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FIVE STORIES ON LOVE AND TECHNOLOGY

Abstract

This paper analyses Florina Ilis's novel *Cinci nori coloraţi pe cerul de răsărit* while including it in the wider context of posthumanities. Since the writer is also the author of a theoretical study on cyberpunk fiction, I thought it adequate to use posthumanities as a primary tool. Some of the prevalent themes in the text are: the primacy of information over matter, the alteration of social or personal practices and the humanisation of technology.

Keywords: Florina Ilis, posthumanities/posthumanism, technology.

Florina Ilis is one of the representative writers in the contemporary literary context; she is the author of several novels such as, *Coborârea de pe cruce* (Echinox, 2001), *Chemarea lui Matei* (Echinox, 2002), *Cruciada copiilor* (Cartea Românească, 2005) or *Vieţile paralele* (Cartea Românească, 2012) and she has been standing out as a mature prose writer and a master of literary techniques. Accordingly, she was awarded the Book of the Year 2005, by România Literară and Fundaţia Anonimul, and the prise of Cuvântul Pentru Proză magazine for her novel *Cruciada copiilor.*

Nevertheless, the *Cinci nori coloraţi pe cerul de răsărit* (Cartea Românească, 2006) novel passed rather unnoticed by literary critics[1]; even these few reports and commentaries lack the proper reading tool, according to the author. In an interview with Horia Gârbea she mentions:

> I believe *Cinci nori coloraţi pe cerul de răsărit* was approached in a superficial manner on our side of the critics. It was not understood that beyond the exotic appearance of the Japanese world, there is a profoundity that we should reflect on. We only approach the posthuman theoretically and abstractly, but in Japan we have witnessed multiple manifestations of what Fukuyama called postumanity. In this novel I tried to capture the tangency points between the traditional world – strongly semiotized, and the contemporary world, in which high technology becomes man's second nature.

We will not take the writer's statements as emblematic for the manner in which approximately all writers declare themselves displeased with the level/orientation/profoundness of their critical feedback; on the contrary, we will consider that in this case the criticism does indeed ignore the wider context in which the novel needs to be placed. A context emphasized by the author herself, this time through her research activities, for the author's encounter with the complex territory

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[1] Except for commentaries made by Tudorel Urian in *Un exotism postmodern* (România Literară, no. 23/2006), and Carmen Muşat in *Literatura română a câştigat un pariu pe termen lung* (Observator Cultural, 18.05.2006) or by Alex Goldiş, *Proza în formă fixă* (Verso, no. 5/2006).

of posthumanist theories is also confirmed by the publication in 2005 of a theoretical study called *Fenomenul science fiction în cultura postmodernă. Ficţiunea cyberpunk* (Argonaut: Cluj-Napoca), a tome based on Florina Ilis's doctoral dissertation. The relationship between the two texts further pinpoint their substantial bond and the author's preoccupations, even though the results of these preoccupations appear in two different forms: fiction and exegesis.

The purpose of the research in Florina Ilis's theoretical tome is the analysis of William Gibson's literature with reference to postmodernist aesthetics. In order to convincingly contour the image of an author representative for postmodernism, the author illustrates the main theories about cyberpunk and the virtual space, or the relationship between the technology of information and fiction. Focused on a particular type of science fiction, the cyberpunk, Florina Ilis's work discusses the relationship between human and posthuman, but also the manner in which the emerging of the informational technologies have made some impact on the status of fiction. Following in the steps of Brian McHale, the author illustrates the similarities of aesthetic substance between *science fiction* and this cultural movement, by placing cyberpunk in the middle of postmodernism. It is also interesting to observe the way in which the author connects literature to technology, cyberpunk fiction to the new technologies for information transmission. Postmodernist fiction, i.e. the cyperpunk, has a pendant for the origins and the diffusion of information while often contaminating its discursive strategies with new ways of the management and traffic of information; thus, it intercepts the changes come from the technological environment:

> the cyberpunk movement, by means of the new perspective on the boundaries between the world of the text and technology, creates areas of interference for technology's linguistic possibilities, the most eloquent example being the cyberspace, an ontological construct in William Gibson's trilogy. These boundaries are not definite yet, they can be affirmed and denied simultaneously, as long as, on the one hand, technology alters the current fictional practices, promoted by science fiction literature, and, on the other hand, fiction explores her technological avatars, deforming them. (Ilis, 2005: 97)

Therefore, the relationship between literature and technology is characterised by permanent dynamics, pertaining not only to the sphere of thematical diversity, but also – and here is where critical challenges begin – to the transformation of literary practices. Only the latter – the transformation of literary practices under the auspices of informational technologies – can be capitalized for a better critical reading of the text, following the author's pursuits.

