set of principles on the basis of which fiction is created; however, postmodernism occupies a singular place among the periods into which literature may be broadly divided.

As can be seen, even the very broad attempt at linguistically grasping the phenomenon of postmodernism is incredibly problematic. What then is to be thought of postmodernist writing? In spite of the fact that literary theorists specializing in the complexity of the phenomenon in question have attempted to generalize postmodernist fiction by inscribing tendencies and features of this type of literature, such as, “*temporal disorder; the erosion of the sense of time; a pervasive and pointless use of pastiche; a foregrounding of words as fragmenting material signs; the loose association of ideas; paranoia; and vicious circles, or a loss of distinction between logically separate levels of discourse*” (Lewis 1998, p. 123). All of these traits are manifested in postmodernist fiction; however, these attempts at generalization are just that – attempts.

Never in the history of literature has there been such a great variety of different literary styles, types of narration, linguistic experimentation, themes, genres, etc. In the fiction of postmodernism,

virtually everything and everyone exists in such a radical state of distortion and aberration that there is no way of determining from which conditions in the real world they have been derived or from what standard of sanity they may be said to depart. The conventions of verisimilitude and sanity have been nullified. Characters inhabit a dimension of structureless being in which their behaviour becomes inexplicably arbitrary and unjudgeable because the fiction itself stands as a metaphor of a derangement that is seemingly without provocation and beyond measurement (Aldridge 1983, p. 65).

Indeed, there is much chaos internalized in several layers of postmodernist fiction, and there seems to be little literary theory can do but try to put this fractured heap of broken images into a coherent form. According to Linda Hutcheon, postmodernism is “*a contradictory enterprise: its art forms [...] use and abuse, install and then destabilize convention [by] their critical or ironic re-reading of the art of the past*” (1988a, 23). This corresponds with the overall spirit of postmodernism – ‘everything has already been done, so why not do everything together?’

There has been mentioned that certain layers of chaos can be identified within the framework of postmodernist writing. The internal incoherence intrinsic to the layers of postmodernist literary discourse will thus be described as two-fold. Firstly, the divide among the literary techniques, styles and genres used by individual postmodernist authors is one of extreme variety, and it is nearly impossible to establish a working foundation upon which it would be possible to (at least broadly) define the terms and conditions based on which their work would be

categorized and somehow unified. Secondly, it is not merely the question of the authors' literary corpora themselves that are chaotic.

Even the literary works of most postmodernist writers themselves differ from one another a great deal. Be it the literary work of Paul Auster, Haruki Murakami, Don DeLillo, Salman Rushdie, Stephen King, Audrey Niffenegger, Cormac McCarthy, Phillip Roth, and many others, it is very difficult to establish a theoretical foundation for liking their individual literary universes within their respective oeuvres.

As it can be seen, the very nature of postmodernist literary fiction is not only one of extreme complexity; it is also chaotic to the point where bringing order into this system becomes very challenging. The only solution to these layers of chaos is to attempt to delve deep into the recesses of postmodernist literature, and try to identify a unifying principle that would be capable of accommodating all of the chaotic phenomena mentioned above. It is important to note, however, that there have been attempts, albeit implicit, at unifying postmodernist fiction. These existing theories – *metafiction* and *intertextuality* – were not originally intended to function as unifying principles of postmodernist discourse; however, these two theories, although definitely not native to this literary period, exhibit the potential to do so. That is why the rest of this article will be devoted to the exploration of *metafiction* and *intertextuality* separately.

2 Between Reality and Fiction

Metafiction is a concept which has been known in contemporary literary circles for quite some time. It is a literary tendency whose shape was defined in 1984, when Patricia Waugh, a professor at the Durham University, Great Britain, coined and introduced the concept of metafiction into literature via her book called *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction*. In Waugh's words, metafiction is:

a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible functionality of the world outside the literary fictional text (p. 2).

Metafiction is an incredibly complex phenomenon because of its unique flexibility and vast number of modes of application within the context of literature. It is in no way restricted only to postmodernist writing because traces of metafictional approaches can be found in many of the pieces of mimetic literature, such as Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605), or James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1918). As Linda Hutcheon notes, metafiction “*is part of a long novelistic tradition*” (1988b, p. xvii) and its uniqueness lies in “*its degree of internalized self-consciousness about what are, in fact, realities of reading all literature that makes it both different and perhaps especially worth studying today*” (p. xvii). However, it is imperative to stress that it is most prominent in postmodernist fiction.

