

„BABEȘ-BOLYAI” UNIVERSITY, CLUJ-NAPOCA
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Maximalist Narratives in the Second Half of the 20th Century
A Structural and Transnational Analysis

– Summary –

Coordinator:
Prof. univ. dr. Corin BRAGA

PhD Candidate:
Alexandru-Florin VĂSIEȘ

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Summary

This thesis aims to provide an overview of the main recent contemporary discussions regarding the possibilities of defining a new type of narrative (the maximalist one), which involves forms of structuring and organization that are opposed to a totalizing approach. Thus, throughout this thesis I will touch, in a more in-depth or schematic way, on what from certain points of view seem to be “isolated phenomena” (*Gravity’s Rainbow*, *Infinite Jest*, *White Teeth*, *Solenoid*, etc.) of post-war fiction, in order to explore the circulation of the characteristics of the maximalist form from one author to another, from one period to another, from one culture to another.

The theoretical part of the work contains, in its first section, an inventory of the most representative maximalist models of the second half of the Twentieth Century. Starting with Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, perhaps the most cited and referred to book in theoretical discussions concerning the extended, excessive form of the novel in the Post-War period, this section proposes a contextualization of the theoretical formulations on the subject, assuming, in each case, the possible shortcomings of the advanced models.

Thus, concepts such as the Systems Novel, the Mega-Novel or the World-text are related to the Maximalist novel, as defined in Stefano Ercolino’s 2014 synthetic book. Further, the concepts Tom LeClair uses in his definition of the Systems Novel in the late 1980s are analyzed in order to question the ways in which they might still be valid today. Drawing on systems theory, which encourages a redefinition of the themes and methods of fiction, and which imposes an extended and totalizing perspective on fiction, and on the three types of domination (semantic, rhetorical and pragmatic), we are here dealing with an investigation of the relationship LeClair proposes between reader, author and the excess that must be ‘dominated’.

Next, the thesis explores the definition of the Mega-Novel as a paradoxical form of intense order, yet lacking completeness, as it appears in Frederick R. Karl – a prefiguration of the chaos and cosmos functions in Ercolino’s model. If it is an American invention, which can be equated with the Mega-Dollar, in what way can we relate this aspect to elitism and anti-market separatism? At the same time, this part attempts to identify the American critic’s stance towards situating the Mega-Novel in relation to broader cultural trends and to question the structure-antistructure dialectic present in these narratives.

Another theoretical articulation relevant to the discussion of maximalist narratives in the second half of the twentieth century appears in Franco Moretti’s *Modern Epic*, even

though the texts on which he works belong, for the most part, to a period preceding the post-war era. Starting from this title, then, the relationship between the epic and the novel is traced, reading the evolution of literary forms in terms of historical struggles or identifying the universalizing ambition of the epic with the contemporary maximalist narrative. Last but not least, a first section of the theoretical part will conclude by evaluating Ercolino's proposed model of synthesis of the maximalist novel, by inventorying and discussing the ten-point definition he proposes in relation to the preceding examples.

A second section of the theoretical part will explore what I consider to be the most important element of maximalism, namely its encyclopedic basis, the impulse to assimilate, integrate and operate with vast amounts of information in a manner that is credible for the moment we find ourselves. Starting from Edward Mendelson's brief introduction and his conceptualization of encyclopedic narratives in 1976, a reverse focus will be carried out, in which, drawing on classical encyclopedic examples (the pedagogism of a Pliny the Elder, respectively the dialogism of the eighteenth-century *Encyclopaedia*), an attempt will be made to reconstruct the trajectory of these tendencies up to the twentieth-century maximalist narrators.

Returning to the encyclopedic narrative and the definition that Mendelson is trying to impose, an attempt is made to question the possibility of defining an encyclopedic literary genre, analyzing several positions regarding the canon, aspects that have to do with the elasticity of literary forms and conventions or the types of creativity that underlie several reconfigurations at the level of textual reception.