The purpose of this study is to analyse the *Cinci nori coloraţi pe cerul de răsărit* novel in the context of conflictual forces: between theory and fiction, between the vanguard of the literary act and the often retrograde literary critic, between East and West, between different cultural codes and, maybe primarily, between human and technology. Seizing the text reduced to the exotism of the theme leads us astray from the core constituted by the avatars of defining and reconfiguration of the human in a technologized environment which will surely reinvent the old humanist values by techno-scientifically contextualizing them, if not abolish them completely. Activating a reading code regardful of posthumanist theories will reveal the intentions of this novel – as long as we are still adherents to such perspectives – and the profoundly meditative character of a text which discusses the technologization of the human and the humanisation of technology. For what better translates the problematic of an irremediable conflict than the delicate territory of posthumanities, with the permanent tension between human and technology – a tension that has not been characterised by an antithetical opposition for a long time, but has been given antinomical features. Considering that the convergency between technology and biology (as Robert Pepperrel observes in *The Posthuman Condition,* 2003) reaches a point where differences are rather hard to delineate, the problem exceeds the area of technological ethics and explicably and explanatorily enters the problematizing space of the literary text. Literary texts – or rather some of them – are not mere vehicles for transmitting some information from the scientific world; they actively shape the new technologies, they test and problematize the generated cultural and ethical implications. The complementarity between the two spheres of activity is obvious and efficient for, as Katherine Hayles concludes, 'The scientific texts often reveal, as literature cannot, the fundational assumptions that gave theoretical scope and artifactual efficacy to a particular approach. The literary texts often reveal, as scientific works cannot,

the complex cultural, social, and representational issues tied up with conceptual shifts and technological innovation.'(Hayles, 1999: 24) If science and literature seemed to take part in a conflict based on mutual ignorance, at least, posthumanism casts them into a fruitful dialogue, illustrating the various connections.

Considering that the posthumanist theories do not carry much clout in the mainstream of Romanian life, literary critics are not tempted to make use of such a reference frame that the novel belongs to. The scarcity of these sources is, thus, unmistakably clear. Apart from the already mentioned study by Florina Ilis, another important reference is Lucia Simona Dinescu's book, *Corpul în imaginarul virtual* (Polirom, 2007). Discussing post- and transhumanist theories in the context of enunciating new perspectives on corporality, the author creates a nuanced analysis of the two concepts. Starting from the cultural anthropology focused on the relationship between technology and the human being, the writing approaches a strong concept of the (post)humanities, *corporality*, and it follows its avatars in the virtual field. The working hypothesis is seductive and it contradicts the theories according to which the immersion in the virtual environment implies a dematerialization of the being, with long-term implications on the notion of identity. However, the author suggests a dynamical image of the human body that continues its metamorphosis in the virtual field:

> virtualization cannot be reduced to dematerialization processes, of disembodiment or subjective amputation of the human subject. On the contrary, embodying and materializing identity in various and multilayered dimensions, virtualization can ensure the enhancement, expansion and fusion of physical senses and perceptions with the informational systems, from the social to the political ones. (Dinescu, 2007: 12)

In the Romanian space, posthumanist approaches in the sphere of activity of the bioethics are more frequent; here I mention the article *Postumanism şi bioetică*, by Ioan Zanc and Iustin Lupu, which appeared in *Revista Română de Bioetică* (tome 5, no. 1, January-March 2007). The authors track the concept's philosophical tradition, placing it in relation to Nietzsche's *superman*, to Descartes's cartesianism or to Renaissance humanism. In this context, of scattering posthumanist ideas in the Romanian field, one must also call forth the first number of the *Post(h)um. Jurnal de studii (post)umaniste* magazine, appeared in 2014. The magazine's editors, Daniel Clinci, Sânziana Nicoară and Vasile Mihalache, selected representative texts belonging to the theorists of the posthumanist movement, Neil Badmington, Cary Wolfe, Donna Haraway etc., in the attempt to offer an image – if not complete, then at least self-explanatory – of this controversial contemporary phenomenon. The complexity of posthumanism and the variety of angles from which the phenomenon can be perceived are well-illustrated here due to the relationships present: posthumanism-postmodernism-deconstructivism, animality and matter in the posthumanist era or posthumanism and the educational politics.

