Book Reviews

Oana-Maria Bîrlea,
Cultura kawaii și discursul publicitar japonez, Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2022

In recent times, Japanese pop culture has become an immensely popular worldwide phenomenon. Following the Second World War, Japanese culture has evolved in a way that softened the once imposing and militaristic image of Imperial Japan. This has, mostly, been done through the *kawaii*-fication of advertisement and international relations. In her study, *Kawaii Culture and Japanese Advertising Discourse*, Oana-Maria Bîrlea aims to explain the phenomenon, drawing parallels between the current forms of advertising found all over Japan (both commercial and non-commercial) and several cultural mainstays of the Land of the Rising Sun. The author also analyzes advertisement as a language in itself, using a semiotic approach to argue that the language and symbolism used in commercials and public service announcements have a lot to teach us about the way that the modern Japanese society functions as a whole.

The concept of *kawaii* can be most easily translated as *cute, adorable, sweet*. However, as Oana-Maria Bîrlea points out several times throughout the book, the word is loaded with meaning and can be recontextualized in a multitude of ways (even sickness can be *kawaii*). The main takeaway is that *kawaii* represents harmony and relaxation, but also a certain "neediness" (*amae*). The author analyzes the idea of *amae* through the lens of Geert Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions, according to which Japan is a predominantly collectivist society. As such, the use of *kawaii* elements in advertising (such as characters, language or various other visual stimuli such as color, font, shapes etc.) is meant to convey a feeling of endearment, a play on emotions that might make people act out of a sense of duty to help a vulnerable person. As the author points out in several case studies, most Japanese public service announcements are extremely effective because they represent the "victim" as a helpless, adorable mascot. For example, a train company might influence commuters to be less noisy on the train by using a drawing of an anthropomorphic rabbit with his ears tangled, clearly distressed by rowdy people around it. The widespread popularity of such PSAs demonstrates that they are effective and that Japanese people are more likely to act out of the impulse to help others in need rather than out of fear of punishment by an authority figure.

As the author shows us through her in-depth analysis, the same effect is achieved through the use of language. The Japanese language is predominantly indirect and considerate of the conversation partner's feelings. As such, Japanese advertisement (both commercial and non-commercial) is never aggressive. In lieu of imperative constructions (which are very widespread in the West), Japanese PSAs tend to invite people to be more considerate of those they might be inconveniencing with their behavior, instead of threatening those they're aimed at with punishment.

The author also points out how context-dependent the Japanese language

actually is. The entire language is marked by a sense of ambiguity, most commercials used in the study only being effective when viewed as a whole. The author does an amazing job at translating every single poster she analyses into Romanian. Of course, direct translations are often impossible, but Bîrlea takes the time to explain every nuance step-by-step, even if the commercials contain context-specific language, such as jokes or metaphors. This makes her work incredibly accessible and informative even to those who are unfamiliar with the Japanese language but might still be interested in cultural studies.

One of the most important aspects of *Ka Kawaii Culture and Japanese Advertising Discourse* is the analysis of the *kawaii* movement through the lens of Roland Barthes' idea of *empty center* according to which Japan's destabilization following WWII and the fall of the emperor as a real pillar of authority have led to an interesting effect. The central authority is delegated to a myriad of cute characters and mascots and, as such, pop culture icons such as *Hello Kitty* have, in a sense, become an emperor-like figure. The police, train companies, sanitation services and other such public and private services have built a common and friendly demeanor, often reflected in their announcements and advertising. Japan's prefectures have mascots of their own, the most popular being Kumamoto prefecture's *Kumamon*, a cartoonish black bear with bright red cheeks. *Kumamon* is not only an extremely important for tourism and branding, but he is also a symbol of peace and mutual aid. He was used prominently during the relief efforts following the 2016 Kumamoto earthquakes. Japan's *kawaii* mascots contribute

to the sense of community of a very collectivist country, while also being extremely cute and marketable for those overseas. The author points out *Hello Kitty's* popularity in the West, the character even becoming an official government-recognized cultural ambassador of Japan.

As an in-depth study into the complexity of contemporary Japanese culture through the lens of its very unique types of advertisements, Oana-Maria Bîlea's book is an excellent introduction to Japanese cultural studies and semiotics even for those who are unfamiliar with the language.

Andrei-Teodor Radu

Andreea Bugiac, *La littérature française sous la loupe : baroque et classicisme*, Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărții de Știință, 2021

Dix-septièmiste, Andreea Bugiac propose dans son ouvrage, *La littérature française sous la loupe : baroque et classicisme*, une exploration approfondie du XVIIᵉ siècle français, adressée aux chercheurs passionnés par cette riche période de la littérature et de la culture françaises. Le titre indique d'emblée que la littérature y est passée sous la loupe, l'« effet de zoom » (p. 6) étant censé mettre en accord l'histoire littéraire avec les événements les plus importants, le contexte politique et les sensibilités culturelles. L'autrice propose une analyse convaincante des évolutions

culturelles, esthétiques et littéraires qui ont marqué le Grand Siècle, tout en adoptant une approche accessible et nuancée.

Le livre, qui remplace les « chapitres » traditionnels par des « modules », en comporte six, précédés d'un argumentaire méthodologique. S'appuyant sur une méthode d'analyse rigoureuse, chaque module se termine par une fiche de suivi et de synthèse. Andreea Bugiac se concentre sur les moments clés de l'histoire culturelle du XVIIᵉ siècle français, en privilégiant des méthodologies variées, à la fois historiques, littéraires et pédagogiques. Sans prétendre à l'exhaustivité, Andreea Bugiac choisit de mettre en relief la complexité de cette époque à travers des examens ponctuels, permettant ainsi aux lecteurs de s'immerger dans le Grand Siècle sans s'en sentir submergés.

Intitulé « Le Grand Siècle : considérations générales », le premier module analyse cette période sous différentes facettes, mettant en lumière les arcanes politiques et historiques du XVIIᵉ siècle. Ainsi, l'autrice initie cette exploration en évoquant les deux événements majeurs qui ont balisé cette époque : les décès tragiques d'Henri IV, victime d'un assassinat perpétré par un fanatique catholique, et celui de Louis XIV. Après le trépas d'Henri IV, s'amorce une période qualifiée de « crise monarchique » et « une période d'instabilité politique » (p. 9). L'avènement de Louis XIV au trône donne le coup d'envoi à une ère de « prospérité économique » et culturelle. Ces manifestations culturelles englobent, entre autres, la magnifique édification de Versailles et le déplacement de la Cour royale à Versailles en 1682 (p. 10).

« La littérature et les arts au début du XVIIᵉ siècle », le premier module

proprement dit littéraire, s'attarde sur les manifestations de l'âge baroque en France et sur ses rapports avec l'époque de la Renaissance. L'examen des trois étapes du mouvement, à savoir le maniérisme, le baroque plein et le rococo (considéré par certains historiens de l'art comme une phase tardive du baroque ; pp. 22-24) et de leurs manifestations dans les arts est suivi par une courte description du contexte de l'apparition du baroque ; celle-ci sert à créer le lien entre cause et effet (l'essor du protestantisme, les découvertes scientifiques, l'expansion coloniale etc.). Dans la deuxième partie du module, l'autrice aborde les thèmes et les motifs du mouvement, qui apparaît comme « une nouvelle vision du monde » (p. 29) : dans un univers instable (*fortuna labilis*), la pression écrasante du temps (*fugit irreparabile tempus*) et le sentiment d'une réalité rêvée, toujours trompeuse (*theatrum mundi*), poussent l'homme, plus conscient que jamais de la faiblesse de sa condition, de se réjouir de chaque jour (*carpe diem*, *memento mori*). L'émergence d'une poésie moderne, dans le cadre de laquelle la « nature dynamique, expansive » (p. 31) et les éléments « fluides, volatiles ou évanescents » (*idem*) sont à l'honneur, s'oppose à la rigueur et à la sobriété de l'Antiquité.

