

Postmodern Neo-medievalism

Middle Ages has never gone out of use – its dusk brought forth a rise of obsessive concerns and constant sojourns, under the pressure of the eternal return to its own cultural and civilization origins – however, in certain periods, due to varied pulses and unpredictable effects, Middle Ages has experienced revivals that forced it to enter in centrality, capturing scholars attention, and most recently the masses interest through highly developed cybernetic technology, even as a pretext for debating contemporary paradigms, as Umberto Eco says, but the indirect nature does not represent the true dimension of excessive familiarity that seems to have been settled between the current world and the medieval one. Such reiterations that certify the recurrent trend of the history invariably led to the new "postmodern" Middle Ages, an oxymoron excused by the definitions, more complex at the aporetic level, which are struggling to establish viable connections between these two periods in areas such as politics, sociology, economics, literature and which are outspread by experts with world recognized professional authority. As a response that counterbalances the privacy of those two periods, the otherness of Middle Ages treats everything through the temporal distance perspective, the abyss that opens being able to be passed only on a fragile and floating bridge of conjectures, and the one who dares to venture on such a risky adventure cannot propose a safe target; once entered in the pre-modern world one can only collect shreds without the certainty that he fully understands their meaning and even less to get the traditional monolithic image of the Middle Ages. The Other that has dominated academic areas along with the introduction of post-colonialist theories was established with its unexplored potential among the hot topics of medieval studies, being exported then in the interdisciplinary field, where Middle Ages is analyzed and exposed with all its bodies and even its interstitial areas, on which terminations today counts feminism or cultural minorities. But just such a Middle Ages - fragmented and decentralized, allogenic and troubling - although difficult to detect in its depth, its proximity inspired postmodernism, as an alter ego of alienating postmodern condition. Between these two extremes, identification and alterity, the double that lurks and watches carefully our hidden anxieties and fears, as Norman Cantor considers it, or the Middle Ages as a mirror, which reflects all the traumas and utopias of modernity, as Barbara Tuchman regards it, as well as other comparisons and sublimation of it, more or less spread, are variations related to the experience of the medieval in postmodern era.

In such a context of conflicting and competitive perspectives, this thesis aims to analyze the postmodern neo-medievalism in a sufficient flexible manner to integrate these views and, in the same time, consistent enough with the intended purposes not to be dispersed in irrelevant details, so that, using the comparative method, it explores not only definitions, evolution, features and opportunities of Middle Ages in postmodernism, but follows up particularly its presence and occurrences in three postmodern arts: best-selling novels, movies and video games called “neo-medieval”, as they fall under the new medieval current that has taken by storm both the academic and artistic world during the last decades of 20th century and the beginning of 21st century.

The definition of the terms and the justification of using them in the present research starts with the medieval studies which – through the return to academic established origins of the 19th century, through the process of comparison they conformed themselves to inside the academic disciplines only, through the very strict specialization they limited themselves to - have given way to more competitive perspectives, many competing from outside, and well known as medievalisms. Settling out systematically the areas of study, the historians have followed up the structuralist ideal looking for final and exhaustive explanations, specializing themselves in more and more restricted fields and refusing rationally to accept in their approaches less severe practices methodologically speaking. The unexpected effect was the storage at the edges – inversely proportional to the narrowing of the subject – of the academic “remnants” and under their threatening pressure the medieval studies were going to be buried, the despised marginal suddenly dethroning the established core and taking its place. Thus, popular medievalisms have captured historians attention and they require the same careful treatment at academic level and in its manifestations, too. Carol L. Robinson, MEMO’s editor, analyzes medievalisms even in their evolution, comparing and distinguishing between traditional medievalism, modern and postmodern medievalism and postmodern neo-medievalism which, though tries to break in with other medievalisms, it is a natural sequel of postmodern medievalism. The definition of neo-medievalism claims the integration of more versions that compete without dissolving one another in all parameters of medievalisms, allowing for all channels of proliferation, technological or traditional, academic or popular, of their ideological cradle, western and postmodern, the alterity and illusion of Middle Ages – the complex and detailed definition is offered in the section entitled *Medievalism versus Neo-medievalism*. A notice is required here to elucidate the use of the term “neo-medieval” instead of “neo-medievalist” when we are talking about postmodern

