META-REFERENTIAL ASPECTS IN ARTISTIC COMMUNICATION

ASPECTE ALE METAREFERENȚIALITĂȚII ÎN COMUNICAREA ARTISTICĂ

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Abstract. *In his films, the Austrian director, born in Germany, Michael Haneke, suggests a new perspective towards artistic communication. His attempt joins the ample and modern current of meta-referentiality. The classical, linear characters are doubled by para-characters and the sequence of events is offset by the symbolic significance of many meta-referential elements. Several characters take charge of a non-conventional filmmaker who defies stereotypes and disestablish traditional norms. The ludic appearance predominates over the movie in which nothing is predictable and there is no happy-end. The elements having a tragic connotation and exemplifying fortuna labilis topos convey a more serious message and grievious significance about the meaning of life. The comic aspect is mostly exbited by unspecific personages and highlights these features. These comic dramas bind in a single game the loss of sufferings, joys and future. The meta-referential aspects abolish the border between fiction and reality.*
Key words: *artistic communication, meta-referentiality, para-character, fiction, symbol.*

Rezumat. *Regizorul austriac, de origine germană, Michael Haneke propune, în filmele sale, o viziune nouă asupra comunicării artistice. Încercarea sa se înscrie în curentul amplu şi modern al metareferențialității. Personajele clasice, lineare sunt dublate de para-personaje, iar succesiunea evenimentelor este anihilată de semnificația simbolică a numeroaselor elemente metareferențiale. Unele personaje preiau sarcina unui regizor atipic care sfidează stereotipiile şi normele tradiționale. Aparența latură ludică domină filmele în care nimic nu este previzibil, iar happy-end nu există. Elementele, care ar fi avut o conotație tragică şi ar fi exemplificat topos-ul fortuna labilis, transmit o semnificație mai gravă despre sensul vieții prin aspectul comic evidențiat. Comicul uneşte dramele într-un singur joc al pierderii suferințelor, bucuriilor şi a viitorului. Aspectele metareferențiale determină dispariția graniței dintre ficțiune şi realitate.*
Cuvinte cheie: *comunicare artistică, metareferențialitate, para-personaj, ficțiune, simbol.*

INTRODUCTION

Defining what is meant by meta-referentiality is essential, but a mere definition seems difficult to find out and the concept has been ascribed a plethora of meanings. Applied to cinema-art, the concept reveals any attempt to show or to offer a hint at the enunciative apparatus of the film itself. This may be found in

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film within a film and the reflexive devices suspend our disbelief in the autonomy of diegesis. For centuries the meta-referential phenomenon has been present in humanities in general. The research work regarding this interesting aspect began later. Over the decades of the 20th century, fruitful essays and discussions have revealed meta-referential practice and strategy in other fields of media. As cinematographic art is considered one of the latest, meta-reference appeared and became an explicit expression of self-consciousness during the '60s and afterwards. Besides the aspect of self-representation, it also involves dialectic forms (essence vs. appearance; truth vs. illusion; reality vs. image, thing vs. sign) and the ambiguity of the aesthetic border. Self-reflexivity in cinema may be seen, from the director's point of view, as a kind of device revealing the enunciation, but, from the point of view of the audience, it is a reminder that they are watching a movie. The present contribution aims to highlight several meta-referential features in Michael Haneke's films. Since there is a close connection with the works of other directors, we refer to the films of Woody Allen as well.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The contribution is based on principles of visual semiotics, theory of narrativity and style. This is a trans-generic attempt because it transposes a few of the openings of meta-referential research in other artistic fields into this one. It also capitalizes the mythical and the symbolic significances of the chosen cinematographic elements, trying to offer a more complete understanding of these several innovative artistic endeavors. Reassessing the contemporary cinematographic *heresies*, the contribution underlines the opposition to the aesthetic norm and the paradigmatic value of these masterpieces.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The visual arts allow a special undertone and an extremely spectacular feature and for this method to create a variety of connotations. The cinema-field confirms this remark. The directors and the fim production designers were captivated by the opportunity to achieve, through fantasy, bridges between the fiction-world and reality (Arhip, 2013). A simple chronological unfolding of more or less predictable events, the effort to come into notice due to various visual or sound effects were no longer enough to require more from the spectator's spirit of observation and interpretative ability. The masters of cinema wished new challenges and a different message of their creations.

Michael Haneke stated his *ars poetica*: "My films are intended as polemical statements against the American 'barrel down' cinema and its dis-empowerment of the spectator. They are an appeal for a cinema of insistent questions instead of false (because too quick) answers, for clarifying distance in place of violating closeness, for provocation and dialogue instead of consumption and consensus." On the other hand, Woody Allen has flirted with the idea of „film within film" almost since the beginning of his career. In an interview, he said that it was not Buster Keaton's attempt (*Sherlock Jr.*) the one which inspired him, but his own self-interest. „The idea to enter the screen was a thought that came much later."