L'examen continue dans le chapitre « Du baroque au classicisme » avec l'analyse du déclin du baroque ; la nouvelle sensibilité commence à se manifester après la transformation des métaphores surprenantes chères aux poètes baroques en métaphores conventionnelles, voire en « clichés » (p. 55). C'est de ce contexte de l'épuisement du baroque et d'un contrôle idéologique de plus en plus fort que profitera le modèle classique afin de s'imposer.

À partir du concept pivot de « classique », s'ensuit une dissection approfondie du mouvement classique et de ses traits emblématiques : le penchant pour « l'ordre », « la clarté » et « l'équilibre » (p. 59).

Le module suivant nous offre des réflexions sur la tragédie classique. Dans un premier temps, sont analysés l'apogée du théâtre classique et une nouvelle forme de tragédie mettant en relief un type de conflit qui revient au problème très ancien de « l'impuissance de l'homme face à un destin aveugle » (p. 63). Andreea Bugiac s'interroge sur la manière dont la tragédie classique française reprend et réinvente la problématique antique de « l'hybris », cette arrogance fatale de l'homme devant les dieux, qui imprègne non seulement la tragédie antique, marquant le destin de chaque protagoniste, mais aussi, de manière implicite, la tragédie française. La structure même de la tragédie, d'habitude inchangeable, celle de « prologue, nœud, dénouement » (p. 67), semble refléter la fatalité du destin des personnages : quels que soient leurs efforts ils deviennent victimes d'une force supérieure et fatale. Cette analyse est complétée par une exploration approfondie des règles de composition d'une tragédie régulière, le lecteur comprenant non seulement pourquoi on imite la vie des hommes (« la règle de la vraisemblance », p. 73), mais aussi pourquoi on évite les scènes choquantes (« la règle de la bienséance », *idem*).

Avec l'avant-dernier module, « Le théâtre classique : textes et auteurs », Andreea Bugiac construit une fresque littéraire qui examine les écrivains les plus importantes du siècle. Mentionnons Pierre Corneille : le mot-clé de son théâtre est « l'héroïsme » (p. 82), car ses protagonistes

désirent surtout respecter leur « devoir », leur intérêt de nature supérieure, et ils ont une capacité remarquable à « tout sacrifier au nom d'un idéal personnel » (p. 86). La morale cornélienne, en parfaite consonance avec les préceptes classiques, repose sur l'abnégation et la tempérance. Dans la seconde partie de ce module, Andreea Bugiac suit l'évolution de Jean Racine, dont le théâtre va avoir un impact significatif sur le développement de la tragédie classique. L'autrice esquisse la typologie des héros tragiques. Enfin, Molière conclut ce panorama littéraire ; le lecteur peut comprendre grâce à l'examen de cette figure littéraire comment la comédie classique acquiert une portée universelle, étant intimement liée à « l'observation de la nature humaine » (p. 120).

Dans le dernier module, « Le roman au XVIIᵉ siècle », l'autrice retrace l'évolution du roman, à commencer par les romans pastoraux du début du siècle. On voit combien ce genre est méprisé, étant considéré comme un « genre inférieur » (p. 130). Aux premières lueurs du XVIIᵉ siècle, les romans chevaleresques s'inscrivent dans les modes littéraires, tout comme leurs homologues pastoraux et héroïques, orchestrant ainsi une symphonie narrative riche en nuances ; celle-ci va se faire concurrencer par la suite par des romans comiques de plus en plus modernes et par le roman classique à dimension psychologique.

En guise de conclusion, l'ouvrage d'Andreea Bugiac, *La littérature française sous la loupe : baroque et classicisme*, réussit à surprendre en peu de pages l'essence, le raffinement et la complexité culturelle du XVIIᵉ siècle. À la fois rigoureux et accessible, il peut s'avérer un guide utile pour tous les chercheurs qui souhaitent

explorer la richesse culturelle et littéraire de cette période-clé de l'histoire de la littérature française.

Robert Notar

Marco Caracciolo, *Contemporary Narrative and the Spectrum of Materiality*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2023
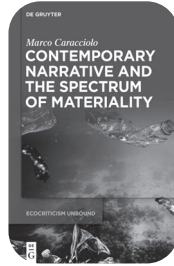
 Contemporary Narrative and the Spectrum of Materiality is Marco Caracciolo's most recent contribution to the field of ecocriticism. Hinging on Caracciolo's previous work on narratology and the Anthropocene, the present volume tackles one of the most important debates that underpins present-day ecocriticism: the nature of matter and the representation of the nonhuman. At the center of the volume's methodological project is the aim of synthesizing two visions traditionally perceived as incompatible, object-oriented ontology and New Materialism, into one operative system that can account for the many possibilities in which contemporary works of art represent the nonhuman. While thinkers associated with New Materialism insist on the interconnectedness of material actors, thinkers like Graham Harman affirm that objects fundamentally refrain from relation and that they are determinedly inaccessible to human cognition. Caracciolo integrates the ontological and epistemological tensions between these two views in what he calls a "spectrum of materiality", underpinned by the recognition that fiction can incorporate contrasting views about materiality. The horizontal axis of Caracciolo's spectrum describes the difference between "matter" (as passive and inert) and "materiality" as "vibrant" (in Jane Bennet's words). The vertical axis describes the aforementioned distinction between relationality and inaccessibility. Two diagonal axes, determinate-uncertain and abstract-physical respectively, describe how materiality can be spatially and temporally determined or shrouded in mystery, or how it can be represented symbolically or in its physical, sensible dimension. To conceptualize how fiction represents the combinatory possibilities of this spectrum, Caracciolo advances the concept of "narrative negotiation", which describes how narratives represent the tensions and instabilities that underpin the notion of materiality and negotiate their cultural, ethical and affective significance.

The majority of the volume is dedicated to close readings that actualize the theoretical acquisitions developed in the introduction. This methodology is supplemented by a focus on spatiality, analyzing how spatial forms coordinate with formal and thematic configurations in order to bring to the fore the relationship between characters and their environment. The volume focuses on spatial forms such as the network, the gap, the museum, the deserted island, the office or the ruins. The close readings are not limited to the novel, but survey a wide range of textual productions, including a collection of poems, movies and video games. Although the exploration of the rich fabric of concepts that are brought together in Caracciolo's close

readings is beyond the scope of this review, some contributions warrant mentioning. The first chapter, dedicated to the spatial configurations of the network, advances the concept of "object-oriented plotting", inspired by Harman's object-oriented ontology. Plots are object-oriented, in Caracciolo's terms, when they subvert the subject-object dualism and disentangle objects from their "equipmental" function, showing their resistance to human instrumentalization. In the close readings included in this chapter, Caracciolo demonstrates how nonlinear temporality supports the functionality of objects as "material anchors", showing that a narrative focus on objects can help illuminate an otherwise convoluted plot. Chapter two is dedicated to the multimodal novel and analyzes how novelists use the form of the gap to express the inaccessibility of objects, while chapter three deals with the institution and spatiality of the museum. The fourth chapter turns to the genre of the Robinsonade and analyzes two contemporary reinterpretations of Daniel Defoe's novel, the 2000 movie *Cast Away* and *Swiss Army Man* (2016). While the first movie exemplifies the "thing-power" of objects (in Jane Bennet's terms), inverting the utilitarian dimension that objects have for the original Crusoe, Caracciolo analyzes how *Swiss Army Man* provocatively stages a grotesque act of objectification of the human body in order to showcase its materiality. The fifth chapter engages with three survival video games. Employing many Crusoesque tropes regarding self-reliance and the mastery of man over nature, the survival genre can typically involve a game mechanic based on the crafting of (natural) resources. While the crafting mechanics of the first

video game discussed hinge on a conception of nature as an inexhaustible resource, the other two feature sophisticated and more naturalistic crafting procedures that seem informed by an ecocritical reappraisal of the environment, being able to heighten the players' awareness towards ecological issues.

