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Serbian Studies: Journal of the North American Society for Serbian Studies, Volume 20, Number 1, 2006, pp. 151-155 (Article)

Published by Slavica Publishers

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ser.0.0007>

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Neorealism in Serbian Prose of the 1990s: Its Development and Transformations

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Vladimir Arsenijević's first novel *In the Hold* (U potpalublju) was published in 1994, in the middle of the last Balkan war. Nobody expected that the first novel of an anonymous author would win the prestigious NIN Literary Award. And yet Arsenijević got it. The award, as well as a very warm critical reception of the book, implied that something new had happened in Serbian literature, which had been up to then characterized by postmodern non-mimetic-poetics. *In the Hold* can be seen as a new beginning: there is a huge discrepancy between postmodern poetics and the neorealistic poetics of Arsenijević's novel. To begin with, the novel lacks metafictional consciousness as well as a "subtle dialogue" with the writer's personal library. Arsenijević describes contemporary events, and his text is based on an experience that is common to all of his Serbian readers.

In the Hold is, therefore, a realistic novel. The word "realistic" is used not only as an opposition to "fantastic" but also as a hint that makes a connection between Arsenijević's novel and Realism—the dominant literary trend of the mid-19th century. First of all, one can recognize that Arsenijević's primary intention is the representation of *totality*. Namely, the novel is the first part of the planned series entitled *Cloaka Maxima*, the cycle of novels that were supposed to depict the totality of Serbian society in the 1990's.

Due to this plan, *In the Hold* deals with a network that links several representatives of the young generation in Serbia. Arsenijević's second novel *Angela* (1997) demonstrates this intention even more evidently: the narration crosses the borders of only one generation in order to involve the members of older generations that were just mentioned in passing in the first novel. These characteristics clearly link it to the poetics typical of the first half of 19th century, or more precisely, to the author of *Human Comedy*.

In *Writing Degree Zero* Roland Barthes discusses two main characteristics of that type of novel: the past perfect tense and the third person point

of view.¹ The first of these characteristics creates the world that seems to be separated from the present. The same can be said about the plot of a realistic novel which appears already finished at the moment of narration. Barthes perceives an ambiguity in this type of novel related to its critical engagement. Although the narration is often focused on the dark side of society, the verbal tense of the narration annuls the critical engagement, because the story deals with events that had been already over. Therefore, there is a gap between narrated events and the reader/narrator. Due to this gap the narration can be objective. It is not hard to see a link between epic and realistic narration: in both cases the narrator is not situated in the world of the narration—he or she is not a “dramatized narrator.”²

At first sight, there is a difference between third person narration in the realistic novel, and the dramatized narrator in both Arsenijević’s works. However, this is a delusion, because there is no real limitation of the narrators’ knowledge in Arsenijević’s novels. The narrators do not deny their willingness to see and know everything there is; at the same time, they strive to recreate every aspect of the world they narrate about, in spite of the fact that they themselves live in those same worlds.

The main characters of both Arsenijević’s novel express the *totality of the Serbian society* of the 1990’s. Although it seems that *In the Hold* and *Angela* are shaped by a pessimistic view of life, there is still something uplifting about this kind of narration. It is based on the ideas that evil and injustice can be punished or overruled by the power of truth that art brings forth. This belief in the power of text and art in general has its origin in the notion that art is like a mirror,³ which links Renaissance, Enlightenment, and Realism.

However, Arsenijević could not avoid the ambiguity of the critical engagement of Realism discussed by Roland Barthes. The representatives of the official political regime in Serbia and their political opponents both had their own interpretations of Arsenijević’s first novel: for the regime it was a story about the past, while for the opposition it was a story about the present. Soon, Arsenijević himself realised that his engagement against the regime does not depend on his novel(s) but on the media. The language of the novels (especially *Angela*) was epically transparent, without an intention to ask a question or give an answer; compared to the language of the media, it seems that Arsenijević’s literary discourse was almost redundant.

¹ Rolan Bart, *Književnost mitologija semiologij* (Beograd: Nolit, 1971), 50-53.

² Vejn But, *Retorika proze* (Beograd: Nolit, 1976), 170

³ See: M.H.Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 31-35.

Arsenijević managed to complete only two novels of the four he announced after publishing the first one. This failure may well demonstrate that the cycle of novels represents an anachronism.

Other Serbian writers whose works do not belong to the poetics of postmodernism did not try to reanimate Arsenijević's concept of the "cycle." Contrasted with two main features of Arsenijević's poetics—the concept of totality and the unlimited knowledge of the narrator—their works clash with Arsenijević's approach without siding with postmodernism. These authors attacked Realism, but not all of its poetics.

The concept dealing with the totality of experience was abandoned in the collection of short stories *In the Bed with Madonna* (U krevetu sa Madonom, 1998) by Vule Žurić. Although one can recognize the idea of *chronology* in this collection—it begins with a town under siege and continues with the experience of a refugee—the end of the collection does not reveal any clues regarding the place where the main hero is. The establishment of chronology did not result in the creation of a novel, but a collection of stories. In this way, the author suggests that the idea of totality must be replaced with the truth of fragment.