arts: firstly, it is already considered an established term - medieval (there is a distinct type of artistic products considered to be medieval – medieval movies, medieval video games) to which is added the prefix “neo” that suggests the removal from the artistic representations and perspectives belonging to other medievalisms, except for video games because having a short history, they entered the international stage about three decades ago, so the medieval does not need an additional framing; then, “neo-medieval” functions as a generic category and associates especially with the artistic impulses, while “neo-medievalism” represents a larger phenomenon, which integrates all other cultural aspects that the arts seem to skip over, and to avoid the confusion created by the replacement of these terms, I prefer to be coherent while using them.

All these approaches are reunited under the title *Postmodern Neo-Medievalism*, which firstly highlights the conceptual frame and ideological base of the postmodern movement, in other words, the postmodern perspective consciously assumed by those who practice it and which are gradually and certainly detaching by modernism and implicitly, by the specific period that the research focuses on – the post-modernity; on the other hand, adding the prefix “neo,” medievalism is defined in postmodernism: the knowledge of Middle Ages becomes a fictional concept, so that what we call today “medieval” can be medieval or not in its nature, but what matters for this medievalism, if Middle Ages however remains essentially incomprehensible, is the study of its changes and reformation process which reflects more or less precisely the actual *Zeitgeist*; in the next place, the dissociation between medieval studies and medievalism, the last one devouring the history of the Middle Ages as narrative of the historical truth, according to Umberto Eco’s assertions from *The Return of the Middle Ages* (1987), a riverbed that collects more middle ages dreamed of by our world without implying necessarily a lasting relationship with the reality.

Thus, the hypothesis that started this research is obvious: if actual “medieval” combines fiction with cultural syncretism in an unprecedented manner that facilitates its manifestation in postmodern arts, then it does not meet the required conditions to enter as chronological period the area of medieval studies and it gradually gets loosen by the other medievalisms, so its transposition in literature, cinema or video games industry can be critically interpreted as a new popular movement among many others belonging to postmodernism. The validation or invalidation of this assumption does not follow only the academic context, which the theory was

incubated in, but I chose to focus mainly on the sinuous path of medievalism in the consumer culture.

The choice of the theme focuses basically on the constant concern of postmodern culture and it is a natural following of the previous researches – *The Ethical Relativism in Postmodern Novel* and *Pop Culture in British Postmodernism* being the main and the first papers that consolidated my knowledge and my view of the contemporary era. On the other hand, Middle Ages has lost its pulse between glory and obscure, and the fluctuation between the two extremes was replaced by the more complex game of simultaneous juggling with many middle ages that is a real challenge even for the cleverest critics. This decentered, split, fluid and uncertain image of medievalism played an important role in choosing the theme because it agrees with the habitual typology induced to the cybernetic generation we come from. And last but not least, the actuality of the topic at the international level and its pioneering at local level have drawn me in an adventure of knowledge which does not end here and can be improved in further academic experiences.

Postmodern neo-medievalism is no more older than several decades however, after quite a short period of gestation, it culminates in the late ten years with its penetration in all domains, from the most various consumer goods to political ideologies, firstly bringing back medievalism through the revitalization of the Gothic, Celtic, paganism and magic to be experienced by contemporary society till saturation and till discharging of any significance. The actuality of the theme at the academic level is obvious due to the prominent world congresses – Kalamazoo and Leeds are the highest centers where thousands of scientists preoccupied by medievalism annually meet there; due to the international conferences that emphasize more and more the influence of medievalism in the postmodern arts – the best known, organized by MEMO (Medieval Electronic Multimedia Organization) is mainly preoccupied by video games and their relationship with medievalism; due to seminars and researches came from these congresses and conferences, many virtually gathering views and observations that focus on or tangentially make mention of neo-medievalism. As a matter of fact, the Internet is extremely populated with sites and blogs that treat more or less exactly the medieval and more and more aspects of it migrate towards the opportunities of cyberspace lately.