Although the close readings can benefit at times from a more articulated insertion into the spectrum of materiality defined in the introduction, Caracciolo's volume is a recognizably bold and noteworthy contribution that tackles the nucleus of many contemporary debates within ecocriticism. The multimedial close readings, binding together many different concepts and methods, demonstrate not only how works that do not seem to be focused on exploring the environment and the nonhuman can nonetheless prove themselves to incorporate sophisticated representations of materiality, but also how a synthesis of New Materialism and object-oriented ontology can be (more) productive for literary studies, given that fiction can often blend contradicting views about materiality.

Alexandra Brici

Ruxandra Cesereanu, *Romania – From Communism to Post-Communism (Studies and Essays). Roumanie – Du communisme au post-communisme (Études et essais)*, Milano, Edizioni AlboVersorio, 2022

The second half of the 20th century was one of the most turbulent periods in Romanian history. While this may be mainly ascribed to the repression during the communist regime, the fall of communism and the transition towards democracy did not take place without their own traumas and tragedies. In the selection of studies collected in this volume (which were previously published in various journals or as chapters in books written by the author), Ruxandra Cesereanu analyses various aspects and events relevant for creating an authentic image of communist oppression in Romania, as well as of the resistance against it. The author also points to the legacy of this totalitarian mindset after the official downfall of the Romanian Communist Party (PCR) and the return to a democratic political landscape.

The topics of the essays are very varied, from historical surveys of events like the miners' strike in the Jiu Valley from August 1977 or the "terrorists" during the Revolution of December 1989, to literary and ethical examinations of the writings of political prisoners such as Lena Constante and Iuliu Hossu, and to diachronic presentations of different genres of writing, for instance the novel of the obsessive decade or post-communist fiction about the "Securitate" (communist Romania's secret police). These heterogenous studies are connected by the author's interest in investigating the mentality of a people living under a dictatorship and the means they created for surviving physically, but especially psychologically, in such extreme conditions. Nevertheless, even if Ruxandra Cesereanu frequently describes the horrors committed by agents of the totalitarian regime and the excesses made during and after the events of December 1989, her texts are never written in a moralising tone. Instead, they are meant to instruct the reader on Romania's recent history without promoting a revanchist or resentful attitude towards it.

One of the most impressive aspects of the studies contained in the book is the author's capacity for synthesis. On the one hand, this can be seen in the extensive bibliography inserted at the end of almost every essay. This, in turn, allows her to give a detailed presentation of events such as the revolution (or, as she prefers to call it, insurrection) in Timișoara between 15-20 December 1989 and the various stages it went through. But perhaps the best illustration of this ability is the first chapter in the volume, in which Ruxandra Cesereanu manages to draw a broad and also comprehensive chronological overview of communism in Romania, from the coup d'etat on August 23, 1944 to its fall in December 1989, useful for those unfamiliar with the historical context her following essays will discuss. The author's synthesising competence is also displayed in the careful analysis of complex aspects such as censorship in Romania and the repression carried out by the secret police.

As mentioned before, the author's approach to presenting and interpreting the various phenomena discussed in the studies is influenced by her interest in the history of ideas and mentalities. As such, she presents not only facts, but lingers especially on their political and symbolic significance. For instance, in the case of Ceaușescu's trial and execution, in addition to relating the chronological series of events that took place after his leaving Bucharest on December 22, 1989, Ruxandra Cesereanu demonstrates how the people newly risen to positions of power intended to create a "black myth of Ceaușescu and Securitate" (p. 155), which was not needed considering the many real excesses the dictator made and his negative public image, in order to justify the mock-trial and the assassination of the presidential couple. This manner of commenting on the deeper meaning of different actions and practices can be most readily noticed in the studies focusing on the Romanian Gulag. The author suggests that the numerous strategies for surviving the brutal interrogations and the horrifying conditions in the communist prisons were not only meant as a means of self-preservation, but they also expressed the prisoners' beliefs about the meaning of their imprisonment and its existential sense. For example, Cardinal Iuliu Hossu perceives his martyrdom as a test of faith and decides to spend his prison (and forced arrest) time as an eternal liturgy and prayer, always hoping for an eventual reinstatement of the Greek Catholic Church, and Lena Constante chooses to psychologically escape through an aesthetic method, creating a complex imaginary world thanks to her passion for poetry, which turns into an activity capable of building a new self.

Another important preoccupation which can be found in many of the author's studies is linguistic in nature. She highlights how the violence and oppression specific to the Gulag and to the broader communist apparatus is not only a physical and ideological one, but it is also reflected in the language used by the Securitate agents and in the press. As an example, starting from Jean-Jacques Wunenburger's theory about the pathological linguistic turn from utopia to a totalitarian regime driven by madness, Ruxandra Cesereanu examines the violent vocabulary of the communist newspaper "Scânteia" and discovers the priapic nature of the PCR in its self-created portrait as a combatant against the "enemies of the people". Additionally, she proves that this violence of language (now having become a "language of violence", to use Catherine Ballé's parallel cited by the author) does not disappear after the official fall of communism, but instead it still permeates verbal attacks on prominent intellectuals such as Ana Blandiana, often adopting a licentious word choice and imagery.

As a final point, perhaps the most important and enduring characteristic of the studies and essays collected in this volume is their ethical dimension. As Ruxandra Cesereanu mentions in the last chapter, "Éthique et mémoire", she has always asked herself the following question: what kind of memory should she promote in front of her students (and of young people in general) when it comes to their nation's recent and often traumatic past? She terms the answer she found "ethical memory" (p. 267). By promoting a human approach, based on reading, listening to and discussing the testimonies and

personal experiences of former political prisoners, the author hopes that remembering the victims of totalitarianism will not serve as an excuse for enacting revenge or for never recovering from traumas of the past. Instead, stories of suffering should exist alongside those of heroism, so that the "memory of the resistance" (p. 270) may be passed down to posterity. This, even if not overtly declared, is probably the sincerest aim and will most likely constitute the long-lasting effect of this series of essays: a path towards peacefully coming to terms with the past of one's own country, not out of ignorance, but out of respect and admiration for the people who opposed tyranny by fighting and sacrificing themselves for their and their descendants' freedom.

Luca Mătăsaru

Aurel Codoban, *Sentimentul straniu al vieții*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Școala Ardeleană, 2023

Aurel Codoban is known as a semio-logist, philosopher of religions, philosopher of communication, novelist and existential researcher. But above all, he is recognized as the sophist who brought us the idea of philosophy as a literary genre. *The Strange Feeling of Life* (Sentimentul straniu al vieții), recently published at Școala Ardeleană Press, Cluj-Napoca, in the „Transylvanian School of Philosophy" collection, is the essay through which Aurel Codoban

seems to unite thoughts of the past with images of the future, through the lens of some novelties of life that depict an inner anxiety precisely because of their unknown existence towards which they are heading.

The essayist proposes two new ideas, with which he succeeds in enveloping us throughout the entire book and through which a new perspective on the uniqueness of man and the beauty of life is revealed to us. A first idea presented by Aurel Codoban is that of the uniqueness of earthly life in a cosmic context. Which means that in the version we know, life does not exist elsewhere in the universe, it is a unique-ness, that is, a singularity specific to our planet. It should be noted that although at one point Aurel Codoban uses the term singularity in its technical sense, consecrated by post-humanist philosophies, which speak of the moment of singularity as one in which artificial intelligence will reach a certain stage of development as a self-governing entity in relation to the human being, the general meaning that the author gives to singularity is that of uniqueness, of being remarkable. He proclaims the singularity of life, despite our expectations based on the assumption that in an infinite universe such as the one we live in, there is an infinite number of possibilities, including the possibility that life may exist elsewhere in the universe. Knowing the truth is beyond our power of thought, yet the truth is emphasized by the fact that we, as moral beings, exist on earth and affirm our livelihood. Nevertheless, the impartiality of our unique thinking as individuals in a society customizes our thinking and makes us believe in the truth that is closest to reality.