Metafiction, as a literary construct, can be labelled as paradoxical. It is so because in its core, two very counterproductive phenomena take place. While metafiction strays from traditional forms of writing of the 18th and 19th century realism and early modernism, at the same time, it reflects on both. It adopts traditional literary forms of realism while twisting and giving then the feel of existentialism, i.e. the aforementioned alienation and isolation depicted by modernists. The combination of these two literary elements from different literary periods results in a uniquely contradictory paradox which metafiction undoubtedly is.

Metafictional writing seems to have taken solid roots in postmodernist literature these days mainly because postmodernism allows for the full development of this particular form of writing. The fragmentation of today's society offers writers who use metafiction a truly unique perspective to voice their concerns and general observations which are manifested in our contemporary culture. It is a mode of writing which many contemporary authors adopted, and it has the capacity to create very interesting, truly surprising, deeply intellectual, and contemplative works of fiction.

The self-conscious and systematic drawing of attention to a specific work of art as a written artefact presents postmodernist fiction in a new light. Metafictional writing is thus presented as a partly metaliterary phenomenon that utterly destabilizes the traditional notion of the written word. Metafictional systems in postmodernist literature are predicated on the attempt of the authors to merge two realities previously thought of as separate – the fictional and the extralinguistic one. An act which results in the creation of a hybridized text that becomes a part of both mentioned universes – the real as well as the literary. That is because metafictional texts radically differ from “*the experience of reading [...] mimetic fiction, in part because we [as readers] are never allowed to forget that the text before us is a fictional construct*” (Bera 2014, p. 65). This perpetual state of uncertainty experienced when confronted with a metafictional text is what distinguishes postmodernist fiction from the rest of the literary artefacts inherent to different literary periods.

It has been suggested that the concept of metafiction exhibits the potential to become a unifying theory of postmodernist fiction. Waugh's attempt at describing the postmodern condition of a literary text goes a long way towards that. By introducing and describing various metafictional systems, Waugh achieves a partial unification of the chaotic nature of postmodernist literature. She does so by describing a theory that permeates the vast majority of the realm of postmodernist literary discourse; however, Waugh does not account for certain undesirable phenomena that will be discussed in the course of this chapter. Although the flexibility of the traditional notion of metafiction (as described above) is impressive, it also has its limits that become manifested when the phenomenon in question is put in confrontation against the chaos internalized in postmodernist fiction, and as a result, it becomes chaotic as well. As Peter Stoicheff notes, “*it seems, at first, curious that metafictional texts possess characteristics of chaotic systems in the phenomenal world, but they do*” (1991, p. 85). The incoherence intrinsic to metafictional texts is exhibited by elements that Stoicheff terms non-

linearity, self-reflexivity, irreversibility, and self-organization. All of these elements are bound by the nature of the transmission of metafictional texts between extralinguistic reality and the world of the text. In other words, the bi-directional interchange between the text and our world is completely destabilized and the boundary between “*language [and reality] exhibits strange and frequently unpredictable behavior*” (p. 86-87). This is the result of the post-structuralist employment of the “*post-Saussurian investigation [that] has revealed how that margin is not an unproblematic prism of decoding but a highly chaotic site where the indeterminacy of language proliferates*” (p.87). Therefore, the focus of postmodernist/metafictional texts is placed within the constraints of the polarity between language and meaning.

Furthermore, characters in such texts often identify themselves as the author of the written artefact in question, thus problematizing the status of the author him/herself. Not only does it lead to the aforementioned ‘fuzziness’ of the boundary between reality and fiction, it also leads to the abolishment of the author, proposed by the French literary theorist Roland Barthes in his essay “The Death of the Author” (1967). By abolishing the author via the inclusion of the metafictional elements within a work of fiction, and by “*exposing the [...] fictional constructs [within the narrative], these writers reject the metaphor that equates author and god, thus denying the author’s role as a prophet who teaches absolute truths*” (Bera 2014, p. 65). The “authorlessness” of the text disconnects it from any stable referent whatsoever, plunging it into the chaos that is expressed by the non-linear property of metafiction. Metafictional texts are thus in dire need of a stable referent because as Barthes states, a literary text is “*is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological meaning’ but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash*” (1965, p. 146), which is further complicated by that fact that when one were “*to ‘understand’ a metafictional text, one must reject seeing it as a vertical organization of a text’s components into a closed order that is interpreted in meaning*” (Stoicheff 1991, p. 94). Therefore, a work of fiction interpreted as a set of disconnected metafictional elements has the potential to generate an infinite amount of possible meanings – a property which is troublesome when trying to adopt this concept as a unifying principle.

