

Postmodern Aspects of Mirko Kovač's Novels

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Abstract

This paper deals with postmodern techniques in the novels of Mirko Kovač, a prominent figure in the postmodern literature. In particular, the study examines narrative strategies which deviate from traditional paradigms and yet create a distinct reality of the text. Postmodern principles such as "the poetic narrator" (and the "poetic reading" associated with it), temporal distortion, the questioning of historical facts, hybridization of narrative texts, metatextuality and citationality, documentation, fragmentation and text segmentation will be addressed using concrete examples. Mirko Kovač stands out with his distinctive poetics which contains elements of postmodernism, intertwined with traces of other poetics. In this paper we will dwell precisely on the postmodern aspects of his texts. In weaving the fabric of his texts, the author employs narrative strategies that threaten and break the traditional conventional narrative with its prominent elements such as narrative instance, time, space, composition, characters. All canonised forms and values are reviewed and dissolved in a specific way. In his writings, Kovač makes use of specific forms of citation and documentarity. Special attention in our work shall be devoted to Kovač's novelistic structures, in which he as an author spans a full creative range. We will try to shed light on all phenomena of the narrative text which are developed in terms of the postmodern.

Keywords: postmodern, the poetic narrator, citationality, documentation, fragmentation, hybridization of narrative texts

The second half of the 1960's saw a specific revolution in the arts, especially in the literature in the Yugoslav semiosphere. It was marked by the development of postmodernism, which is a poetic based on specific rules, largely well-known in up-to-date scholarly research on literature. The prominent representatives of postmodernism are the three writers who brought a new spirit into Yugoslav literature and developed a distinctive style – Borislav Pekić, Danilo Kiš and Mirko Kovač. The critics are unanimous that 1965 was the landmark year and that the publication of *Vreme čuda* (*The Times of Miracles*), *Bašta, pepeo* (*Garden, Ashes*) and *Moja sestra Elida* (*My Sister Elida*) opened a new chapter in Yugoslav literature (Jerkov, 1992).

Mirko Kovač stands out with his distinctive poetics which contains elements of postmodernism, intertwined with traces of other poetics. In this paper we will dwell precisely on the postmodern aspects of his texts. In weaving the fabric of his texts, the author employs narrative strategies that threaten and break the traditional conventional narrative with its prominent elements such as narrative instance, time, space, composition, characters. All canonised forms and values are reviewed and dissolved in a specific way. In his writings, Kovač makes use of specific forms of citation and documentarity. He weaves already existing texts, among which the *Bible* being the most prominent, into his own text, making a new text out of the elements of the texts of others. Segmentation features as one of the specificities of his style, since the framework of individual chapters is sometimes strengthened (at the expense of the whole), resulting in a fragmentation of the narrative. In this way, separate parts of the text make up specific fragments.

Special attention in our work shall be devoted to Kovač's novelistic structures, in which he as an author spans a full creative range. We will try to shed light on all phenomena of the narrative text which are developed in terms of the postmodern.

The mid-sixties and seventies were characterised by a new poetics, i.e. a literary period in which diverse concepts were at work. Peter Pijanović points out that "after the collapse of the socialist-realist and neo-romantic fervours which dominated the previous two decades, accompanied by weak voices of poorly known poetics and thought, a new generation of writers has emerged with a new poetic orientation" (Pijanović, 2005: 8). Pekić, Kiš and Kovač were prominent representatives of what was modern, but, in his words, not the modern which could be linked to the well-known period in the poetic art of the twentieth century, but to the modern "to be understood as a deviation from the conventional, standardised narrativity, regardless of the time when a literary work appeared" (Pijanović, 2005: 9).

The poetics of postmodernism is very controversial since it creates and breaks different systems simultaneously. It both brings about a new quality and creates its texts on old patterns. Old forms, as pointed out by Pijanović, are re-modelled, making them part of a new sensibility. On the foundation of old texts and poetics, a new textuality is weaved

(Pijanović, 2005).

Some of the key postulates of "a new textuality" are as follows: "the poetic narrator", and in that respect also the so-called "poetic reading", self-referentiality, narrative poetics, citation, documentarity, breaking of chronology and logic in the narrative, time and the image of the world in a text, fragmentation, re-thinking "historical truth", hybrid genres, parody.

"A novel, therefore, can be read as narration on narration or as 'a book about book'" (Pijanović, 2005: 6). A specific way of shaping a narrative text affects the mentioned above. Poetic statements, scattered along the text, speak volumes about the poetics of the book as well as the poetics of the author.

"Old texts, or literary tradition, in such a concept, is but a template; the material to be processed in a new poetic retort" (Pijanović, 2005: 11). It is about a reality which establishes a parodic relationship with the template.