At the end of the second section of the theoretical part, the problematic of encyclopedic fiction is taken up again in order to extend it in the direction of new applications and polemics, such as the cognitive mechanisms that coagulate at the level of reading maximalist texts or even the dynamics of literary affirmation and legitimization that these narratives can offer.

In the third section of the theoretical part, several problematizations and instrumentalizations of the maximalist formula are brought into discussion, with the aim of relating them, among others, to a dialectic of valorization of a literary form that comes from a central literature in relation to the de-valorization of a perspective of canonization or literary imperialism or to manners of approaching this narrative model through the prism of some alternative conceptual interventions.

Thus, a first subsection will analyze the ways in which the maximalist novel can be used as a tool of American cultural legitimization, based on discussions including Thomas

Pynchon, David Foster Wallace and Don DeLillo. The aim is to problematize the figure of the Great American Novel in postmodernism, and to explore some of the discussions surrounding the fetishization of maximalist narratives and their difficulty.

The second subsection of this part discusses the modalities of working with detail in maximalism and it will try to problematize some aspects related to the process of reading these works by taking into account aspects related to the reader's attention, insisting especially on the problem of excessive detail.

In the third subsection an attempt is made to discuss some issues concerning an anarhetypical model of dealing with maximalism, starting from some similar structural queries that can be identified at the level of the text defined as an anarhetypical, respectively at the level of the maximalist text.

Finally, the fourth subsection of this part will aim at discussing the dichotomy between craft and superfluous detail, between minimalism and maximalism, in an overview of the post-war maximalist model in relation to the phenomenon of minimalism generated and imposed in creative writing programs in American universities during the same period. Also, starting from the notion of 'cruft' taken from programming, an attempt is made to observe the ways in which the most recent maximalist narratives can be approached from the point of view of a differential reading.

Next, in its applicative half, the thesis contains several case studies. The first section of these case studies aims to provide a transnational analysis of the reception and circulation of the maximalist novel, using an innovative methodology based on digital tools and multiple data sources. Maximalism, as a complex and dense literary form, has experienced diverse interpretations and manifestations in different cultural spaces, and the aim of this section is to map the variations and understand its global dynamics. The research methodology used here is interdisciplinary, integrating digital tools to allow a comparative and visual approach to the data.

Such an approach is complementary to the *close readings* that follow, especially given that the tools at our disposal in the information age, where digital technology has radically transformed both inter-human communication and socio-economic and cultural systems, cannot be overlooked. Thus, the analysis will start from a set of digital tools and platforms that allow an overview of the circulation and reception of the maximalist novel. The first digital platform used in this section is Goodreads, the largest platform for amateur readers in the world, with 150 million users in 2023. Goodreads provides access to detailed datasets on the publication and reception of literature, including publication information,

ratings and user reviews. The second digital tool, Google and its search function, will be used to measure general public interest and popularity. As the world's most widely used search engine, Google indexes billions of web pages, providing a measure of the presence and influence of authors and their novels in the digital public discourse.

In addition, Google Academic will be used to evaluate scholarly interest, indexing scholarly contributions from various international databases and providing an overview of the scholarly attention paid to maximalist authors and their novels. The latest digital tool used is the Google Books Ngram Viewer, which is based on the Google Books archive, the largest collection of digitized books in the world. It allows for specific searches in body texts in different languages, and it searches the occurrences and name frequencies of maximalist authors between 1950-2019. This data is used to measure the presence and influence of authors in published literature.