Examined in isolation (as it has been continuously done so by literary scholars), Waugh’s concept of metafiction is a useful one on the account of the fact that this notion is able to describe the chaotic elements found in postmodernist fiction. It is one of the few coherent frameworks that function as an “*investigation of the chaos of meaning’s production*” (Stoicheff 1991, p. 86). However, naming and describing them is just the first step at understanding the mechanics of postmodernist fiction. As Stoicheff and others insist upon (and they are partly right) is that the non-linear property (the vast multiplicity of meanings) that causes the chaos intrinsic to metafictional texts is, first and foremost, due to it lacking a stable referent, a system that, instead of negating it, could complement the vast variety of the elements incorporated in metafictional writing. This system needs to demonstrate the potential for the capability of erasing the forms of chaos inherent to postmodernist/metafictional texts: *the infinitude of possible meanings and the indeterminacy of poetic language.*

3 The Three Dimensions of Language

Around the time when the project of modernism had come to a close, and postmodernist fiction was slowly emerging, a Bulgarian linguist, literary scholar and philosopher, Julia Kristeva, has formulated a theory that stood on the brink of structuralist and post-structuralist thought. Since then, Kristeva's notion of intertextuality has become one of the most influential and crucial developments in literary theory.

The term *intertextuality* was coined by Kristeva in 1966, around the time she came to Paris and was influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure, and, at the same time, tried to familiarize the Western world with the work of another prominent scholar, Mikhail Bakhtin, through her essay "Word, Dialogue, Novel." This essay seems to be "*in many ways a divided text, uneasily poised on an unstable borderline between traditional 'high' structuralism [and] a remarkably early form of post-structuralism or the desire to show how the pristine structuralist categories always break down under the pressure of the other side of language*" (Moi 1986, p. 34). The other side of language Moi refers to is the attempt to break through the constraints of poetic language that has been, albeit implicitly, imposed on literature by structuralist way of thinking of Saussure. Literature had been thought of as a closed system of signifiers that were unable to venture beyond the constraints of their own narrative structures. Kristeva has adopted Saussure's vision of language only to a certain degree.

Her formulation of the concept of intertextuality can be thought of as a synthesis of "*what she found useful in the already influential linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure and the relatively unknown (to Western Europe) literary theory of Mikael Bakhtin*" (Irwin 2004, p. 228). Saussure created a theory of language called semiotics which tears the character of the linguistic sign out of the context of the everyday-world experience. He has divided the linguistic sign into two components – the *signifier* and the *signified*. Language thus becomes an abstract composite because it only contains differences, and

a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up: but in language there are only differences *without positive* terms. Whether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system" (1974, p. 120).

A linguistic sign in itself means nothing and contains nothing. It only assumes its meaning and consequently fulfills its purpose when put in confrontation with other signs within the system of signs (language). This confrontation is either one of similarity or one of difference. The positive terms to which Saussure refers mean that signs are "*not referential, they possess what meaning they do possess because of their combinatory and associative relation to other signs*" (Allen 2006, p. 10). In other words, language is in itself a referential system that is composed of linguistics signs that, when analyzed individually, possess their inherent arbitrary nature; however, their pragmatic function is realized when employed in the context of an individual and specialized speech act (like producing or consuming a literary work, for instance) – a *parole*,

a concept that denotes a performed verbal or written utterance constructed from a pre-existing language, or *langue*.

Although Saussure's study of signs was indeed the starting point of not only Kristeva's notion of intertextuality, but the whole of structuralist thought, the emerging structuralist systems based on the rigid belief of the existence of a transcendental signified were insufficient at explaining the complexity of the linguistic relations manifested in literature. The poetic word, as it was later revealed by Bakhtin through Kristeva, is predicated on an intricate matrix of relations that cannot function in an arbitrary, unconnected way. The structuralist position has offered a degree of unification when it came to language as such within a single piece of written discourse, but literature is not a set of disconnected universes that function independently of one another. That is why Kristeva decided to find a conjunction between – then fashionable – structuralism and Bakhtin's radically different view of the inner workings of literature.

