
BOOK REVIEWS

ALEXANDRA VRÂNCEANU, ed.

Text(e)/Image: Interferences.

Études critiques. Critical Studies

Bucharest: Ed. Universității din
București, 2009

NEVER BEFORE has there been a time so fond of prefixes; almost no attempt at characterising postmodernism can escape the theoretical and lexical “distortions” brought about by the addition of prefixes to older, well-established concepts: *inter*-textuality, *trans*disciplinarity, *meta*fiction, *hyper*reality, *anti*-narrative, etc. The term “postmodernism” itself is one such “distortion”; however, this change in designation reflects a widespread process of hybridisation whose “children” are present in all contemporary fields of knowledge. One such “child” is *Text(e)/Image: Interferences*, an anthology of critical studies which analyse the complex relations between literature and the visual arts.

The book, edited by Alexandra Vrânceanu, is the result of a series of scientific presentations held at the University of Bucharest in 2007 and 2008, and of a conference organized at Arizona State University in 2009. The book is structured into three parts, according to the type of relation established between the text and its visual counterpart: the first part focuses, on the one hand, on illustrations to several texts, and, on the other hand, on works that employ the technique of *ekphrasis*. The second part deals with common themes and recurrent patterns in literature and visual

arts, while the last section of the book concentrates on hybrid works, where textual production can no longer be separated from visual creation. Any initial suspicion of incoherence is rapidly dismissed, as the book’s heterogeneity is in fact one of its strongest points. Apart from being a linguistic challenge (the articles are written in five languages), the anthology elaborately provides an overview of artistic productions across time, countries, and genres: the reader undertakes a comprehensive journey from the Orientalism of Victor Hugo to the formal constraints of poetry, from Bogomilism to surrealist art and to the paradoxical post-modernist novels, etc.

Since the spatial limitations of this review attract a rigorous and, inevitably, a subjective selection, only one critical study from each section of the anthology will be referred to—an unjust treatment to the equally valuable articles which were omitted.

The book opens with Gisèle Vanhese’s remarkable study on Alberto Martini and his illustrations to Victor Hugo’s *Orientales*. The author focuses on the representation of the Orient in the poem *Clair de lune*, which depicts an old Turkish custom of drowning women by throwing them in the sea in sealed bags. She argues that, by setting the moon and the sea water as governing elements in his illustrations, Martini performs both a translation and an interpretation of the poems. The second section of the first part presents Alexandra Vrânceanu’s study, which offers an ingenious insight into an emerging literary genre, the ekphrastic novel. She focuses on Régis Descott’s *Obscura* and Fabio Bussotti’s *L’invidia*

di Velasquez, which starts from paintings by Manet and Velázquez and create a formula for best-sellers. The author suggests that the popularity of this genre lies in its hybrid nature: the ekphrastic novel is usually a detective story which employs description, romance and a collage of low and high culture, combining them with what the author calls “critical and fictional *ekphrasis*.”

Ion Manolescu’s article in the second part of the book offers a very original presentation of a less common affiliation between literature, geometry, and graphical art, as this becomes apparent in the novels which employ the so-called “impossible objects,” i.e. paradoxes and optical illusions transposed into textual production. The author argues that the presence of these illogical or absurd textual creations is a sign of “modernist and postmodernist shattered narratives,” such as, for example, surrealist fiction or the experimental French novel of the 1960s.

The last section contains Ioana Both’s study on the formal constraints of poetry, a study which reorganizes the conventional *verbum–imago* pair into an almost indistinguishable superimposition of the visual and the verbal. By ingeniously opposing Petrarch’s sonnets to postmodern experiments with this form, the author demonstrates that formal conventions bear profound semantic overtones and direct the reader’s response to the text.

Whether the reader is interested in grasping the terminology and/ or methodology of research in the field of literature and visual arts, or is simply looking for a challenging and engaging read, *Text(e)/Image: Interferences* will surely not disappoint.



ALEXANDRA COLUMBAN

MIHAELA URSA, ed.

Divanul Scriitoarei

(The female writer’s divan)

Cluj-Napoca: Limes, 2010

IS GENDER innate or is it a cultural construct? Is the artistic product gender-biased? Can writing be feminine or masculine? How do Romanian women writers understand and relate to feminism? Are Romanian women writers confronted with gender preconceptions? All these questions and many other regarding the status of women writers in Romania are analyzed in *Divanul Scriitoarei*, a volume edited by Mihaela Ursa. The volume includes fourteen contemporary Romanian female writers and is structured into two distinctive parts. Part one is based on the answers the writers give to a 36-item interview, while the second part gathers relevant pieces of literature signed by the same authors.