A detailed examination of the posthumanities would function as a useful tool that would help us better understand the social and cultural phenomena of contemporaneity. A text like Ion Manolescu's *Derapaj* is one of the numerous texts needing a reading tool regardful of the relationship between human and technology. Similarly, the interpretation of Florina Ilis's novel gains from a well-placed position in an idea-based context to which it actually pertains. This quasi absence of the posthumanist critic instrumentation in our perimeter can be explained through a series of factors: the Romania's peripheral status – despite the increased and declared globalism – in the present scientical and technological conjunction, the relative immaturity of the investigation area – only along with the recent technological development we can (if we can!) talk about an attack on the humanist values in our lands – and, last but not least, a possible cause for these absences would be the lack of tradition concerning the cultural critic.

Although the present critical approach will be built upon posthumanist theories, we could not say that we will use a strictly posthumanist reading on the text; as long as we are still attached to a metaphorical humanist head, we can, at best, mimic posthumanism. Or, as Neil Badminton (using Nietzsche's perspective) plastically affirms, 'it is remarkably difficult to cut off the human(ist) head through which we (continue to) «behold all things»' (Badminton, 2004: 110). Therefore, a posthumanist reading would be against human nature, against the sets of genetic and cultural codes that define us. As opposed to the numerous *post-* concepts that animate the intellectual fields of

contemporaneity, posthumanism, even in its more moderate discourses, is still extremely radical. An entire humanist tradition, founded on principles such as reason-affect, moral sense, free will etc., is called forth and compelled to bring proof of what *true human nature* means. Under the assault of the various bio-, nano- and neuro-technologies, we assist at a rather profound interrogation of the humanist values, in the attempt – not often lacking a systemic desperation – to consolidate an unattackable nucleus.

However, a posthumanist reading of this novel would be possible but, in this context, it will be similar to the display of avatars to which the human is submitted, through an untiring interrogation of the ambiguities specific to its definition. And the alteration of the human is, in this meditation-novel, a consequence of the subtle-sly insertion of technology. The posthumanist dimension of Florina Ilis's novel resides exactly in the problematisation of the human-technological binomial, which is in a permanent state of deconstruction and reconstruction of the senses. Moreover, the directions of the posthumanist reading would be generated by a plurality of perspectives on the manner in which the individual interacts with technology or rather the manner in which technology affects the individual. The posthumanist meaning for interpretation would be a consequence of assuming the evidence that we are witnessing the crisis of *humanist notion of the human* (Herbrechter, 2013: 3). A crisis which is not necessarily related to the destructuration of the great concepts – although poststructuralism is also to blame – but rather translates the consequences of technology's major impact on humanity.

Elaine L. Graham, one of the paramount researchers of the posthumanist phenomenon, talks about this impact on all compartments of the human life, personal and social. In *Representations of the Posthuman: Monsters, Aliens, and Others in Popular Culture* she selects some of the areas in which the consequences of the new technologies are most visible: *the technologization of nature*, *blurring of species boundaries*, *the technologization of the human bodies and minds*, *the creation of new personal and social worlds* etc. (Graham, 2002: 2-5). Each of these spheres, detailed, reveals the measure of social and cultural mutation produced and reconfirms the necessity of defining posthumanism and, implicitly, of reconfiguring the attributes of the human. From this series of features, the last three are most useful for the analysis of our novel, supporting and highlighting the text's posthumanist orientation. The world described by Florina Ilis is built on the boundary between the physical and the virtual environment, with a special highlight on the models of socialisation and constitution of the private and public space. The mechanization of the human and the humanization of technology are visible on the entirety of the text, both in the *history* and the *diegesis* plan.

The novel is placed in the contemporary hypetechnologized Japan, a more than adequate context for debating upon the problem of the human's alienation in contact with the technological universe. From a narrative point of view, the novel is constituted of five stories, each of them presenting the perspectives upon the events, according to the main characters: Darie, Lili, Kyomi, Ken and the robot Qrin. The first story and the last seem the most consistent, credible and illustrative; the three middle versions, Kyiomi's, Ken's and Lili's, have a rather explanatory function. Obviously, it is not the events/history that matters, but the narrative as a method of characterisation of the narrators. From the personal options and explanations for the chain of events to the moral valences and justifications, the five narratives create overlapping stories that are linked together by inserting them in a technologized world.