As it was mentioned, Kristeva's notion of intertextuality could be seen as a synthesis of the above-described approaches of grasping the nature of language that, even at first glance, radically differ from one another. On one side, there is Saussure with his depersonalized and abstract system of linguistic signs where the transcendental signified exists; on the other side, there is an equally valid Bakhtinian hypothesis describing language as a system that is in no way synchronic and unavoidably dominated by spatiality that is internalized in the interplay between the subject, addressee, and exterior texts. What Kristeva carefully chooses from both theories is the following: from Bakhtin, she takes the narrativization of extralinguistic reality, while from Saussure, she singles out the depersonalization of discourse and the division of linguistic signs into the polarity expressed by the terms signifier/signified. What she evades in her theory, is Saussure's transcendental signified, and her point of departure from Bakhtin then seems to be the place where his work "*centers on the human subjects employing language in specific social situations,*" while Kristeva's "*way of expressing these points seems to evade the human subjects in favour of the more abstract terms, text and textuality*" (Allen 2006, p. 36).

Having said that, a literary text becomes "*a permutation of texts, an intertextuality in the space of a given text,*" in which "*several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another*" (Kristeva 1980, p. 36). That is because a text is essentially "*a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double*" (p. 66). A literary text is thus a composition of pre-existing texts that are woven together on the fabric of intertextuality, and it is necessary for us "*to give up the notion that texts present a unified meaning and begin to view them as a combination and compilation of sections of the social text*" (Allan 2006, p. 37). Text as such possesses no coherent meaning of its own, it is always profoundly tied to the cultural production of texts that precede it. This way of thinking is essentially post-structuralist, and postmodern alike. The synthesis of the two fundamentally structuralist corpora (Saussure's and Bakhtin's), which are of an epistemological nature, essentially overturns the original intent of both, and adopts an essentially ontological character.

This theory, therefore, “*is descriptive rather than programmatic [because] all texts are intertextual, not only modernist or postmodernist texts, and her [Kristeva’s] concept aims at characterizing the ontological status of texts in general*” (Pfister 1991, p. 212). What is striking, and – in the context of this article – important is that the application of intertextuality in the space of literature does not exhibit limitless potential for the production of meaning. In spite of the fact that literature is composed of a great number of works, this number is by no means infinite. A literary work is no longer “*viewed as a container of meaning but as a space in which a potentially vast number of relations coalesce*” (Allen 2006, p. 12). The intertextual relations that constitute the preeminent force that generates meaning are by all means finite, and, consequently, so is their meaning. In this sense, the project of intertextuality serves as an ontological account of the nature of all fiction that possesses signs of connectivity rather than isolation; a plurality of meaning rather than its singularity; a quality of unity rather than chaos.

But is intertextuality capable of deconstructing and unifying the chaotic nature of postmodernist literature? Although it presents a system that is capable of coherently unifying literary universes within (and across) various literary periods, when measured against the chaos internalized in postmodernist literary discourse, it lacks the metalanguage necessary for its deconstruction. Postmodernist fiction, exhibiting strong and profound ties to extralinguistic reality through the medium of metafiction, subverts the traditional reading of mimetic fiction, thus problematizing the unification process that is under way when applying intertextuality to postmodernist fiction. Intertextuality is by its nature incapable of breaking through the barrier between fiction and reality, thus remaining in the realm of purely textual discourse. Furthermore, its limitations become more severe when it is taken into account that “*in the late twentieth-century literature [...] authors are sensitive to the notion of intertextuality and deliberately and intentionally build such references into their texts*” because, as Irwin notes, “*Practice has largely followed theory*” (Irwin 2004, p. 237). At the time, Kristeva could not have accounted for the deliberate, frequent, and explicit use of intertextual references within the works of postmodernist fiction that is so characteristic of (for intertextuality) the problematic action of stepping outside of the narrative structure of fiction. Intertextuality does not possess the means to deal with such an issue.

Conclusion

As can be seen from the rigorous exploration of these two preeminent theories of textuality that are most notably internalized within postmodernist fiction, when analyzed separately, both seem to possess certain traits that allow them to be considered as viable unifying principles of postmodernist literature. Where, on one hand, intertextuality is capable of unifying postmodernist fictional discourse at the level of language; metafiction, on the other hand, is capable of stepping outside of the text into the realm of objective reality, thereby exposing the fictional construct in question. When examined separately, the limitations of both, metafiction and intertextuality, pose serious problems when they are considered as the leading candidates for a unifying theory of textuality with respect to postmodernist literary discourse; however, because they complement

each other so well, when put together, they constitute a theory which is flexible and accommodating enough to successfully deconstruct the chaotic nature of postmodernist fiction. The combination of the phenomena of metafiction and intertextuality allows them to overcome their limitations – the infinitude of possible meanings and the indeterminacy of poetic language exhibited by metafiction; and intertextuality’s inability to transcend the boundary between reality and fiction that is characteristic of postmodernist writing.

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