Mihaela Ursa is a lecturer in the Department of Comparative Literature, Faculty of Letters, Babeş-Bolyai University. She was awarded several prizes for her work as a literary theoretician. Her teaching activity ranges from the evolution of the novel to postmodern literature, erotic literature and gender studies. Given her interests, the publication of *Divanul Scriitoarei* only emphasizes the coherence of her work.

The voice of Romanian women writers is still weak and studies regarding womanhood and the condition of the female writer are still rare in Romanian literature. Even if they are confronted with more or less the same patriarchal stereotypes as female writers in Western countries, Romanian women writers have not yet developed the habit of speaking out loud. Therefore, we consider Mihaela Ursa’s volume pur-

poseful and include it in the group of works which express the growing preoccupation for gender studies and gender awareness in contemporary Romanian society, such as *Feminine* by Michaela Mudure, *Feminist Perspectives* by Reghina Dascăl or the works of Otilia Dragomir, Mihaela Miroiu, and Mihaela Frunză.

What makes *Divanul Scriitoarei* different from other investigative volumes or anthologies focused on the same topic? Well, exactly the fact that it brings the two together: interview responses are backed up by the literary creed of the women writers as expressed in the second part.

The first part is based on an interview which consists of a corpus of 36 questions referring to the condition of women and women writers in contemporary Romania. These questions are addressed to some of the most prominent Romanian women writers of the moment: Ioana Nicolaie, Rodica Braga, Ruxandra Cesereanu, Dora Pavel, Doina Ioanid, Gabriela Melinescu, Mariana Codruț, Ana Maria Sandu, Simona Popescu, Letiția Ilea, Elena Pasima, Magda Cârnci, Angela Marinescu and Iolanda Malamen. The selection criterion, as mentioned in the introduction, was that of availability and willingness to take part in the survey. The order in the book respects the chronology of the responses. There is no grouping of the writers according to their opinion on a certain topic, nor regarding their genre of choice. The randomness of the organization offers the reader a sense of equality among outlooks.

The starting point of the interview relates to the issue of gender identity: is gender identity innate or is it a social construct? Most writers are of the opinion that sex is innate, but gender identity starts building up in the pink and blue children department stores, as Ana Maria Sandu would put it.

Gender and gender stereotypes reside in the innate sexual characteristics, but they develop as social artifacts. Letiția Ilea embraces a somehow Jungian approach, stating that each sex bears characteristics of the opposite sex. Gabriela Melinescu considers that the issue of identity goes beyond sex and gender. She advocates a plurality of identities basing her argument on the increasing cases of sex reassignment surgeries and on sexual transformations mentioned in mythology: Ovid's *Metamorphoses* or Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*. A similar pluralistic approach on identity is also embraced by Elena Pasima.

The inquiry continues with a series of questions concerning the "écriture feminine" as Hélène Cixous called it, the gender of the artistic discourse and of literary forms. Opinions regarding the feminine specificity in the writing of women vary considerably. Ruxandra Cesereanu considers her writing as "very much feminine" and describes the gender-specific factors of her literary discourse. However, she does not necessarily attribute feminine writing to women writers and does not directly associate the gender characteristics of the discourse to the writer's biological sex. On the other hand, Magda Cârnci advocates the asexuality of the artistic product. The gender of literary forms is also perceived differently: while Ioana Nicolaie considers the traditional novel as being neutral, gender-independent, Dora Pavel endows the novel with masculine impulsivity and strength.

Sexual discrimination, seduction as a means of achieving goals, the assumption or refusal of being labeled 'feminist,' erotic literature, solidarity among women, gender preconceptions and stereotypes and other social aspects of gender differences are considered throughout the interview section of the volume, while the different

perspectives argued by the writers make the reading all the more interesting.

The second part, entitled “The Creation Room,” gathers relevant pieces of literature signed by the authors interviewed in the first part. The statements in the first part can be processed in light of the artistic statements in part two. The reader can enjoy poems by Doina Ioanid, Angela Marinescu, Letiția Ilea, Elena Pasima, Simona Popescu and Ioana Nicolaie, a short story by Gabriela Melinescu, novel excerpts signed by Mariana Codruț, Ruxandra Cesereanu, Rodica Braga, Ana Maria Sandu, Dora Pavel, Iolanda Malamen, and a prose piece by Magda Cârneli.

Opening the door to the “creation room” reveals a fictional world focused on the ex-

ploration of the body, carnality, sensuality, sexuality and eroticism, a rebellion against patriarchal hegemony, a quest oriented towards the inner self, elements that shape the artistic identity of the writers. Using a few sophisticated words to describe the richness of the pieces of literature gathered in the “creation room” would be nothing but a reductionist, sterile attempt. Therefore, we suggest that readers enter the “creation room” and explore it by themselves.

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AMELIA NAN