With such a pleiad of medievalists and high contributions to the development of postmodern neo-medievalism in the late years, one cannot say that the thesis is completely

original, the bibliographical sources, many published in English, are numerous and they needed a careful selection among subjective views, ambiguous opinions and reference works, the ones very well argued and academically supported to ultimately reach up the present paper. But there are elements of originality in this work and we briefly name several basic aspects: the connection between the modern models and postmodern neo-medievalism operates with the relationship *we-they*, comparing the perspectives of several brilliant medievalists from the first half of the 20th century – Marc Bloch, Johan Huizinga, C. S. Lewis; the alterity of Middle Ages in the academic medievalism is analyzed not only as a permanent reference to a previous era, but according to all contextual agents (life and personal experiences, academic orientation, international events, etc.) that have interceded between medievalists and their studies as Norman Cantor says; the major contribution is the central chapter of the thesis – *The Postmodern Neo-medievalism*, where I am identifying and analyzing each of the four methods of rewriting Middle Ages in postmodernism: identification, comparison, sublimation (or parody) and fantastication, and if the first three can be found in other medievalisms though they know a more ample approach in neo-medievalism, the last is the most important for neo-medievalism, so that its features are highlighted better in the chapter on possible arts; the comparative critique of the best-selling novels, of movies and video games (in postmodern novels there were written with less academic determination about Middle Ages and even less about movies and video games that reiterate the medievalism) focuses in particular on the latest and best known artistic creations which have overreached the public: the novels of Dan Brown or J. K. Rowling's or MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games) or even the movies with and about the legend of Robin Hood.

Such a vast field cannot be exhaustively analyzed and the thesis do not claim that has managed to capture all the artistic, cultural and of another nature phenomena framing in the context of postmodern neo-medievalism, but it contains the essential aspects which could be the starting point to further studies because each chapter could be developed in an independent research. Approaching the theme, there are several lines that the thesis draws on, beginning with a progressive analyze of medieval studies in the 20th century and ending with a simultaneous of medieval phenomena and their convergence in possible arts. It is maintained the consistency of perspective resulting from the reality that the medieval belongs equally to the academic studies and mass culture, which interact and complement each other in reiterating the Middle Ages in postmodernism and also aims at the entering of the exhibits of the consumer culture in the

academic concerns via media, a sluggish but certain process that led to the blurring of boundaries between the cultural elite's world and the common individual's world.

Structured in five major chapters, an introduction and conclusions, the thesis balances between the first two chapters – *The Erudite Medievalism of the 20th Century* and *Postmodern Neo-Medievalism* and the last chapter, *Possible Arts* that contains other three important chapters: *The Neo-Medieval Novel*, *The Neo-Medieval Movies* and *The Medieval Video Games*. In postmodernism the arts are commercially promoted, their success depending on their financial values, and the neo-medieval movement is not an exception to the rule, that is why a “possible art” in postmodern neo-medievalism appears as the artistic genre known today as medieval or neo-medieval that imposed itself massively in the entertainment industry through exceptional works, set up a new cultural tendency, shaping public's taste and habits, and everything that fails framing in this pattern becomes impossible, namely turns back into obscurity and shortly after falls into oblivion. The possible arts are often called during the thesis “postmodern arts” because are postmodern works, and they cannot be conceived outside the consuming culture and are expressed in the latest technology; they deconstruct modern myths, play straights out with motifs and symbols and make possible in the virtual world the most daring utopias.