(Björman, 2013). Thus, after 25 years he watched Keaton's film, Allen directs *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985). A double-crossing between fiction and reality takes place in this film. The female character, Cecilia, idealizes the fictional world and enters the screen following a character, the archeologist Tom Baxter, who also has descended into the real world. Both crossing of the aesthetic border occur under the pretext of a quasi-traditional love-story. Therefore, the viewer watches two films in which the main characters have dual membership to different fictional levels, and the meta-referential aspect becomes the principle theme of meditation for the director and for the audience. Woody Allen was fascinated by the possibility to blur the limit between fiction and reality. The proof can be found in his previous works. For example, in *Annie Hall* (1977), the main characters talk explicitly about this trans-medial aspect. Waiting in a movie-line, the male hero Avy brought Marshall McLuhun himself to support his opinions that contradict the emphatic speech of another character. This personality, apparently inaccessible to ordinary reality, appears metonimically behind a poster. He is an element of imagination which becomes reality. McLuhan is kind of *correctio*, an incarnate *anthorismos* (Dragomirescu, 1975) joining the world of ideas with the concrete world. In the same series of interviews, W. Allen admits that he tried to persuade Ingmar Bergman ori Fellini to appear in his film, but they refused, though appreciating the originality of his idea. Other monologues of Woody Allen may be observed in *Alice* and *Husbands and Wives*.

The aesthetic attraction to blur the border between fiction and reality may be better noticed in Michael Haneke's films. The Austrian director was born in Germany, but he has been living, directing and teaching in Vienna. We mainly refer to *Caché* (2005) and *Funny Games* (1997/remake in 2007). In the first one, a subtle exergue for self-reflection draws the viewers attention. The film begins with the image of a still-camera placed on the street which is called Iris. Iris is a visual diaphragm of the eye which controls the amount of light reaching the retina. The sight of the audience is presented metaphorically by video cassettes and drawings received by G. Laurent. From a mythological point of view, Iris was the messenger of the gods, a female correspondent for Hermes. Another exergue in the same film is the title *Brothers*. It is the title of a movie watched by G. Laurent one afternoon and it clearly appears on the light-signboard of the cinema. This exergue allegorically refers to the myth of the brothers Cain and Abel which is reinterpreted in Haneke's film by the stepbrothers Georges Laurent and Majid. In the other Haneke's movie, *Funny Games*, the strange killing doublet, Peter and Paul, looks straight to the camera several times and talks to the audience and to the director about their opinion regarding the usual course of action and the ordinary predictable happy-end which it is not the case of their murder-game. In addition, Paul literally rewinds the film with a television remote and he goes for a turn in reality. According to the biblical perspective, Paul and Peter are martyrs and symbols of revealing the true knowledge and faith. Haneke inverts the original meanings and the normal evolution of the events.

All these movies are very rich in symbolic elements implying also biblical or mythical significances. The combinative perspectives of the directors are a strong proof of their artistic intentions. They wish to modernize their art and to transform the audience into a more elevated and active communication-partner. The illusionist character of the representation constitutes the source of intellectual, aesthetic pleasure. There is a prominent, deliberate continuity between the representational level and the reality-level breaking the Hollywood-standards and classic norms.

A universal symbol is the rose (*The Purple Rose of Cairo*) and it connotes revival, love and accomplished perfection (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1995). All these meanings comply with Cecilia's wishes and dreams which do not become true. Eventually, the movie itself is the Rose, the perfect, magical cinematographic jewel. Cecilia remained in her dreary life and her only offering for Tom Baxter/Gil Shephard is a merry-go-round which stands for *simulacra* of the world. The purple colour of the rose represents the mystery of life and the nocturnal or feminine principle. It apprises for danger and for rule violation.

The Laurent family, presented in *Caché*, receive several video cassettes revealing their own slices of life and having a first deceiving designation of threatening. They are also used as symbols. In fact, this modern device stands for G. Laurent's recollections of his wrongdoing against his adoptive brother during their childhood. The cassettes and the drawings are projections of this guilt and his remorse. His present successful, fulfilling life and career as guest of a TV talk show cannot counter-balance the culpable past. His real sin is not his vanity, but his self-abandonment which is the main cause for not realizing the *gravitas* of his behaviour. George Laurent, the contemporary Cain, is guilty of violation of *xenia*. The Greek term *xenia* refers to the ritualized friendship and hospitality, both of them being not observed by George.

The drawings received by the Laurents have a bloody cock on them. The cock is another symbol standing for vanity and reckless anger (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1995). Laurent's envy and hatred as a child against his adoptive brother, Majid, render the mythical conflict between Cain and Abel. The drawn blood from Laurents' received papers figures Cain's sacrifice in front of divinity, but the tribute is not accepted. Georges Laurent carries up his sin and grief.