For Codoban, the way of creation or the field towards which man is heading in

the arena of social skills is not relevant, but the strangeness of life is. That strange feeling that comes from the unknown abyss of the world that surrounds us and from the wholeness of the cosmos itself that hides the truth in the shadow of the unknown. By this fact, man's access to the social scale of the world makes him important from an elementary point of view, man is the rational being who managed to evolve and dictate his life on his own, successively participating in the evolution of mankind through his simple presence with innovative ideas. „What we keep and what we project are only our stories, but only the sensory present exists. Paradoxically, once thought or told, these stories produce reality!" (p. 143) It is like an ideology of dream and imagination, what we dream fictitiously produces the idea of a state that does not exist, and what we imagine fixes in reality a wish we wish fulfilled. Thus, through story-producing thought, what emerges is, in fact, reality. Just as the beginning is based on creation itself, the condition of the unknown is uniformed by affective participation in the primary evolution of all that surrounds us.

Human existence is conditioned by the choice to live and experience every strange novelty that appears as an obstacle to a person's life. The writer tells us that we should privilege life as such in relation to man as the foundation of our reflections, because life is constituted as a moment of grace. In order to be convincing, he starts from the tragic feeling of life, goes through the absurdity of existence and tragic existence, to arrive at surrendering to life, with its tenderness and strangeness. Time is the one that takes precedence in the declaration of the unknown, as a spatial form that stands out from the most closed secrets of man. Knowledge takes time, so finding out the truth lies in the hourglass of time that marks the constant evolution towards the curiosity of the unknown in the matter of the strange.

Through the style used by the author, he does not imagine a philosophy of life, but a revitalization of concepts from the moralizing perspective of an idea shaped by the strange feeling of life through the mirror of the unknown, the universality of an experience blocked by the idea that darkness opens paths of knowledge. This comprehensive essay emphasizes that the wisdom that life offers us is added to a new experience of the future, so young generations must understand that technology is a gateway to customizing one's appearance, and regardless of the field you belong to, the key to curiosity is related to the uncertainty that life's unknown offers us.

Alexandru-Luca Bala

Teju Cole, *Black Paper*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2021
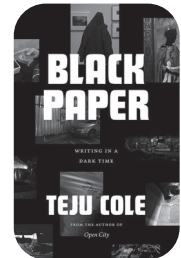
Black Paper is a wide-raging, but thematically unified collection of essays in which Teju Cole writes about darkness: how black and shadows are used in paintings, photography, and typography, the darkness of our personal lives, and the darkness that we choose not to see when we hear about wars, homelessness, and people being discriminated against. His background in photography and art

history, and his experience with writing and living in different cultures helped him make unexpected connections between fields, ideas, and people through which he expresses what humanity should be and how much our world lacks it.

The book's first part is focused on Caravaggio's paintings and their immersive power to make the viewer not only see the painting and feel the characters' emotions but smell, hear, and touch what is in the setting. When he shifts his attention to the pictures taken of the refugees or war victims, it is striking how we would much rather let ourselves be emotionally impacted by a painting that is hundreds of years old than by depictions of real-life events that happen at the same time as we watch the picture. That is *the black that has been there all along, but not seen by them* that Teju Cole emphasizes on, the black that is not seen by *us*. He writes about how crucial it is to see black as a presence, not an absence, photographs as mirrors instead of windows, to make the difference between death and hiding, between loss and abandonment, and to *address absence with capital A*. He continues to talk about how photography can present the ways in which the ideals of human rights fall short through depicting the terrifying reality. Mentioning different intellectuals who have written on the same topic, he lets the reader wonder if it is enough or even ethical to be the witness of such photographs and who the pictures talk about (the photographed, the bigger powers who led to this scenario, or us, who let everything happen).

He cites and gives examples of many artists and intellectuals to exemplify the subtle richness of "darkness", "black", and "shadow", some of them being Santu Mofokeng, Edward Said, Beethoven, Marie Cosindas, Susan Sontag, Ariella Azoulay, Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, Susie Linfield, Shimpei Takeda, Rinko Kawauchi, André Kertész, Brett Weston, Paolo Pelegrin, Tina Campt, Shakespeare, Kerry James, Marshall, Akira Kurosawa, Lorna Simpson, Rainer Maria Rilke, Richard Mosse, Mircea Eliade, Eugène Ionesco, Anne Carson. He analyzes what shadows and the color black mean in different areas such as religion, science, cave paintings, medicine, sculpture, criminology, writing, photography, and painting to make us understand that it does not represent emptiness nor something automatically negative. Shadows, blackness, and darkness can be full of historical meaning, dangerous, protective, mysterious, clear, hiding, highlighting or being the main idea, etc. He talks about how the white gaze disrespects the African culture assuming they are all part of the same nation, culture, religion and so on. Why do we know about Paris, Rome, London and not just Europe, but we don't know about Lagos or other African cities? Why do we know about German, Spanish, and Italian, but we haven't heard about Yoruba, Ewe, Tiv, or Lingala? Moreover, he criticizes how much we simplify and put blackness in its own different category. For example, when he describes zoos from different countries as a simplification of the logic of that society's organization, he talks about how the well-known black panther is two different animals and no animal at all. The animals we call black panthers are either jaguars with black fur, or leopards with black fur. Both are melanistic variants of two already existing felines, but their color has a bigger differentiating power than their origins and anatomy. We

are so keen to identify the *other*, to label it as different, and to marginalize it that we do not recognize that, in fact, just like there are infinite types of others, there are so many differences among *us*, that we can no longer separate people in *us* and *others*, we are all a *we* composed by a multitude of unique, different individuals. So we might as well see all the people as part of this general *we*.

The idea of noticing what is hidden in the dark is strongly linked to history and the importance of remembering. Our individual present is built on a collective past. There is stigma, superficiality, indifference, and hatred perpetuated at every corner, and knowing their roots makes it easier to identify and stop them. Memories and history are our chance to remember good times with our dear ones, chances to mourn them, but also lessons and responsibilities we have to hold on to.

Throughout his travels and the book, he keeps an open mind, making notes about how his perspective on death or New York, for example, has changed after different experiences. At the end of the book, he even acknowledges that literature cannot change the whole political world, it cannot stop wars, end hunger, find shelter, or put discrimination to an end. What literature can do, he explains giving the example of a house on fire from which we have to escape, is to save a life at a time, make you think about others, and engage in this beautiful mechanism in which you carry someone and someone carries you. *Black Paper* is written in such a way that it does not give you an answer, it makes you wonder and want to ask more questions, his thoughts invite us to contemplate and embrace the complexity of humanity

through discovering the history-making, meaning-carrying darkness.

Derya Alim

Czigányik Zsolt, *Utopia Between East and West in Hungarian Literature*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022
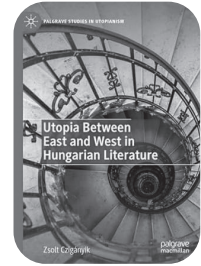
What Czigányik Zsolt, Professor at Eötvös Loránd University of Budapest, presents in his latest book, *Utopia Between East and West in Hungarian Literature,* is a chronological panopticum of essays meant to expose the evolution of the utopian genre in the Hungarian literary tradition. The volume is structured on the analysis of six authors more or less present in the main literary canon. Following a chronological approach, Czigányik states that the concept of utopianism represents a main subject in Hungarian cultural thought, being connected to Thomas More's *Utopia* and with Swift's *Gulliver*.

In his introduction, the author adopts a deductive strategy in order to portray the utopian genre in the national literary space. Emphasizing that the Hungarian literature, with all its aspects, passes through the European cultural history rather unnoticed, this study creates a thematic network meant to place some of the most important writers in the larger European context. Czigányik not only that offers a broad introduction in the utopian studies, but also

focuses on the way in which utopian ideals passed through history into the Hungarian context. Even more, he announces that a complex study must adopt an interdisciplinary view. Therefore, an historical and political context is always linked, through his analysis, with the main literary texts present in the volume.