In the chapter entitled *The Erudite Neo-Medievalism of the 20th Century* there are chronologically followed the turning points of the evolution of the medieval studies from the previous century, those distinct models suggested by several famous medievalists of the 20th century, one part that signs up into the dominant movements and other one that resides in special sections where they meticulously work out their challenging theories. Beginning with the ten minor middle ages noticed by Umberto Eco, the chapter carries out an analytical journey through the studies of contemporary historians: Johan Huizinga, C.S. Lewis, Paul Zumthor, Norman Cantor etc, and the representatives of The Annales School: March Bloch, Lucien Febvre, Fernand Braudel, Georges Duby, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Philippe Ariès, particularly the researches of Jacques Le Goff, who tries an extension of the historical methods used by The Annales School and in the same time he tries a critique separation imposed by the contemporary global and cultural context according to it the center of Europe's gravity being transferred to the whole world. Jacques Le Goff becomes the known ambassador of another Middle Age or at least of another way of writing the medieval history marked by polyvalence and multiple reiterations, process called “the history of history”, that is why a special attention is given to his perspective in

the sections *For Another Middle Age, Time and Space in the Medieval Ethos* and *Mystical Experience or Religious Exaltation?* A consistent part of this chapter is reserved to the otherness of Middle Age – Paul Zumthor proves in his studies that the access to the knowledge of medieval literature is descriptive by nature; this otherness is wrapped up with our own research methods in order to be seduced or penetrated, but though the effort is useful even if it fails it cannot accomplish more than it promises. Furthermore, Norman Cantor, developing the beginning history of modern medieval studies, from 1895 to 1965, asserts that Middle Ages are an innovation of the 20th century. The therapeutic value of imagining Middle Ages have made this era the hard core of the 20th century, and Cantor wants to analyze it through the lenses of the medievalists both as an inheritance – enlightened through their research, cultural background and personal experiences – and as the Other – that equally resembles and differs from the present culture in order to allow values and habits questioning and to offer them viable choices.

The chapter entitled *The Postmodern Neo-Medievalism* particularly focuses on hermeneutical methods: identification, comparison, sublimation or parody and fantastication. In dealing with the identification, there is no fusion between the Middle Ages and postmodernism, because the otherness theory of this farther period from the history of Europe forbids this, and even it would not do that, we have to understand that the working tools have stereotypes and symptoms in its bag of tricks, so that there can be stated at the very most that all is about a synthesis – main features and very important for us are preserved and communicated to us leading to a fusion of our expectations, needs, crises and our lifestyle. The comparison, more elevated than the identification, sees Middle Ages as a real historical entity where postmodernism can reflect itself through both similarities and differences, that's why the permanent reference to its realities activates easier at the “concrete” level of the contemporary ethos – the political and economic background of globalization, the excessive development of technology and the visible digitalizing of the world, the artistic part being cared for by sublimation and fantastication. If identification and comparison show mainly in the strict field of politics, economics, etc., sublimation and fantastication seem to lend themselves to the world of arts. The sublimation or the parody of Middle Ages, the two extremes so popular in the postmodern mentality, converges towards consumerism and towards what Frederic Jameson called in *Postmodernism and Consumer Society* (1983) – *the pastiche*, the fading of satiric impulse, of a subsequent reason that helps in rewriting the past, of the curative and healthy laugh, in other words, we have to deal with

a “dead parody”, with no sense, that have lost its own humor. Sublimation writes from outside to inner side – Middle Ages firstly travels the toilsome way from its visible artistic, economic, social and political works to a particular reality that stands behind them, an imagined one or no less than created, that entailed as a reaction the awareness that such realities cannot be endured without a healthy dose of irony, giving the possibility to the parody to play its role. Fantastication is artistically measured too, a foreignism that comes into prominence along with the launching of the film industry, especially along with the vulgarization of its effects in video games and because the fascination of the European Middle Ages keeps on top the interest of the Eastern producers, mainly the Japanese and Korean one, for whom the medieval gains the mythical dimensions of a realm where the most daring dreams come true and where the utopian idealism of a world having the same rights, the same ancestral inheritance and the same free perpetuation in cyberspace opens the gates of a possible earthly Paradise. Opposed to the other methods of rewriting the Middle Ages analyzed in this chapter, fantastication wins its conceptual independence through the *fantastic neo-medievalism*, which focuses on the gainful interference between fantastic and medievalism.