"A heightened level of the narrator's self-consciousness, prose as poetics, reading and writing as a polemic with the works of predecessors, text as a story and an auto-poetic commentary, a new relation to the so-called reality and new methods of literary shaping of this reality, make the common denominator of the three authors" (Pijanović, 2005: 13).

In the postmodern text there is a specific form of the narrator, the so-called "poetic narrator". Jerkov points out that "a narrator can no longer take a word for granted because something has happened to him or he has heard something and he wants to convey it. He must be poetically ready to find a story lost in the crowd of the surrounding documents, lives and destinies. This is why he is a poetic narrator" (Jerkov, 1992: 30). Narration unfolds according to the poetic rules found in a text, whereby imposing a new form of reading a text becomes "poetic reading". This way of narrating keeps the reader awake, occupies his/her attention, thus establishing an intensified relationship between the story and the recipient. The reader is obligated to follow signals scattered along the text, in order to manage to fit in all the pieces of a narrative mosaic.

For Jerkov, the narrator is the "master of the story", whereby he/she places emphasis on the narrator's superior position in the postmodern text: "The Narrator who is conscious of poetic conditionality is the master of the story. He is not subordinate to the model but governs the model instead. The change is extremely important: therefore, playing with the meaning and storyline is not only the result of excess of the creative process but also the fruit of the narrator's self-consciousness, which is a new quality. An excess of narrative consciousness is a feature of postmodern literature. It is much more than a mere play with meaning and re-modelling of the world" (Jerkov, 1992: 97). In line with the postmodern structuring of the text, Kovač shapes his novels.

His narrators are mostly of the *poetic* kind. They establish an intensive dialogue with the readers, which is a kind of novelty compared to the traditional narrative texts. The narrators of Kovač's texts are mostly artists, further impacting the modelling of a single reality, particularly if we take into account the fact that the narrative situation is an essential element of any narrative structure which governs all the other elements. In *Gubilište (The Scaffold)* the narrator is the author, who already in the introductory section mentions his doppelganger and his meeting with him, resulting in the doubling of the author and creating of a special perspective on the new, amended version of the text. The narrator addresses the reader throughout the text. "Friends have strongly advised me against publishing this prelude as it seems confusing and unbelievable and, apart from this, it works to the benefit of all those who put to doubt even the most original of works. I've never cared about that sort of people, so I don't heed to such complaints, and from now on I'll be offering the reader this 'book within a book' as the final form of the work. Our skill and mastery lie in bettering ourselves. Some of this method will later be found in my books; they thus represent 'a tiny part of the world', as the learned doctors of the Great Vehicle teach us that the essential characteristic of the universe is its emptiness. I do not know if I can take this phenomenon as an illusion or as the doubling with the unknown? Anyhow, the new 'Gubilište' is now before us! It has its creator, whoever he may be" (Kovač, 2003: 7)!

If we are to make a cross-section of all Kovač's texts, we will notice the implied outlines of one narrator who appears as the constant in the narrative, who is quite active and has an active dialogue with the readers. The narrator always comments on the text which is before the reader, always through an amended or revised manuscript of some sort.

When it comes to the organisation of the temporal structure, it is important to note that the nature of postmodern texts usually contests chronology and the rectilinear flow of time. We frequently encounter shifting and blending timelines, resulting in losing the narrating thread. In Kovač's texts, flashbacks and flashforwards constantly intertwine, bearing a substantial impact on the thread of the plot itself. Accordingly, some of the texts are difficult to follow because the reader must be considerably mentally involved in order to connect the dots into a single whole and find himself/herself on the right track so as to draw relevant and right conclusions. Also, in the texts of this author, memory figures as an essential element to the organisation of the narrative and thus the time structure of most texts, and entails a comparison at the levels – "then" and "now", present and past, idyll and chaos.

As an example of the temporal structure we shall take the novel *Ruganje s dušom (Mocking the Soul)*. It features bending timelines and, thus, challenging the chronology. At the beginning we find ourselves before the deathbed of Elida;

however, her character gets revived as the text progresses. The story is organised through clips from life, such that each clip follows its own time rules. We should also add that the style of clipping or splitting is typical of the way Kovač organises his texts. In this case, each clip is organised by its time code and rules in the narrative itself.

The denial of logic, causality and completeness is related with the organisation of time and narration (the narrator), resulting in breaking down the traditional narrative and questioning the canon epistemological and axiological systems (Bečanović, 2008). In the traditional narrative, the time passed along a steady course and the reader would not be brought into a state of confusion and inability to organise a chronological stream in his/her consciousness.

