THE CULTURAL AND LITERARY SYNTAX OF FEAR IN THE TRANSITION FROM MODERNITY TO POSTMODERNISM

ABSTRACT

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ABSTRACT

Born out of the primary existential hollowness, crossing the history of mankind since the first signs of life began to appear, fear manifests equal to itself, without justifying or searching for measure. The Judeo-Christian culture associates the birth of fear with the breaking of the sacred order, with the disequilibrium that sin brought into the world. Knowledge of the Good and Evil leads to an opening towards the anguishes of the human being that split from its divine nature. Fear is connected to death, the curse of the Creator and punishment. The inner void left by God has been filled with fear.

Greek Mythology even offers two names of gods who brought about terror on the battle field: Deimos – horror, Phobos – fear. Sons of god Ares and goddess Aphrodite, they combine the powerful features of their parents: sheer unstoppable force, passional and merciless love, respectively. This induces the idea that fear is more powerful than man, that terror paralyses and phobias give birth to confused, unadapted and alienated beings.

With the passage of time a shift is produced from the fear of the divine to the holy and sacrificial love. The Jews especially cultivated fear in the form of a virtue in front of the Holy One, marking "the beginning of wisdom" with this emotion. The presence of the Saviour brought about the possibility of the sinner to defeat his/ her fear through love, to live plenarily, without the anguish of disappearing. Thus, the balance between the divine and the human reequilibrates, offering the possibility for redemption. Without fear, shame or sin.

Fear operates the primary level of existence and marks several stages in the history of the mankind. From the fear in front of the deities, it switched to fear of the Other, then transferred to the terror of the Evil forces or the one in front of the force of nature. Afterwards, the unknown, the void created unjustified fears and this lead to a fear of himself of the modern man, overtaken by the feeling of the inutility of his existence. Postmodernism signs a "pact" with fear, through which it does not annihilate its force, but makes it even stronger because it manages to cumulate all the fears of the past in a great terror of everything. The split from the transcendence creates fear since modern period, but contemplating fear makes this emotion become the essence of our being. The postmodern man turns to the telluric level of social manifestations, being interested in the building of the "public image" or the realising of some iterative self-antropogonies in the virtual space. A sum of terror and anguishes, postmodernism offers fear a spectacular touch, without however being able to defeat it.

The transition from modernity to postmodernism brings about some changes as regards the way the individual or the society relate to certain feelings of insecurity. If during *modernism* there can be identified a some kind generalised anguish of man confronted with his own absurd condition, and the postwar period establishes in many cultural fields a certain type of terror as regards political systems and dictators, *postmodernism* brings about some other fears correlated to social life, because it promotes the culture and literature of the masses, based on processes of fragmenting, consumerism and deconstruction. Thus, our way of reffering to the outer world (knowledge does not head towards an interiorisation of social and psychological phenomena, but can be found outside the individual) presupposes multiple fractured and fluid perspectives that give birth to fear under different paradigms. Under the apparent indifference and superficiality of the postmodern man there lies some of the eternal search of the sense of living on earth and, because he does not manage to find it, he is overtaken by a permanent fear fuelled by the mass-media and different cultural productions.

The most powerful anguish is the one related to death (a rather typical human aspect, irrespective of its place in the history of the mankind), but it now takes the form of not killing, getting killed or being subjected to aggressions. Everyday, the first headlines of the news refer to murders, violence, terrorism and imbue a permanent state of fright of which we try to free ourselves by evading into imaginary (created by writers in fiction, put on stage by film directors) or virtual spaces. Even if these fictional worlds are populated by monsters, devils, mutants, zombies, warlocks, vampires and other creatures of the same kind, on one hand, criminals, psychopats, self-murderers, drug addicts, gang members, demonised, wizards, on the other, meant to create fear, all cultural productions aim at freeing us from horror, at turning it into a performance that can detach ourselves from a sometimes more frightening reality than fiction.