On the other hand, when trying to offer a definition of utopia, the author negotiates between historicity, politics and ambiguity. Accepting the fact that "utopia has always been in the no man's land between literature and the social sciences" (p. 11), the author concludes that three dimensions must primary be taken into consideration when analyzing the utopias from the Hungarian canon. These three vectors that lay at the foundation of the analysis are: the literary constructs *per se*, the practical dimension implemented by the communities of the time and the political theory tackled behind the narration.

The key element that underpins this study is given by the way in which the literary texts are connected. Behind the interdisciplinary attitude, the author refuses to isolate each case in its own hermeneutical thought, and tries to create, not a pattern, but a semiotic network meant to highlight the way in which utopian thought moved through the history of ideas in Hungarian culture. Therefore, the six chapters of the volume, dedicated to one author, are meant to offer a foray through two centuries of utopian literature, starting from György Bessenyei (*The Voyage of Tariménes*) to three authors of dystopias, representatives of the twentieth century. It becomes clear that Czigányik's intention was to tackle a modern history of the utopianism, for he does not include any writings of such genre

from the postmodernist tradition or from the twenty-first century contemporary horizon.

Throughout the volume, the author explores the way in which political systems, specific, as I mentioned, to the utopian genre, are criticized by different authors. We can take into consideration, at this point, Bessenyei's *Voyage of Tariménes*, which offers a view of two different ways of internal organization, through the utopic land of Totoposz and the dystopic neighbouring land of Jajgádia. Following what inspired by Thomas More and Voltaire, the text presents a utopia and a dialectic space mediated in the end by the force of nature. Briefly, the main idea in Bessenyei's text is that "natural life is indeed to be considered when trying to achieve an ideal synthesis." (p. 86) Even more, beyond the Rousseauesque attitude, the ideal political organization presented is the constitutional monarchy, in which "the common good in Totoposz depends upon the well-being of the individual."

Czigányik Zsolt uses dialectics, polyphony, allegories and thematical approaches in order to point out the complexity of the literary text. When talking about utopias, Jókai Mór's *Novel of the Century to Come* represents a similar pattern, in the sense that, from the eighteenth-century perspective, technological progress seemed an anticipation of future utopias. As the author mentions, Mór is one of the first to tackle the subject of technological advances, yet the twentieth century gives a more detailed attention to this topic. The author takes into consideration two authors, Mihály Babits and Sándor Szathmáry, who, in their novels – *Pilot Ezra or the Perfect Society* and *A Voyage to Kazohinia* – portray

a dystopic world in which technology represents the main cause of the human decadence.

It is interesting to point out that this study not only follows a single topic of interest regarding utopistic thought, but rather succeeds in offering a broad perspective over the topics that obsessed the utopian genre. From political thought to dehumanization, the evolution of utopian writings gains diversity and complexity. One example in this sense is Imre Madách's play, *The Tragedy of Man*. This text portrays Adam and Eve journey through human history, after their fall from Eden. Czigányik exposes how any utopia and any method of government is condemned to fail in this world, no matter if we talk about Roman Antiquity, the Renaissance, the French Revolution or the mechanical future.

The historicity of such texts is also highlighted by the author, in the sense that any work is intertwined with the historical present. When talking about Madách's play, the author shows how the dialectic between utopia and dystopia, the uncertainty regarding a political system, mirrors, in fact, the geopolitical condition of the Central European nations (p. 103). The author points out that these utopian "projects" must be taken especially as ways of negotiating the national problem.

One last aspect that is placed at high value when analyzing Hungarian utopian literature is its links with the broader European literary canon. Besides Thomas More or Yevgeny Zamyatin, Jonathan Swift is considered one of the main sources of inspiration. For example, through the short stories of Frigyes Karinthy, *Faremido* and *Capillaria*, the author reflects upon the so-called sequels of Gulliver. Both of them are written with a conscious satirical dimension and the way in which Karinthy continues this exploration of utopian and dystopian worlds is considered ideal for the author: "the figure of Gulliver travelled from Swift's book to Karinthy's seamlessly, without injury." (p. 157)

It is relevant to point out the importance of such a study in the larger context of literary hermeneutics. Not only did Hungarian literature pass rather unnoticed through the European canon, but it's essential to point out the fact that, in some ways, a utopian text lies at the origins of the Hungarian literary tradition: Bessenyei's *Voyage of Tariménes*. The two main targets that the author envisions are well founded: "on the one hand it was intended that those who do not read Hungarian to be acquainted with important utopian works written in a language that is alien to many readers in the world, […] On the other hand, it was also hoped that the volume contributes to a better understanding of Hungarian culture…" (p. 235)

To conclude, the marginality of the works analyzed in this study is double edged. Not only were the tradition and the language considered semi-peripheral, if not indeed marginal, in spite of their geographical position in Europe, but the texts themselves passed through the Hungarian public with little attention. Czigányik succeeds in offering a study that is both innovative and complex. His method and the multitude of perspectives adopted show hermeneutical rigor, while maintaining the study's accessibility not only for the academic milieu, but also for the larger public.

Horațiu Tohătan

Quentin Deluermoz,
Pierre Singaravélou,
*Pour une histoire des
possibles. Analyses
contrafactuelles et futurs
non advenus*, Paris,
Éditions Le Seuil, 2016

What if history had taken a different course? What if the great turning points in history had been given a different ending? Counterfactual reasoning is a paradoxical phenomenon that arises from reality and seeks to explore the universe of possibilities from the past. In the volume "Pour une histoire des possibles," Quentin Deluermoz and Pierre Singaravélou address, analyze, and investigate the issue, bringing together a vast literature that employs this system of thinking to rewrite the world, create uchronic fictions, or even propose serious hypotheses regarding future possibilities. This volume makes significant contributions to the fields of history and speculative imagination, attempting to demonstrate the importance of the counterfactual approach in historical writing and the social sciences.

The book is divided into three main sections, each one focusing on a distinct phase of the phenomenon under investigation. The first part, entitled "Enquête", comprises four chapters and focuses on investigating how the counterfactual approach has been adopted and defined over time by historians and, later, by researchers in other fields of social sciences, presenting some of the best-known cases in which this reasoning had been used. The topics covered in these chapters include counterfactual digressions, the 19th century origins of uchrony, the evolution of the counterfactual, and the history of the "what if," identified in historical texts even if it represented an unconscious practice rather than a fully articulated system of thinking. Furthermore, the authors analyze various historical texts and note how the counterfactual approach has been used multifacetedly over time, both to assess the importance of a historical moment or a historical figure, to highlight structural phenomena, power relations, or class relations, and to allow the historian to reverse perspective so that readers understand events and the world in an entirely new light. The research also aims to show how counterfactual history has been adopted plurivocally in different regions and how it has been used in various fields, not just in the historical or literary fields but also in other areas such as psychology, law, economics, philosophy, and so on.

The second section focuses on "deciphering" the problems that this reasoning raises for historians and the conditions under which it proves useful to their investigation. The indissoluble but risky role of imagination in historical reasoning, the problem of causality or causal imputation in history, the general applicability of counterfactual reasoning and cognitive reflexivity at the universal and Western level, the problem of uncertainty, and, last but not least, the ideological, political, and conservative character attributed to counterfactual history are the main issues the authors address and analyse, providing answers as well as a broad perspective on the phenomenon. According to them, imagination, once constrained by empirical data, fully becomes a tool for historical

investigation, for articulating the past. The analytical framework outlined throughout the chapter presents six uses and three temporalities that allow different types of counterfactuals to be distinguished according to the objective pursued, thus helping to clarify the confusions that have led to historians' negative perspective on the approach.