The texts of postmodern nature feature specific segmenting which allows for strengthening the frameworks of individual chapters, as well as even smaller composition units. Splintering the narrative is related to this. It is possible to expand the functions of the frameworks, i.e. the prologue and epilogue boundaries, as well as boundaries of individual paragraphs. The procedure of fragmenting is related to the specific segmenting. Fragmentation in postmodern texts is reflected in breaking the unity and wholeness. Section segments exist on their own and are not absorbed into a greater whole, thus allowing solely for heteroglossia and dispersion. Fragmentation of the narrative structure is reflected in the compositional assembly of the text, which becomes jagged and disjointed.

"In Kovač's novel, the functions of the frames, i.e. the prologue and epilogue boundaries of individual paragraphs, sections and chapters, are made complex and expanded, whereby the narration is broken down and the diegesis is fragmentarily organised as the functions of the frames are inserted into the central part of the narrative" (Bečanović, 2009: 156).

Splitting characterises much of Kovač's texts. His texts operate on the principle of presenting clips from life as separate images ordered in the structure of the novel, which is why the texts are often organised on the principle of mosaic.

When it comes to *Uvod u drugi život (Introduction to Another Life)*, the text is shaped "loosely", according to the author, and one might say that that really is the case if we consider the organisation of the text. In addition to one personal narrator, present in every chapter, nothing else exists as a thread that would affect the establishment of the connective tissue of the novel. The whole text is organised on the intertwining narrative and poetic discourse. It is organised through a series of chapters, each of which is headed by a special title related to the action. There is no unity among the chapters. Each of them works as an entity in itself and is not directly related to the content of the next. Chapters are not shaped in the same manner but vary. Some of them are designed as fragments of a larger whole, while some exist as a whole on their own.

Reading Kovač's works in the postmodern poetic key implies a direct encounter with documentarity. Under the term documentarity we understand a literary procedure relating to the incorporation of various forms of written sources in the text, whose primary function is the testimony of some time or event or creating the illusion of authenticity and historicity of the text itself. One of the main features of Kovač's fiction poetic is reflected in the existence of the document as a primary factor in the construction of the text. In his essay, *Dokumentarnost je postupak (Documentary is a Procedure)*, Kovač presents an interesting observation about this procedure: "Fine actions of introjection, careful selection of 'erudite references', serious quoting procedure, inserting newspaper clippings, advertisements, signs from public toilets, travel books, paragraphs from laws, brochures, horoscopes, dead passages and language structures of others; collaging and interlacing non-literary and literary materials, introducing fabrication, other's words as if they were one's own and one's own as if they were other's, using manuals, encyclopaedias, cheap booklets, fake sources, real sources, etc. – can we really define this whole array of diverse riches of a novel as a documentary procedure? And if we can, is this definition satisfactory, or is there no other which is better at the moment? In our literature, the so-called documentary movement came as a critique of arbitrary literature.

Gentlemen, you just can't dream up the data. A novel with no data is insufficient. Writing off the top of your head is just scribbling. The documentary procedure represents a high degree of imagination" (Kovač, 2008: 51).

Malvina (Malvina) is a short novel resting on the basis of a document in the form of letters, designated as manuscripts A, B, C, etc. What is particularly characteristic of this text are the photographs which appear as a specific form of documentarity, further building on the illusion of authenticity and historicity. In this way, a moment in the life of the hero is suspended and captured as a snap-shot. Commenting on the phenomenon of inserting photographs in the text *Davidova zvijezda (The Star of David)*, Tatjana Bečanović highlights the following: "The semantic load of a photograph as a para-linguistic means of expression, when inserted into a chain of verbal signs, significantly increases, and its complex meanings participate in the specific modelling of the narrative time, i.e. in its mystification and myth. Photographs capture a moment and preserve it for eternity or a similar temporality: 'Images live longer than men.' In addition, the role of photographs and their specific imagery as specific iconic signs in the novel is very important. Their narrative functions are multiplied as they feature as objects observed by some of the characters or they give an impetus to new embedded

stories: 'Who is this pilgrim?'; or the photograph is inserted directly into the text and with its own peculiar picturesque properties actively participates in the development of individual narratives, most commonly characters and spaces, but indirectly also the historical time as it is recorded visibly on it" (Bečanović, 2006: 23).

In a number of Kovač's texts, documents emerge in the weaving of the text, confirming that this procedure is the dominant one.

Citation as a specific procedure finds its full expression in postmodern writings. Although this process is as old as literature, in postmodern texts it is the "consequence of poetic orientation". Most of postmodern texts are characterised by intertextual dialogue and character. Lešić notes that in postmodernism the author's wish to communicate with other writers has become stronger than ever before. "Because of this, a postmodern text often has the characteristics of a 'meta-text' which – as a whole or in parts – represents a replica of other texts, as their version, or just as a quote, homage, polemical adaptation or parody, which has just now become particularly popular" (Lešić, 2008: 424).