This first section of analysis is structured in two subsections. The first is devoted to analyzing the reception of maximalism along three axes: the general public, the reading public and the specialized public. The separation is a necessary one because of the differences in the tools used for each category of audience. The impact on the general public is measured by Google search results, the impact on the reading public by analyzing Goodreads data, and the impact on the specialized public by measuring Google Scholar results. The interweaved approach allows a comparative and individual analysis of the reception of maximalist authors and novels. The searches are based on a list of novels compiled from the titles analyzed by the theorists discussed in the first part of the thesis, to which are added a number of authors either analyzed in the subsequent case studies or, in my view, authors that can be analyzed within a maximalist logic. Furthermore, various types of information related to the number of ratings, reviews and average ratings these volumes have on Goodreads is extracted. The resulting database provides a solid foundation for understanding the relationship between the number of ratings and readers' engagement with the texts. In addition to this, the section also includes an analysis regarding the authors, revealing the number of Google results, Google Academic results and Goodreads ratings for each author. This section thus provides an overview of the authors' relevance in the global literary field, highlighting both their popularity and their academic prestige. The extracted data is accompanied by several variables or composite dimensions, which are intended to broaden the perspective and allow as many different analytical angles as possible.

The second subsection concerns the question of the international circulation of maximalist novels by analyzing translated editions of novels indexed on Goodreads. This

part focuses on identifying trends of circulation and dispersion, as well as center-periphery routes, and aesthetic affinities between different cultures and the maximalist form. The analysis is conducted at both the macro level, by regions and countries, and the micro level, by individual authors. Using comprehensive approach, this subsection explores the relationships between “national” cultures, those between regions and continents, and also possible external factors that lead to one author being translated more than others.

The second section of the applied research part is a case study that aims to provide a detailed analysis of Mircea Cărtărescu's novel *Solenoid*, exploring in particular the dynamics between structure and anti-structure, as well as the author's pendulations between literary centers and cultural peripheries. In order to explore the complexity and impact of the novel *Solenoid*, this examination employs an interdisciplinary approach, integrating both traditional literary analysis and tools and landmarks from literary sociology. The research methodology in this case allows for a multi-layered analysis – starting from the close reading of the text itself, while also integrating secondary sources such as interviews. Thus, a comparative analysis is carried out with subsections that refer to the way the novel and Cărtărescu himself navigate between the center and the periphery, but also to examining the construction and deconstruction of the narrative, or to discussing postmodern and post-postmodern influences on Cărtărescu's writing style.

The third section of the applied research part deals with the way Florin Chirculescu reinstrumentalizes popular fiction in the context of post-communist Romanian literature. The exploration includes an examination of the dynamics between popular fiction and mainstream fiction since the 1990s, with a focus on how Chirculescu utilizes and transforms the textual devices specific to popular fiction. Through the lens of these techniques, his novel *Greva păcătoșilor sau apocriifa unui evreu* is explored as a representative example of how maximalist narratives transcend the descriptive boundaries of traditional literary genres. The commentary in this section contains an exploration of the reinstrumentalizations of the devices of popular fiction, comparing them with similar techniques employed by other authors of maximalist narratives, as well as an examination of the fluctuations in narrative perspective and differential attention to detail also referred to in the theoretical section.

The fourth analytical section concentrates on *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith, specifically on how the author deals with themes of identity and multiculturalism in a contemporary British context. The methodology of this case study involves a detailed literary analysis of the novel, focusing on narrative structure, characterization of the characters and central themes. The complex structure of the novel, its non-linear chronology, the

interconnectedness of narrative threads, fragmented identities, chaos and randomness in the novel are explored. Last but not least, this case study is interested in how, through the maximalist narrative, concepts such as assimilation, alienation and the struggle for integration are articulated in a landscape of multiple and fluctuating identities in the early twenty-first century British landscape.

The fifth section of case studies examines *Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernardine Evaristo, attempting to address similar themes to those described in the previous part. In addition, this part seeks to analyze the concept of *fusion fiction* with which the author operates and the textual effects of this expression on a formal reinterpretation of the maximalist narrative. Last but not least, this section aims to extend a comparative approach involving maximalist authors to another central figure of contemporary literature.

The last section of the applied research part introduces an analysis of Arundhati Roy's novel *The Ministry of Ultimate Happiness*, published twenty years after her debut *The God of Small Things*, which established Roy on the international literary scene. Extending the comparative framework to include the three authors, we launch into a synthetic discussion on the theme of “peripheralization” and, as an extension of this, a possible dialogue on the positioning of the authors in the logic of the theories regarding the maximalist novel.