The egg is the main symbolic element in *Funny Games.* The egg is a universal symbol referring to genesis and the mystery of human existence. It is the primary reality which contains the plurality of human beings. The egg is the anaphoric element of the series of crime-games played by the doublet Paul and Peter in *Funny Games* by M. Haneke. One of the two strange young men comes to borrow eggs from their next victims. The egg also symbolizes order and the diversity of the origins. Although the egg is not essentially the first, it epitomizes the seed of diversity. Each crime starts with this basic principle, and the variety of possibilities to continue the events is impressive. Paul and Peter challenge the audience to this game of a new and unpredictable unfolding of events. They become the directors and a kind of para-characters evolving into a second parallel

fictional level. *Funny Games* proposes the reverse of a happy-ending for a thriller. The para-characters behave abnormally and have an unusual appearance. They are wearing white golf-clothes instead of the classical black helmets for negative personages. New rules of a strange game are announced by this dress-code. It is a paradox as the croquet-game from *Alice in Wonderland*. When Paul and Peter violently attack the family, the movie itself becomes a loaded gun and the onlookers are molested similar to the characters. The para-characters disobey all the normal rules of a serial killer; there are no miraculous escape routes or techniques, no survivors, no justice. The movie deconstructs the modality in which media present violence. Virtually, the doublet does not commit crimes. As directors of the new genre of film about violence which they have offered, they kill or eliminate a category of predictable, oversimplified characters that they no longer want to be present on the screen and in the scripts. An element of the cinema-heroes paradigm must disappear.

From a symbolic point of view, the double or the divided self (Peter and Paul) has a tragic and evil connotation. The double is our enemy who comes to fight against us and it forebodes death. Paul and Peter, the doublet from *Funny Games*, came to Anne and George Farber's vacation house and, after a prologue consisting of a bunch of lies, they took the family hostage. They represent the psychopathic enemy who proposes sadistic games during the next twelve hours. After the innocent guess-game of famous musical theme, a game played by the family before reaching their vacation retreat, the double Peter and Paul initiates them into sadistic games involving mental and physical violence. Another connotation of their arrival to the house and on the screen may be that specific to the author/director as a "visitor" into his own creation. He becomes a semiotic instrument and creates his self-portrait as a modern, iconoclast and contextualized film-director. This is a good opportunity to remember Montaigne's words: "So, my reader, I'm the very dough of my book" (de Monaigne, 2012).

In *Funny Games*, golf may be seen as a metaphor for life or for the course of life. The sport golf is the only one not requiring a standardized playing area, but it involves definite rules and a degree of hazard (unplayable situations). Paul and Peter play life-and-death golf on the greater field of the neighbourhood in which every family is a hole, but they also play golf with the Farber family, the death of each character being a hole. The final scene in which Anne fails to grab the knife and save her life being thrown from the boat is very figurative. The move resembles a skilled stroke of a golfer and her fall is like the roll of the white golf-ball into a hole. A lot of inter-textual syntagmatic combinations can be noticed while the game is taking place. The standard plot is reversed and disestablished; the general assembly is a completely different one. The common thriller and the intellectual-film constitute *in absentia* rapport. They are mutually exclusive. The director also uses a sophism *extra dictionem*. The relative elements are intermingled with the absolute ones as in "Alice in Wonderland". The cinematographic sophism highlights *technè*, the art itself as the real subject of any film.

In all these films, the screen acts as a modern mirror that highlights the relationship between truth and illusion, between reality and fiction. As well, the directors' camera in all these movies is the door for our fictional entering and the characters' reality disclosure. The relationship between cinematographic fiction and the reality of the onlookers has become a meta-artistic one. The movie itself is a parergon (Dragomirescu, 1975), a work undertaken in addition to that of nonconventional communication between the audience and the directors. The latter brings to light the stagy elements and challenge the onlookers who become the real partners of the artistic communication. The lens of the camera has become an aesthetic border. It plays the role of a window or that of a door or any other kind of specular surface in painting or in architecture. In fact, we have to deal with the awakening of self-consciousness of the new cinema. The emergent cinema rests upon three convergent features and artistic impulses: illusionist representation, the theme of the vanity of action/story and the meta-referential aspect of the artistic representation. The lens of the camera emphasizes the hiatus between two different spiritual attempts to deal with cinematographic art.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The novelty of the concept meta-film has required attention in the recent decades and many case studies or scientific papers are devoted to this topic.

2. Unlike the usual representation, meta-representation must take into account the different media, the message being a specific artistic work which lays itself into a particular cultural context, code and channel

3. The cinematographic image presents itself as being aware of its image-character expressing a desideratum – to accede to a new and superior existential level. The film-art struggles for its specific autonomy.

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