The hypostasis of revealing the self, of exposing the existential void leads to the raising of the curtain, transparent however, that hid our daily insufficiencies and frustrations. Moreover, the latter become subject to cultural realisation, born out of the irrational fear of intimacy, of hiding emotions and inner feelings. Human pleasures ostentatively and vulgarily exposed turn into humiliation, self depossession, terror installed in the existence of each of us. Mass-media builds a universe of horror exacerbating every danger, bringing it to the level of catastrophe. Contemporary society defines itself through repetead abuses heading in two directions, convergent in fear. At one level, there lies the horror of not becoming the victim of some aggressions, abuses and, on the other hand, there is the fear of not abusing, of not becoming dependent on something or someone. The more and more advanced technology

turns the object into subject and man, even if he possesses the objects, is in his turn possessed by them. Mass culture is connected to these dependences which it exorcises by means of accessible artistic acts, shallow, profitable, superficial maybe, aimed at generating fun, one of the religions of contemporaneity.

Current literature becomes a drug in itself, numbing self-consciousness, producing an oscillation between reality and fiction. Linked to "here" and "now", to the present, it does not pretend durability, but it only looks for success, another god of our universe. Man feels the need for the spectacular, for carnivalisation, for transparency, while virtual "clones" turn into more real entities than the living human being. Fear of exclusion gradually generates an anguish that will trigger a destructive process within a society of picturising and of building networks, true traps of aneantisation. Permissiveness and irresponsibility draw a downward path towards nonbeing. Created masks are taken for the "original" which loses itself in great urban agglomerations where you are no longer alone with yourself, but only alone. Your dwelling becomes a space of anguish, because it has lost its "soul" and it absorbed then dweller's energy, turning him into an ordinary object, among many others on which he became dependant.

Contemporary myths annihilate to a small extent this fear of dissipating the human being into nothingness, because they manage to mirror its fears. The latter feature a spectacular nature, performed through rites born out of all existential anguishes. The ceremonial is ludic; it melts fear through euphoria, ecstasy, even though they preserve no more the occult character of the performing. Myth lacks mystery or deep emotions because of its "show-window displaying", its public exposure which turns it into one of the large scale goods. The valencies of fear are inverted, gone through by ritual and the mythologisation of the ordinary. We may witness a return to the values of Christianity which presuppose love, compassion, but this is a form of religiosity depossessed of sacrality, transposed into comprehensible, diluted forms. Ritualic gestures are "consumed" in the form of performances of saving the sacred from itself. Man reveals himself in the state of a film director of his own religiosity and does not suffer the drama of alienation any more, because he does no longer own his destiny, while his diverse identities, made possible through that virtual antropogony, do not build, but dissipate. Contemporary individual crossed the distance between Good and Evil, going "beyond" them.

A universe of the "madness" of the mankind is being drawn, a whole human universe left without history, without the past, without gods, without itself. The real is only fictionalisation, picturisation and does not correspond to current requirements connected to

satisfying needs, it only annihilates human dignity determining the permanent anguish of living next to the "other", turned into a stranger or an enemy of your own security. Every social gesture needs public approval, while renouncing transcendence translates itself in a self-transcendence and religious aspirations towards the manifestating forms of Evil. Excessive technologisation corresponds to a religious revival, but contemporaneity created other gods and goddesses, represented by each individual. Contemporary man is a model, film director, puppeteer, spectator and actor of his own existence – a void that opens towards horror.

The end of existence becomes another reason for anguish, even frustration, because man confronts with the disappearance of death significance. Mass-media induces a state of letargy by presenting the performance of extinction, be it personal or social, without preserving anything tragic or painful. Those virtual "alter-egos" which are not even hypostases of alter-egos situate outside the self, which they exclude and annihilate. In this context, death appears as an existential void lost within a hollowness of significance. Public executions, spectacular violences activate primary emotions and under the indifference displayed there lies the deepest terror amplified by the construction of some apocalyptic scenarios, a topic so often dealt with that it became obsolete. Contemporary man defies his reason of being, trying to surpass the anguish of dying through ludic. The shows of death can turn into scenarios of terror of the others, generated by the opulence that allows the "buying" of sadistic pleasures.

The new wars that appear in contemporaneity have the force to impress, to create a fascination of terror which mass-media turns into show. The power given by holding the information really opens the way to horror. Fear of terrorist acts is more and more powerful, because it brings about social destabilisation by creating a state of permanent panic. The terrorist is defined by a blind hatred against humanity, making use of the most powerful weapon – fear. And this paralyses, leads to inaction and giving up when confronted with terror.