The radical failure of the narrator's unlimited knowledge is obvious in the novel *Eavesdropping* (Prisluškivanje, 1999) by Zoran Ćirić. The action—if the novel can be said to have one—takes place in Niš, a city in southern Serbia, during the NATO air campaign against Yugoslavia. This book consists of two "discourses": a conversation among friends in a restaurant near the main police station in Niš, and the fragments of texts written by the main character/writer Magic Ćira (Magični Ćira), incorporated into the text. Although Magic Ćira is present during the conversation in the restaurant, he is not the narrator. The narration in this novel has the characteristics of Schtanzel's *personal narration*.⁴ This kind of narration makes us believe that the conversation in the restaurant is not narrated but was *recorded*. At the same time, the fragments of text are left without any comments, as they were copied from somewhere. In both cases it seems that the narrator was replaced by a "recorder."

It is not hard to see that Ćirić insists on a fragmentary view instead of presenting the totality, because the narration is never removed from the restaurant near the police station, and it does not incorporate any other outside material except the fragments of Magic Ćira's texts. This is an important fact because it suggests a confrontation with Arsenijević's novel. In Arsenijević's novel the desire to encompass the totality implies solidarity with all the

⁴ Franc Štancel, *Tipične forme romana* (Novi Sad: Književna zajednica Novog Sada, 1987), 74.

victims of Milošević's regime in Serbia. The absence of such an aspect in Ćirić's novel tells us that this kind of solidarity is lacking.

The next point of confrontation between these two novels is the predominance of the voice in Ćirić's novel. This feature is emphasized by the title—*Eavesdropping*. If one eavesdrops on someone else it means that he or she is interested in voices and words, not in the "phenomenal" world. One can understand the full symbolic importance *eavesdropping* comparing it to the importance of the "eye" in Realism. The eye is a symbol of the desire to see, which overlaps with the desire to make visible. This is something typical of Realism, or as Mark Seltzer puts it: "The realist desire to see is also necessary a desire to make visible: to embody, physically or materially, character, persons, and inner states."⁵ Seltzer's idea makes it clear that Realism is closely related to the phenomenon of the body and the eye. The body is the field where one's inner states become visible, and the eye is the tool which enables the narrator to rule over his or her world.

Seltzer's assertion offers a productive interpretation of *Eavesdropping*. The title of Ćirić's novel is not only a sign telling us that the world cannot be seen as a whole, but also a hint regarding the subject's desire to make himself *invisible* in the panoptical world, where only spy satellites that circle our planet seem to be able to see the whole. At the same time, this title indicates a tendency to replace the eye with the ear. This decision suggests that a text is not, before all, a mirror of society, but a shelter, because the character who *eavesdrops* is always hidden. It means that he or she exchanges a certain amount of information for his security, while the power of the realist's eye becomes the neo-realist's fear of observation.

In the same way, the voices that we hear are not just the signs that interest us, but also the hints that our shelter is not completely safe. The ear is, therefore, a sign of necessity, because one can close one's eyes, but not one's ears.

If Ćirić's novel confronts us with the prevalence of the ear over the eye, it means that his text is based on *poetics of blindness*. The first point regarding this poetics is the lack of the wish to see or to make something visible. The second one is the disappearance of bodies. It means that the descriptions of characters are excluded from the novel on purpose, thereby making a departure in relation to the poetics of realism. This lack of description is important because it raises questions about the personality of the character that now cannot be embodied. The fragments of conversation by certain characters are not enough to fully characterize them, because there is a lack of

⁵ Mark Seltzer, *Bodies and Machine* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 95.

the precise definition of the speaker. The author of *Eavesdropping* leaves us without these labels on purpose, in order to divide the replies from the characters. The replies in the novel are almost independent because they do not take part in the process of characterization.

We can conclude that the characters without the body and personality cannot be identified as realistic action-subjects but only objects that do not invoke reader's sympathy. This is the next level of disappearance of the realistic subject: the disappearance of the body also raises questions about the problem of the reader's identification with the character because "a common body, a shared organic nature, bonds reader and character."⁶ The lack of body introduces a kind of post-human narrative, because the human bond between reader and character is devoid of substance.

Yet, there is one action-subject in this novel. This is the writer-hero Magic Ćira. Although he is present at the restaurant, he does not take a part in the conversation. His replies are "invested" in the war/anti-war novel that he was writing during the NATO air campaign in order to establish himself as a writer and thus obtain a scholarship from a foreign foundation that helps writers-in-danger. It means that Magic Ćira's novel represents *disappearing information*, because it does not address literary traditions of his own language, or is not oriented *inside*, but rather impersonally *outside*. His hero deprives himself of the body and personality (except one idea—get out of here!) in order to turn himself into a piece of information that is not vulnerable like the body.

This is the last level of the disappearance of the realistic subject and realistic poetics. From this point on, we enter a post-human situation where bodies will be disappearing, and identities (without personalities) will turn into the information that moves from one point to another, without leaving traces in the visible world but only in the world of global texts. Therefore, the differences between Arsenijević's and Ćirić's works mark not only the decomposition of poetics of (neo)Realism in Serbian prose of the 1990's but also the disappearance of the realistic action-subject and its transformation into the post-human subject.

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⁶ Thomas W. Laquer, "Bodies, Details, and the Humanitarian Narrative," in Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 176-204.