The majority of Kovač's texts feature an interactive dialogue with the *Bible*. The *Bible* appears as a prototext from which allusions are drawn and which is used for forming the texts written by this author.

In *Vrata od utrobe (The Gate to the Womb)*, the material is organised as a chronicle, imitating the chronicles from the books of the Old Testament, whereby archetypal situations can be recognised both in history and the fates of the heroes.

"In 'Gubilište' (The Scaffold), Kovač uses the biblical subtext to point to the repetition of the archetypes – Herzegovina resembles Israel as shown in the prophetic books (actually ever since the Genesis): unfaithful, full of sins, as the embodiment of man's fall, causing him to become the object of God's wrath. Although the position of the narrator's father in The Scaffold points to the Old Testament's prophet Jeremiah, as his prophecies (and he persistently prophesies doom) are not believed and then other biblical characters (Job, and even the Christ Himself) are recognised in him, the author takes away the metaphysical dimension of prophesying" (Ahmetagić, 2007: 98).

The need for order and hierarchy which marked the post-war modernism has been completely discarded in postmodernism. Further, postmodernism challenges all systems and most frequently turns us to re-examining our past, where the return is not nostalgic but fundamentally critical. In the postmodern world everything is questioned yielding no stable answers, because each of them is conditioned by the context. Postmodernity abolishes stable value systems and absolute truth, and puts a review of the historical truth as most important. The representatives of this movement foster a decomposing attitude towards history, which they re-think deeply and critically. In her *Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon says that the view that postmodernism suppresses history to a "dustbin of an obsolete episteme, arguing gleefully that history does not exist except as text" (Hačion, 1996: 37). The author further points out that history is not obsolete but that it is only re-examined once more as a human construction. "In arguing that history does not exist except as text, it is not stupidly and "gleefully" denied that the past existed, but only that its accessibility to us now is entirely conditioned by textuality" (Hačion, 1996: 37). In his writings, Kovač also re-examines the historical truths and paints history from his own perspective, frequently putting emphasis on the communist ideology and distancing from it.

The specificity of the postmodern text is reflected in the crossing or hybridisation of different genres. As Lešić points out: "And while in the poetics of modernism the key word was 'coherence', i.e. consistent and undeviating structuring of texts, postmodern poetics prefers stylistic inconsistency, incongruity among the parts, narrative discontinuity and a mixture of narrative techniques" (Lešić, 2008: 422).

Mixing genres is reflected in the intersection of different varieties, whereby a text can be a historical novel, psychological novel and "metafiction" at the same time.

"Once they are included in a novel, autobiographical memoirs change the status and equate themselves with the other elements which make up the novel: what used to be a true life event becomes just as fictional as everything else in the novel. But this process of personalisation of fiction, i.e. introducing what is personal into the body of the novel, at the same time represents an attempt to break the apparent objectivity suggested by the older novel with its realist procedure, thereby creating space for 'writing about oneself' which is so characteristic of postmodernism" (Lešić, 2008: 423).

In Kovač's texts we find quite a lot of the autobiographical. His narrator often writes an autobiography and presents autobiographical elements. However, under the influence of the text and its formatting, these elements cannot be taken as relevant because we are in the world of fiction. Almost none of the Kovač's texts have the pure form of a novel, there is always some hybridisation and cross-over of forms. Frequently, the narrative builds on the principle of short forms, i.e. the principle of clippings which are organised to form a whole.

Grad u zrcalu (City in the Mirror) is a kind of border between the text of a novel and autobiography. The narrator himself points out that he is writing a sort of biography – memories of the times gone by.

In *Uvod u drugi život (Introduction to Another Life)* there are different genres and so the text builds on short stories within a big story, the poetic genre – poems.

In Kovač's texts, the presence of some motifs which can also be related to the postmodern reality is visible. Thus, in the semantic sense, the motifs of death, devil, as well as family and family relationships, prevail. The motif of death, as some critics have noted, is given a privileged place in the structure of many Kovač's texts. Death is dominant as compared to life, which is in accordance with the rules of the postmodern destruction and collapse. A similar principle of destruction is present in the modelling of family and family relationships, which are usually dysfunctional and disturbed. The devil as the opposite to God, evil as opposed to good, idyll versus chaos, are the principles which govern individual texts. Everything is turned inside out.

In this paper, we have tried to present the key elements of postmodern poetics on the example of certain texts written by Kovač. We have shed light on the narrative instance, organisation of chronotopes, fragmentation, quotations, text hybridity, documentarity and historical truths, and proved that his texts are largely governed by the rules of this specific poetics.

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