The third section, suggestively titled "Experiments", encompasses a series of experimental essays that employ the counterfactual approach and analytical tools developed throughout the book. These essays aim to investigate whether this approach can bring new insights into two distinct areas and problems. The first experiment examines global history and takes a macrocosmic view of colonialism and imperialism, while the other revisits microhistory; more specifically, it examines the possibilities of the Parisian revolution of 1848. The chapter also alludes to the playful dimension and educational potential of counterfactual reasoning, ultimately providing readers with examples and exercises in collective history writing. The results underline the significance of counterfactual imagination in the appreciation of historical potentials, highlighting its reflexive and comparative nature.

The research concludes by showing that the counterfactual approach has been a part of the collective imagination for centuries, and that people frequently use it to think about the past without acknowledging its significance. However, this seemingly mundane reasoning has the power to raise truly important questions about historical truth, the relationship between history and fiction, the question of determinism and contingency, or how different forms of power can change the world. Both historians and novelists have used this approach, although in different forms, spreading unevenly across the globe, each time adapting to existing geopolitical, academic, historical, and intellectual configurations. The research creates a secure methodological framework for using the approach and restores counterfactual history to its rightful role as a tool of historical analysis.

Alexandra-Maria Anca

Graphè, no. 31, Jean-Marc Vercruysse (éd.), *Le sacrifice d'Isaac*, Artois Presses Université, 2022

Le sacrifice d'Isaac, anthologie de textes portant sur la thématique chrétienne, a paru en 2023 chez Artois Presses Université, dans la collection « Graphè », sous la coordination de Jean-Marc Vercruysse ; ce recueil fait partie d'un projet de recherche commencé en 1992, qui se propose d'analyser l'influence de la Bible sur l'histoire culturelle et artistique du monde. La tendance perpétuelle des artistes à réinterpréter les épisodes bibliques est examinée dans les onze articles de cet ouvrage ; tout en respectant l'ordre chronologique, les études se penchent sur la métamorphose de l'histoire d'Isaac et d'Abraham, à partir des écritures néotestamentaires jusqu'au vingtième siècle.

Jean-Marc Vercruysse, le coordonnateur de l'anthologie, nous offre dans la

« Préface » une synthèse du texte de l'épisode biblique qui va être analysé par la suite dans chaque étude ; le vingt-deuxième chapitre de la Genèse raconte l'histoire d'Abraham, prêt à sacrifier son fils, Isaac, selon le commandement du Dieu, acte qui est interrompu par un ange. Vercruysse souligne la rigidité de ces deux personnages qui agissent machinalement et qui n'éprouvent aucun sentiment malgré leur mission tragique. La dimension émotionnelle manquant, les artistes ont engendré de nombreuses interprétations théologiques, littéraires et esthétiques, qui essaient d'explorer plus profondément la nature et le symbolisme de l'épisode biblique ; l'anthologie passe en revue les œuvres emblématiques qui ont donné une épaisseur affective aux protagonistes de cette scène biblique, Isaac et Abraham.

Le premier article, « Sacrifice d'Isaac, d'Abraham ou du bélier ? Une analyse exégétique de Genèse 22 », approfondit la lecture de l'épisode biblique grâce à l'analyse explicative réalisée par Catherine Vialle. Elle présente le contexte littéraire du récit, en précisant l'impact de cet holocauste sur Abraham : Dieu demande à Abraham de sacrifier son fils le plus aimé, qu'il a reçu miraculeusement à l'âge de 100 ans. L'autrice nous présente la lecture traditionnelle du fragment, qui fait référence, pour les chrétiens, à l'obéissance d'Abraham et à sa crainte de Dieu. Ensuite, dans le deuxième article, « La figure d'Isaac dans certaines matrices littéraires du premier christianisme », Philippe Molac nous offre une autre lecture traditionnelle d'Isaac ; il présente le corpus néotestamentaire des Évangélistes, qui considère Isaac comme une préfiguration du Christ.

Plus tard, les écritures canoniques de l'Ancien et du Nouveau Testament vont être réinterprétées d'une manière plutôt subjective, ce qui donne naissance à des approches imaginaires d'Isaac et d'Abraham. Un tel texte est proposé par Origène, qu'Agnès Aliau-Milhaud examine dans le troisième article « "Qu'en dis-tu Abraham… ?" : Origène et la mise en scène du sacrifice d'Abraham ». Origène, exégète biblique, est la première personne qui dramatise l'épisode, en s'imaginant les pensées et les sentiments des personnages, car il considère « la théâtralisation [comme un] moyen d'accès » (p. 54) au sens plus profond du texte. Par conséquent, il inspire d'autres mises en scènes théâtrales, tirées de la Bible, qui se produisent au milieu du XVIIe siècle.

Dans le cinquième article, « Quelles sont les originalités de l'interprétation reformée du sacrifice d'Isaac par Abraham ? Les récritures de Genèse 22 chez Jean Calvin, Sébastien Castellion et Théodore de Bèze », Quentin Roca présente la typologie des œuvres employées pour soutenir la Reforme religieuse. Selon lui, les trois théologiens ont forgé « de vraies constructions littéraires » (p. 82) ; grâce au développement des scènes et du dialogue, ils ont offert au public l'occasion de vivre la lutte intérieure des personnages, imperceptible dans la Genèse 22. Toutefois, ils adhèrent à la perspective traditionnelle : il faut toujours obéir à Dieu. D'ailleurs, les textes dramatiques du baroque espagnol – les *auto sacramentales* écrits par Calderón et Felipe Godínez – sont devenus aussi « le support d'un enseignement moral et spirituel » de la population (p. 117).

Cependant, les artistes ont trouvé une autre manière d'explorer le « non-dit » de l'épisode biblique, à travers la peinture : « En Genèse 22, il reste donc à interpréter. […] [Et les artistes, n.m.] clameront leurs propres qualités inventives. Un fils va mourir. Aux arts maintenant de lui trouver un corps. »

(p. 131) C'est ainsi que les grands artistes comme Caravage, Rembrandt ou Giambattista Piazzetta ont réussi à capturer sur la toile, de manière très dramatique, l'émotion et la souffrance attribuées généralement à Isaac et à Abraham. Corinne de Thoury analyse ce pouvoir de la peinture dans son article « De l'iconographie du sacrifice d'Isaac au devenir perpétuel du pictural », où elle nous suggère que la peinture, comme les autres arts, « nous invite à entendre qu'une création si achevée […] n'est jamais la dernière création » (p. 141) ; donc, on a toujours besoin de nouvelles interprétations pour essayer de trouver les sens cachés des créations artistiques.

En fin de compte, l'anthologie nous offre une analyse critique de diverses œuvres qui se penchent sur l'épisode biblique d'Abraham et d'Isaac ; ces réinterprétations favorisent la survie du texte religieux. Les relectures sont fascinantes mais c'est important aussi de contempler le message authentique du texte, qui nous encourage de nous fier à Dieu.

Laura-Elena Ștefan

Simona Gruian,
Mitologii postmoderne,
Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărții
de Știință, 2021
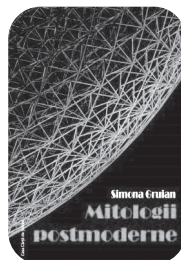
Myth, one of the pillars that stand at the foundation of a civilization and its ideological representations, has been successively modified over time,

developing along with the individual's thinking and way of life. Seen through the lens of the current imaginary, myth helps contemporary man to find the substance of his origin, reconstructing and deconstructing the imaginary of other ages. In this work, *Mitologii Postmoderne* [*Postmodern Mythologies*], Simona Gruian presents the main metamorphoses of myth in postmodern society, starting from the idea of myth seen as cultural heritage and reaching the mythologies of consumer society, a kind of cultural recycling, translated into films, video games, hypertext and more.