In the chapter *Neo-Medieval Novels – fantasy* genre with its medieval dimension prevails over the postmodern popular works – I chose some of the most relevant representatives of the genre to analyze them from the postmodern perspective of neo-medievalism: *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Chronicles of Narnia* and a latter one, *Harry Potter* which relate on another fictional level to Umberto Eco’s novels in accordance with which I chose for a careful analysis *The Name of the Rose* and *Baudolino*, considered to be representative works for the research, and finally I am dealing with the controversial novels written by Dan Brown: *Angels and Demons*, *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Lost Symbol*. Firstly, everything that isolates from the dominant movements today is foredoomed to failure. Only what holds public’s audience lasts, the main factor that ensures success being the media. Then, success is measured less in kind, but more in degree today (how many copies sold, how many advertisements, how many readers or spectators, how many reviews), and when quality supplies quantity, the results are extremely unusual. Thirdly, here we go with the field of our research – medievalism and its place in the mass culture, thus: to have success in postmodernity, medievalism has to hold public’s attention and to reproduce itself massively, but these conditions are not carried out anyway. The indispensable ingredients are the syncretism, the theme’s presentation, the counterbalance of the high technological present with

the illusion of a similar sophisticated past and certainly, the main contribution to the transfer of a work of fiction to a worldwide best-seller belongs to the film adaptation, where again, the statistics measure in numbers (profit and audience) the whole success. The obvious receiving of the Celtic myths that is reflected in the two cultic texts of the medieval fantastic literature – *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* – has a wavy path in The Great Britain, beginning with the legends of Arthur from the Middle Ages and going on towards the Ossian movement from the 18th century, very fashionable in the modern Europe and rolling in the nationalist movements of the North of Ireland as a result of the formation of the Celtic consciousness in the 19th century, but only after the publishing of these novels, the Celtic extends to higher areas of popular culture – a “brand” with its own symbol as an identification formula among other consumer goods. Joining Tolkien or C. S. Lewis, Umberto Eco is one of the few modern writers who managed to put together the academic study of the Middle Ages with the popular fiction, being known for their analytical works on literature and medieval arts, but the same time for their own modern versions of Middle Ages in their novels, preserving both the otherness of Middle Ages considered by H. R. Jauss farther to postmodernity even than the ancient period, and its active presence which Eco stated that it is without a doubt following us in our daily life. The direct references to Middle Ages, the placing of the plot in the medieval background and the “medieval compendium” from the novels *The Name of the Rose* and *Baudolino* are very important for the analyze of postmodern neo-medievalism, that’s why a particular attention it given to them in this chapter. Middle Ages, but not the factual chronological period between 6th and 14th century, but a world where supernatural actions are no more limited by modern reason, has raised uproars within the masses and only in the two last decades when several best-sellers were successfully set off on the big screen, the public exhilaration reached to paroxysm, so that qualifying it as a “mania” fits perfectly to this background and undoubtedly the famous *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007) written by J. K. Rowling and the three novels of Dan Brown that have raised acerbic debates on the authenticity of the writer’s narration, *Angels and Demons* (2000), *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) and *The Lost Symbol* (2009) enter this category.

The chapter entitled *The Neo-Medieval Films* examines the so-called medieval movies as a particular genre from their evolution from the beginnings of the cinematography to the present, analyzing them from the perspective of three established periods: the classical cinematography,

when the medieval acted as an archetype, the golden period, when the medieval was sometimes re-invented and re-built from the roots, and the present period that sees the medieval as a pretext for the postmodern dialogue, according to Umberto Eco. The deliberate misappropriation of the historical accuracy on condition of preserving the impression of authenticity, both being intermediated by the advanced film technology, the alienation and hybridization of the Middle Ages, its hermeneutical disclosure to other perspectives than the orthodox one, the narration of the hot issues from contemporary social and cultural order more than the medieval intrigues, the shaping of heroes' characteristics by a modern pattern, the exaggerated attention to the so-called political correctness, the public's unconcernedly acceptance of all these derailments from the pattern established by historians, adding to them the reviews that rate the film quality according to numbers and public reaction, in other words, the concessions more or less conscious made by the consumers mentality in their race for entertainment show that the neo-medieval film is an unprecedented cinematographic genre. There cannot be attained any list of medieval films and even less a detailed analyze of them, that's why I chose as standard references the famous *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, the well-known and acclaimed archetype by the postmodern public, as well as the films of the familiar medieval legend of Robin Hood, trying to chronologically follow the evolution of the myth. We cannot talk about a break between the representations of the legendary Robin Hood through the history of cinematography; its continuity is given by the imitations and the adaptations of the old film known as classical movies like *The Adventures of Robin Hood* masterpiece (1938) with Errol Flynn as the main hero or the famous British serial, *Robin of Sherwood* (1984-1986), well-known because of the revisionist perspective absorbed afterward in the movies come into existence after '90s, thus particularities are meant to contribute to the delimitations of the neo-medieval perspectives – use of Middle Ages as a pretext and its sublimation, parody and fantastication.