The distructive force of man is emphasised by the catastrophes he provokes, willingly or unwillingly. Generating "natural disasters" to convince people of the existence of some "traps" of nature leads to the possibility of manipulating them through fear. In the novel entitled *Fear*, Michael Crichton shows how global warming can become a source of obtaining funds, especially if a "natural disaster" takes place right in the middle of a conference dealing with that very subject. Science and technology become dangerous when they are the basis of some experiments on humankind itself, sentenced to extinction by an epidemy provoked by

the "cleaning" of the Earth in order to repopulate it with people created through genetic syntheses, as it appears in *Oryx and Crake*.

Genetic manipulation that aimed at purifying people of what was considered negative inside their being (fear, selfishness, immorality, stupidity) leads to the appearance of some monsters, of some wars that nearly destroyed the planet. The solution was found in the reconstruction of the "broken" genes through a purification that presupposed other experiments on humans in the trilogy *Divergent*. Terror insinuates itself through the "escape" of a deadly virus from a lab (*The Stand*), through a truly maddening signal, transmitted by mobile phones (*Cell*), through performances of death organised as a "punishment" for revolt (*The Hunger Games*) or the impossibility to control radiations that reiteratively affect the planet (*A Canticle for Leibowitz*).

The fascination for blood brings again to the foreground the figure of Countess Elisabeth Báthory who comes close to contemporaneity due to her pleasure to see extreme violence, sufferance, torture and death. Blood becomes the symbol of humiliation, shame, revenge and hatred in *Carrie*, and its valuing as "nourishment", source of life for the dead is revealed in all novels that present the figure of the vampire. Whether demystifying the image of the ruler Vlad Ţepeş as "the first vampire" and showing him merely captivated by the power of blood in *The Journal of Dracula*, whether renewing the image of the classic vampire (*Salem's Lot*) or rendering it more human, the subject is still of interest.

Out of the suffering, sheer force, violence and murder a malefic entity is born whose existence is constructed through a blood pact, through sacrificing an innocent by the one who accepted his protection during centuries in order to gain immortality, power, the ruling of the world. Magic, terror of killing thousands of children to quench the monster's thirst of blood, as well as its desire to procreate reveals a hallucinating universe in the novel *The Century of Chimeras*. And also from ancient times there came into existence Santanico Pandemonium, combination of snake and vampire, bait kept closed by the Lords of Darkness that long for human blood and flesh.

Terror also establishes on a small island in Maine whose inhabitants are threatened with extinction if they refuse to sign a pact with the devil Linoge that wants one of their children, in the novel *Storm of the Century*. Monsters come from the depths as extraterrestrial entities (*IT*), they are born out of horror and madness (*The Hounds. Man The Fiercest Beast)*, out of the despair to protect children (*Dolores Claiborne*), out of the belief that many of our neighbours are not grateful for being alive (*Saw*), out of psychoses manifested as acts of

sheer cruelty (*The Green Mile*), out of the terror of insecurity (*Carnivore Locks)* or the extraterrestrial space (*Dreamcatcher*).

Fear finds its most fertile manifesting grounds the moment in which man cannot be a master of him any more; he cannot control the rhytms of his being. Demonic possession is a source of horror in *The Exorcist*, as well as a way of valuing the power of self sacrifice. Secrets hidden alomg centuries through statues that reveal their mystery become punishing means of a sinking universe in the novel *Avenue of Floes*. Sacrifices brought in the name of a demonic deity have a reiterative character and mark a state of profound terror (*The Skeleton Doctor*), while malefic constructions take into possession human beings emotionally more vulnerable (*Shining* and *Nightmare for rent*), kill in order to live (*Rose Red*) or annihilate the right to liberty (*The Cube*).

Our approach was aimed at studying fear from multiple perspectives, in close connection to the contemporary directions of dealing with the subject. We chose horror as a genre, because it comprises the most profound manifestations of fear, an emotion that equally contructs and defines it from a cultural point of view. We considered that this way we somehow attempt to answer Umberto Eco's query as regards the fall into desuetude of the genre. "We should inquire in connection with the horror theme why nowadays and why horror is in fashion, especially at a popular level: as the taste for the macabre which is of English tradition – and, along with it, the French *black humour* of surrealist origin – is a learned manifestation."

In conclusion, fear can be regarded from several perpectives: as an emotion before the unknown, as a means of social control, as a feel of terror while confronting other beings and supernatural forces or as a feeling of panic, generated by the mass-media and cultural productions. Even if we cannot avoid it, we can defeat it, on a ludic level, accepting it as an essential part of the human condition.