The desacralization of myth occurred in modernity due to the modern man's need to logically and rationally explain every element of the world; thus, the idea of the fabulous and sacredness of the myth was erased with the aforementioned attempt to explain it by invoking logic. Postmodern culture carries out a recall of the mythical, a desire to satisfy the human need for mythification, announcing from the very beginning the preference towards dialogism, cohabitation, and parody. Thus, we are witnessing the reinvention of the mythical world in a postmodern manner, starting from the premodern forms of myths and reaching an ensemble that does not consider borders.

We are also dealing with an important change in terms of the structure of postmodern texts, a crossing of texts that leads to the formation of a new text, a process known as intertextuality. The different rewritings of the myth can also be considered a form of intertext, a form of renewal or actualization of the mythical heritage, a labyrinth of text and hypertext, in the case of the latter it is about wandering in a virtual universe, a labyrinth of labyrinths.

Hypertextuality was the generative source of myth, especially in the literary field: individual works exert a mythic influence on the collective unconscious, thus actualizing their mythicism. There is also the reverse possibility, that the myth was the source of hypertextuality, and from this perspective, the myth becomes an intertext that the text builds without quoting directly. Through hypertextuality, the postmodern writer invokes, with the help of the postmodern imagination, possible realities, and fictional worlds elaborated based on rhizomatic thinking and combinatorial games, processes that lead to the formation of new mythical morphologies.

The concept of multiple possible realities is also found in the virtual environment. The author refers to hypertext as a magical portal that facilitates travel to other worlds and which, at the same time, metamorphoses into a rhizomatic labyrinth. Easy exploration of imaginary worlds in the virtual environment is also provided by video games, which offer a reinterpretation of fairy tales with mythological creatures; the game becomes a postmodern fairy tale capable of intertextually recombining fragments of classic fairy tales. Virtual mythology is slowly becoming a mythology of the consumer society, where the artistic creation becomes a commodity of the consumer market, a mythological prefab that mirrors the needs of the turbo-consumer.

Despite this continuous improvement of the reinterpreted myth of postmodern society, the author believes that there is no such thing as a postmodern hero, but rather a hero with a puzzle-like identity, built based on a fragmentary nature specific to postmodernity, or represents a being rhizomatic which is characterized by multiple

exercises of demystifying the heroes of previous centuries.

In postmodern society, the need to adapt fairy tales to the current cultural formulas and myths of the new age becomes evident. Therefore, postmodern fairy tales try to preserve the mythical core of this literary genre, while updating the personality of the heroes who live the traditional fabulous events; in some reinterpretations, we encounter the projection of the image of a new Eve and the cancellation of the misogyny present in the original form of the fairy tales. Behind the story, an ironic criticism of the consumer society emerges, and postmodern fairy tales articulate, through parodic narrative forms, the idea of distancing hyper-technological societies from the authentic forms of the everyday world.

The author concludes this tour of the mythical with a passage through terms such as cyberculture, cyberspatiality, cybersociality, cyberbody, and more, making a transition from postmodernism to posthumanism or transhumanism, creating the idea of a world that exists as a cybernetic extension of the human condition, a world of cybernetics and the computer. Simona Gruian leaves the reader to reflect on whether these changes produced over time are a form of mythical regeneration following a succession of changes or a demystification that occurred precisely as a result of so many deconstructions and reconstructions of myths.

Andreea-Maria Rotar

Raphael Kabo, *Utopia beyond Capitalism in Contemporary Literature*, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023
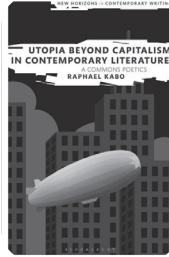
W hat is utopia like nowadays? How is it represented in contemporary literature? Does is still have the same definition and references as it did a few decades ago? Or do we refer to it in the same manner as we used to in the last century? Raphel Kabo's book, *Utopia beyond Capitalism in Contemporary Literature*, does not only try to formulate answers to these questions but to provide new ways in which utopia has been referred to and analysed in the recent past, through a series of relatively recent published texts. These works are attentively examined through the lenses of the actual-time methods and were selected from the oeuvre of well-known authors in the field of utopian literature, and of authors whose works present notable differences in culture and in the tradition of representation, in order to build up a broad vision or perspective of contemporary utopian literature, as the title indicates.

The present work is divided into four main chapters, to which introductory and closing chapters are added. The structure is linear, and so is the content of each chapter. Starting from the *Introduction*, Kabo brings to the table a few fundamental aspects and the basis for his analysis chapters, such as important critics and their concepts or main ideas and the ways in which utopian literature is perceived at present.

Based on these coordinates and others, the author presents the aim of his work, which is to demonstrate that the 2010's and early 2020's utopian texts have completely left behind the specificity of the last century's utopian literature, and that contemporary utopian texts, tend, with each step, to get closer to representing new types of utopias, which have the potential to reinvigorate or even to bring transformation into the present times or the near future. The book is concerned with how to reshape the world through utopian texts and brings a powerful wave of hope, contained in the analyses of each text. In this sense, the author wanted to demonstrate that reading the present as directly linked to an imaginative and prefigurative type of utopia is possible in contemporary literature. Kabo follows closely this line of thought throughout the four chapters, in which the analysis per se is made.

The first of these chapters is concerned with what the future will bring in poetics and utopia, while being anchored in the historical past of the utopian commons. For this, the author introduces the 2015 poetry collection of Juliana Spahr, *That Winter the Wolf Came*. In this section of the book, Kabo follows closely the main aim of his work, and tries to show how the current-time precarious situations can be transformed into prosperous ones, by tackling subjects like eco-poetics, post-humanist poetics and even anthropogenic poetics.

Chapter two, entitled *Utopias beyond borders: Exit West*, presents mobility or moving as possible means of reaching utopias, starting from the migration crisis of the last decade and the desire of returning or refusing to turn back home. The author investigates these issues through the

metaphor of the mysterious doors that serve a crucial role even at the level of the narrative structure and form. These doors seem to be the motors which keep alive the desire and the possibility of reaching utopia.

The next section of the book, *Utopias beyond Disaster: New York 2140*, moves around the idea of utopias as something open and contingent, as well as something that must occur outside or beyond our world. Because of the chosen novel, *New York 2140*, which pendulates between past and present, he introduces two new ideas in his book: utopian figuration, which is linked to the utopian potential of music. Towards the end of this chapter, Kabo's analysis comes full circle.

In the last part, the author focuses on two texts: Lidia Yuknavitch's *The Book of Joan* and Cory Doctorow's *Walkaway*. Kabo examines, in the key of a hopeful view of the future, the utopian human life beyond death and immortality as the centre of utopia. Even more, the analyses of the texts show how immortality and utopia intertwine with the post-human and there is also a metaphysical layer that is to be discovered in the texts. In order to give an overall description of the two texts, the author brings into discussion the concept of *strong AI* as the final utopian form of artificial intelligence. In other words, through the correlation between the texts, the author follows the trace of utopian immortality and life beyond death in the future, with direct links to post-humanism.

Maria-Carina Lechințan

Mazcelka Csaba, A *kora újkori angol utópiák magyar története* (*The Hungarian History of Early Modern English Utopias*), Kolozsvár, Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület, 2019
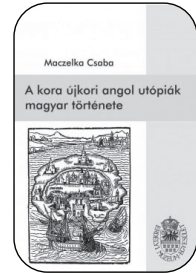
The number of writings dedicated to human curiosity and the chance of fully discovering the world would not surprise a reader of utopian literature. While speculation on humankind and the possibility of people coexisting in harmony leads to numerous works illustrating man's perception of the flawless state, utopian literature reveals the search for the unreachable Terrestrial Paradise.