One of the text's most eloquent posthumanist traits is given by the permanent tension between the world's, women's or Japan's hard-to-quantify beauty and the mathematical rigour of the data worlds, of the robot improvement technologies and of the incessant monitoring that destroys not only privacy, but lives as well. In the context of a Japan where tradition and ancestral spirituality are still preserved, technology is addictive and it overshadows communication. The five protagonists are caught in a web of reality levels, of industrial and family espionage. In a reality which reveals itself to Darie – while visiting Kyoto – as a fulguration of an abstruse eternity, the plan to develop robots capable of becoming the most advanced artificial creatures on earth seems doomed. The moment of brightness makes the programmer Darie realize that the advancement of the *material part* must be doubled by the advancement of the *spiritual part*. Thus, the quantum robot they would start working on would be a prototype capable of processes such as feeling and thinking – which actually happens at the end of the text, according to Qrin's story.

Seen through the eyes of a programmer, reality would have to be reconfigured; quite frequently, Darie would prefer another program for the unfolding of reality, the elimination of some

of the parameters and replacing others, in a maybe demiurgic or probably rather pathetically powerless try to induce change. It is the consequence of living for too long in the virtual environment. After acquiring the ability to permanently change variables, actual reality is characterised by a disturbing solidity. A new relation arises – between individual and the reality, which contains him: he displays a suspect immobility, he does not adapt, but would prefer the alterations of reality data according to his needs. Finally, he does all of this, for he manages to disappear Lili using the computer. Thus is revealed another posthumanist feature, *information*'s primacy over *materiality*. In fact, what happened to Lili is not even relevant anymore; what is important is that there is no more *data*, i.e. *information* about her, that her presence in the databases that, give beings some materiality, after all, was erased.

The world imagined by Florina Ilis is one where the human being is perceived and theorized as a mechanism, often completely void of subjectivity. In spite of all the passions they are guilty of, the characters are, as a matter of fact, dull, thus the easiness with which they pass prom one partner to another. The rupture between body and intellect is obvious, and the characters walk about lonely in a reality which has stripped them of feeling accomplishment. We witness an excedent of reason and a lack of genuine emotional involvement, for the characters are caught in a rush that does not give them the opportunity to probe their feelings. The Russian prostitute presents these characteristics of a world in a continuous chase for an anchorage in a technologic eternity:

> The power of the image, under whose auspices we live, has an influence on us, transforming us and taking away the only thing we have left untouched, the present. Incapable of governing the present and trying to detach ourselves from the barbarity of the sense, we resort to images created by *them*, preferring to watch ourselves, then to live. This is the man of our days, the *soft* man. (Ilis, 2006: 83)

In a way, this is certainly the moral of this book, which details a being's failure to understand and accept the short-lived existence of the present. The dependence on the technological recording[2] of feelings and memories betrays, in a very transparent way, the ancestral terror in the face of death. Confronted the perishable corporality, fickle feelings or the passing of time, the posthuman human chooses to storage humanity in databases, in virtual memories.

The gliding from human to technologic is also visible in the novel in the problematic erotic relationships established between the characters. The novel's two significant females, Lili – a beautiful Romanian who left her country to become a mistress in Japan, and Kyiomi – a wealthy Japanese, schooled in England, but who preferred to return to Japan with her grandparents, get involved into a complicated love game with the novel's two males, the Romanian Darie and the Japanese Ken. The two men work at a robot company, a multinational, which tries to augment electronic organisms, enhancing them with spiritual traits specific to humans. Using a posthumanist perspective, we notice the way in which female characters are perceived is related to a culture of the image that destroys the feeling; the women are, as one of the narrators, Darie, affirms at one point, 'a visual aphrodisiac'. The men – dependent on image – clarify their emotions or become aware of them only by relying on a visual support. At the first contact with his future wife, Kyiomi's beauty, Ken has a childish reaction, wanting to take out his phone and take a picture of her. The same male character, after six years of marriage, discovers al the femininity hidden in his spouse, only when he spies on her with a camera installed in the bathroom, saying: 'I fell in love again with her face displayed on the plasma screen of a computer'. It is most interesting that this type of scenes do not pertain to a phallocentric scenario which could be decoded using a feminist key (in the manner the famous 1975 article, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, by Laurei Mulvey, did): the existence of at least two levels of female abuse using technology: by filming and, subsequently, watching, both methods of objectifying women and, implicitly, of manifesting control over them. Attention is drawn rather from the fragility of the male audience, a powerless consumer aroused by pictures – the representation of the human overwhelmed/possessed by technology. The scene is representative especially for

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[2] In *About Time. Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time*, Edinburg University Press, 2007, Mark Currie uses the structure *archive fever* (along with *time-space compression* and *accelerated recontextualization*) in order to illustrate the specific manner in which we perceive the present nowadays.

technology addiction, for the return to reality and its capitalization is technologically mediated. The love relationship between Darie and Lili unfolds similarly, the video recording he made on their first night together becoming a perfect substitute to reality.