The chapter entitled *The Medieval Video Games* analyzes three MMORPGs that have entered their maturity age, known to be an extraordinary influence in the digital world: *World of Warcraft* (2004), *Dark Age of Camelot* (2001) and *Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar* (2007). All these games were labeled as medieval because they imitate more of the clichés that modern society got used to attribute to Middle Ages, which usually is based on popular imagination in virtual space, thus the word “medieval” means in this context a pseudo-historical, mythical, magic and fantastic realm, in a word – tolkienesque, but credible enough that the player

could feel familiar to the character he chooses. Firstly, I have tried to answer to questions like: Why Middle Ages? And why is the medieval mania so persistent?, afterwards I have concentrated on the exposure of video games which cannot be included in the narrative typologies known so far and I have established that its performance depends mainly on the player considered to be a “manipulator reader” able to transform at any time the *ludus* into a *paidea* and thus the game cannot achieve its initial purpose. There is a specific thematic stereotype that has always been retained from the beginnings of the first video game, the only improvements being related to the obstinate refinement of details, that’s why the characters and the background travel from a game to another and only the makers perspective save the game from dullness. So, because of the ubiquity of these three games obvious in all the medieval MMORPGs, by extrapolation, their pattern can be applied to other medieval games that box up the online market. The chapter follows the development of the plot that includes not only the narrative incipit of each sequence or higher stage, but the stereotypical orientations that the player – character develop in his evolution; on the second place, the shaping of the characters that have a deep meaning at social level – the character holds the emblems of his class or craft, at magic level – the character can choose among different talismans, weapons or magical abilities, at virtual level – the players join virtual communities recognizing themselves by the fittings and the features of the avatar; thirdly, the pseudo-medieval scenery, the most frequently a gothic one, from the beamy, labyrinthine and sinister insides to the open landscapes, with gloomy forests where danger arises to each step, or abrupt mountain sights; and lastly, the player’s perspective, his identification to the character through the visual field at first person or partial detachment through the reference to third person, 3D kinesthesia or the orientation in the two-dimensional space, although these seem to be technical details, they predominantly contribute to experiencing Middle Ages in video games. These aspects do not finish the analysis of video games; this field has infinite resources regarding the active development of the contemporary entertainment market, however, they meet secondary sides that could be effectively fathomed in a further research with innovative results.

Finally, the natural conclusions of the whole thesis finish the analytical undertaking with the limits of neo-medievalism which, though it’s recently in the headlines, have not managed to cross the ideological, cultural, economic and social borders of a civilized world because only this background can offer proper conditions for developing - the technology, the public, the mentality

– and it revolves especially around the western medievalism and its imaginary patterns. There are noted several development opportunities of neo-medievalism, temporarily and spatially: identifying the European Middle Ages with similar periods from the history of other civilizations and their integration in the postmodern circuit, its readjustment to the new current challenges and catching the media attention, the dangers to take medievalism for the contemporary history where supporters of the identification can go back, landing too much in the past and alienating willingly or getting distance from the present through a sublimation act wrongly practiced, diffusing a too bright or too gloomy image of the past which has as a result extremist reactions, met here and there such as the denial of the present (or of the past) by those addicted to the virtual life of video games.

Keywords: medievalism, neo-medievalism, postmodernism, Middle Ages, fantastication.

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