Maczelka Csaba is not only aware of the complexity of this search, but he also ventures into finding connections between works that became some of the most important turning points in the history of literature and, most specifically, utopian literature, such as *Utopia* by Thomas More, *Mundus Alter et Idem* by Joseph Hall and *New Atlantis* by Sir Francis Bacon, without forgetting to treat the name of Milton, Swift and Defoe with utmost importance. He focuses on identifying the way each work contributed to the appearance and development of imitations and the utopian texts that followed, finding similarities but also outstanding particularities in each of them. Using *The Land of Cokaygne* and John Mandeville's *Itinerarum* (*The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*) as a starting point, he strategically builds his analysis on the apparition of More's *Utopia*, the work that

appears to be the basis for Maczelka Csaba's chronological overview. The author is not indifferent to gendered restrictions that highly impacted literature and dedicates a chapter to the work of Margaret Cavendish, whom he refers to as the first female utopia writer (p. 244), entitled *The Blazing World*, concurrently analyzed with Henry Neville's *Isle of Pines*. Maczelka Csaba appreciates the work of Margaret Cavendish as being one that merges the borders of both fiction and reality, placing in the hands of the writer itself a power unimaginable otherwise (p. 245). He also does not hesitate to bring out the problem of women when discussing *A Pleasant Dialogue betweene a Lady called Listra, and a Pilgrim* by Thomas Nicholls, mentioning the obedience of people in the province of Crangalor, where the ideals are enveloped in moral values, and women are expected to fulfill a passive role and be "honest" and "virtuous". More than referring to a gendered issue, when discussing Thomas Nicholls's work, the author states a distance from More's *Utopia* regarding the perception of the ideal world. Maczelka Csaba emphasizes the role these aspects play in representing society at the end of the sixteenth century.

Even though the sixteenth century is long-windedly discussed in the author's analysis, paragraphs about lunar literature, centered in the mid-seventeenth century, come to underline the connection between literature and science, starting with the analysis of Sir Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* and Bacon's strong opinion on the connection between science and geographical discoveries reflected in his work. Maczelka Csaba considers Bacon's utopia to be the only one that can be measured in its effect

with More's *Utopia*, although it is shorter than all the texts mentioned before (p. 201). Even though the moon appears in earlier writings as well, rather as an allegorical figure (p. 214), the author brings out Francis Godwin's *The Man in the Moone* as a turning point in lunar literature. The connection between science and literature and the importance of this coexistence in Bacon's and in Godwin's work stands out in Maczelka Csaba's analysis, who sees it as the beginning of science-fiction texts (p. 215).

Although the author states that his intention is "stressing the importance of finding a balance between 'literary' and 'non-literary' (historical, philosophical, politico-historical) approaches" (p. 301), he meticulously highlights the reception of the mentioned works, leading to brief paragraphs about Hungarian and Transylvanian writers who approached English utopian literature. Nevertheless, he pays attention particularly to the numbers of editions and the differences between editions of the same work, as representative for the political context of the time. The author's view upon the strong bond between literature and the historical, political context is accentuated by various remarks upon the period in which each work was published, insisting on the importance of utopian dialogues in the Elizabethan age.

Maczelka Csaba's work is purely analytical and brings out the complex background of utopian literature and, most of all, the strong relationship between not only utopian literature and the historical, therefore also political context, but also between readers and contextual influence. The reception of the works mentioned is a strongly emphasized element in the

reviewed work, as reception influenced the critical perception and evolution of utopian literature. The author's intention to clarify the historical evolution of utopian literature leads to further questions which appear in his work as a challenge launched for further research.

Sütö Csilla-Noémi

Matei Stîrcea-Crăciun, *Tratat de hermeneutică a sculpturii abstracte*, Târgu Jiu, Editura Institutului Cultural Român, Editura Brâncuşi, 2016

Matei Stîrcea-Crăciun

TRATAT DE HERMENEUTICĂ A SCULPTURII ABSTRACTE

perspectiva endogenă

Brâncuşi simbolismul hylesic

T he impressive volume on Brâncuşi published by Matei Stîrcea-Crăciun at the Romanian Cultural Institute Publishing House is, as Sorin Alexandrescu points out ("Brâncuşi inepuizabilul", *Observator cultural*, no. 866, 30 March–5 April 2017, p. 12), a publishing event, due to the special technical quality of a large format edition of 607 pages, a scientific event, given the author's effort to create and use a new method of interpreting Brâncuşi's work, as well as a cultural event, in that, by forcing us to look at Brâncuşi differently, it also forces us to think differently not only about his work, but also about its relationship with Romanian culture.

There are currently no institutions expressly empowered to study the grammar and content of symbolic discourses in the highly complex hypostases that characterize landmark productions in the visual arts and, by extension, in architecture, design, object environment. Endogenous hermeneutics – a new method in art criticism, developed over three decades at the Francisc Rainer Institute of Anthropology – seeks to reconstruct abstract languages in modern and contemporary sculpture through analyses of morphology, syntax and imagery. The approach is defined as the polar opposite, and therefore complementary, to exogenous critical approaches, based on preconstructed reading grids, postulated to have universal validity - psychoanalysis, Marxism, feminism, etc. - and should in principle precede them.

Matei Stîrcea-Crăciun applies the method of endogenous hermeneutics to the "workshop" of Brâncuşi's sculpture. The approach offers, for the first time, solutions to the four cardinal problems of Brâncuşiology: the systematic interpretation of sculptural motifs, the identification of the main sources of inspiration, the conceptualization of the artistic current launched by the master in the art of the 20th century, and the culturological positioning of Brâncuşi's creation.

"Brâncuşi remains one of the greatest sculptors of the sublime in the 20th century. What Brâncuşi's work offers for contemplation are telestial gods. The sculptor creates an algebra of the transcendent, abstracting the Old Testament and Neo-Testamentary themes and heroes, giving them values as algebraic functions operated on the basis of variables (x, y, z), synergistic parts of the Unknown Being. His peasant soul senses that the depersonalization of the attributes of the sublime by transferring them into abstract language brings to light the superlative, revelatory hypostasis

of human values of universal essence, the expression of which he seeks to render through the language of matter rather than the language of form. The Brâncusian project offers an answer to the great problems inherited from Renaissance art: equality between men and women, reconciliation between Christians and Jews, reconciliation between all nations", says Matei Stîrcea-Crăciun.

The first part of this project reviews Brâncuși's entire work chronologically (pp. 25-385, including notes), followed by a methodological section (pp. 389-502) and, finally, a *Dossier français* (pp. 505-608, plus extensive final sketches), which re-states the essence of the demonstration in translation. Thus it is that many of the problems, diagrams and explanatory images have a triple presence in this huge volume. If the last part switches to another language, the second part makes a real methodological leap from the chronological textual presentation of each work to one based on schemes of themes and variations on the whole work, including variants and, above all, comparisons with other sculptures that establish relationships according to a multitude of criteria. This aspect of the book is undoubtedly the most spectacular and reveals, indeed, the high dimension of the research, unique in Romanian culture, I believe, thought out and built as a real model for further research. Although it is not really a treatise on the hermeneutics of Brâncuși, the book is an important step in this direction, prepared down to the smallest details and intended to become a complete working method for the work of other artists. The fact that it does not fully succeed in such a feat and raises the question whether today, given the huge fan of analytical methods on offer, there can still be a single, decisive hermeneutical method for any work of art cannot cancel out the height of the enterprise. There are, of course, many repetitions in the book, but Matei Stîrcea-Crăciun's intention was obviously to move from the expository nature of each work in turn chronologically, in the first part, analysed, let us say vertically, in all its details, to the character of a transversal analysis of Brâncuși's entire work, in the second and third parts of the book, in order to highlight the relationships between all these works, according to families of themes and working techniques. The last two parts are thus of particular interest and I would even say that this is where the main merit of the book can be identified, that of deciphering the meanings of Brâncuși's works.

We are talking, in fact, about several different books, melted by Matei Stîrcea-Crăciun into a single volume: a Brâncuși monograph, a hermeneutic method, thematic cartographies, individual analyses of works etc. The fruit of an immense effort to identify details and systematize them into a new explanatory vision of the sculptor, the massive volume written over many years is a major undertaking of art history in Romania, probably the most ambitious and broadest analysis not only of Brâncuși's work, but of any plastic artist in general in this country.

Maria Ungur