However, men are victims to the power of technology as well. If we were to trust the warnings given by the disparagers of prosthumanism, we would declare that a long contact with the technologic civilization alienates the human being, even altering its innate abilities to interact. Technology, like a protective plant', as Darie says at one point, underlines, in these texts, the human frailty. It is not only the women who become cyborgs by being inserted into derivative electronic universes, but men too, for technology becomes a substitute (but also a creation) to instincts. Among all the advanced technologies populating the Japanese environment, the one which horrifies the two women the most is a virtual computer program that, once your particularities inserted, induces orgasm. The last fashionable trend in the nightclubs was for men to film their sexual performances in order to watch them later. It is not a moralizing perspective upon some form of perversion, but a warning sign for the weakness and the narcissism of the human being, for whom technology has become an existential prosthesis. And the boundaries between subject and object, which offered a certain coherence to knowledge, were abolished, resulting in the self's dissipation into (physical or virtual) reality.

What is fascinating in this novel is the human's disintegration into a world where technology has lost its evil spirit and camouflaged into daily life forms. The four stories are haunted themselves by the demon of virtuality. Considering how they are constructed, there are enough signs of suspicion – not only interpretive – for the humans' stories themselves to be robot Qrin's creation, because the intertwining of the real and the virtual is subtle enough to allow such interpretations. The development of the virtual environment influenced the status and the construction of the *subject*, who passed from individual and autonomous entities, to posthuman collectives of human beings and intelligent machines. The immersion into the virtual environment, the skeptics say, generates a much deeper type of alienation, followed by the deletion of the boundaries between real and virtual. Finally, the contact with the virtual environment and the manner in which we choose to rely on it puts the personal reference to reality to test: "With its virtual environments and simulated worlds, cyberspace is a metaphysical laboratory, a tool for examining our very sense of reality" (Heim, 1991: 59).

Qrin is representative for the artificial intelligence that has escaped the relatively secure lab sphere, appearing in the other stories as well, being Darie's research project or silent witness for the others. Rather intellectually than physically mobile, "the metallic structure of the body, stiff and clunky, does not allow Qrin to move around according to the superior motor capacities developed by his brain" (Ilis, 2006: 205), the prototype-robot goes from IIIrd to Ist person, from object and objectifying to subjectivity and self-awareness. From Darie's perspective, Qrin is the cold insensitive creature, incapable of decoding his master's mood; because of this inadequacy, he almost fell victim to "the first technological crime in the posthuman age, a clean bloodless crime" (Ilis, 2006: 50), which would have presupposed the disconnection of all circuits. Only in the moment where the robot comes up with its own version of the events, we become aware of its humanity. Sensitive to Lili's caresses, overcome by the sense of duty towards his master, Darie-san, happy that he will take part in the game, Qrin disintegrates in the explosion created by himself, in an "infinity coloured by metallic sparks" (Ilis, 2006: 2010).

The text's fifth chapter, narrated by the robot, does not differ from the other previous four. There are no signs of a narrative mechanization, not even some phrasal robotism. The fact that the robot is so narratively skilled that, if not for the obvious marks, we could not even spot the word origins, can only send chills down the spine. If the machine has become so versatile that it is capable of narrating, i.e. of imitating an ancestral human occupation, it means that the passage from human to technologic has already been made. Moreover, if the narrative indications do not even betray the narrator's non-human descent, then profoundly parabolic meaning of Florina Ilis's novel should draw some attention from us. The stories of the future, as the transhumanist futurists like Ray Kurzweil, Hans Moravec or Vernon Vinge warn us, might no longer be the ones told by a tired humanity. Over the four human stories lies a fifth, conclusive, the metal voice belonging to the robot Qrin. The aliveness and the warmth of the human voice are converted into the metallic discourse of the new technologies.

Finally, Florina Ilis's *Cinci nori colorati pe cerul de rararit* – a parabolic novel discussing the risks of the technologic euphoria, a meditation on the well-camouflaged technology that announces the instauration of the posthumanities – is the story of the human avatar who tries to preserve his humanity. If the ending of the book seems tragic, both for the humans and for the robot Qrin, is perhaps in order to remind that every revolutionary technological product is, in a certain historical or esthetical context, a ticking bomb.

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