

KITSCH AS AESTHETIC RECUPERATION

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Abstract: *The case study provided by the analysis of Daniela Zeca's Oriental Trilogy novels reveals the enterprise professional literary critics embark upon when they convert a short-term bestseller into a long-term bestseller, namely into a classic book. It therefore becomes evident that there exist the kitsch of a literary work and the kitsch of its critical reception. Literary critics, regarded as actors with a significant role in the production of a work of art, are responsible for the propagation of kitsch, the ethical evil, when they deceive their audience.*

Key words: *kitsch, critical reception, Daniela Zeca, short-time bestseller, long-time bestseller.*

1. Introduction

Paramount to the discourse on kitsch is Hermann Broch's theory, which presents kitsch not as a mere aesthetic category, but rather as an ethical or metaphysical one. To the Austrian thinker, kitsch disrupts the obligatory connection between the ethical component of any formative action and its aesthetic counterpart. Kitsch does not advance knowledge, such as a good work of art should do, but it reaches at once for the effect, for the beautiful. It does so by imitating the formal characteristics of art. Kitsch, in almost all of its instances, is defined as forgery, as it parades as art (Broch, 2002, pp. 3-39).

It is precisely this attempt to affect the appearance of authentic art that is kitsch par excellence. It may well be that not only kitsch authors are responsible for this imposture, but other actors active in the process of production of a work of art. Following Pierre Bourdieu's theory, we try to bring forth the fact that literary critics abuse the importance of their position in the literary field by imposing on their audience works of art incompatible with the aesthetic standards of high art. Therefore, the literary critic impinges on the ethics of their profession, in their instance as promoters of low art.

In his classic study *Rules of art*, the French sociologist presents the field of literary production as divided by the degree in which the makers of cultural objects are perceptive to the demand of the market. Consequently, there exists the subfield of large production, very sensitive to the demands of the market and whose success is determined by large sales figures. At the other side of the cultural field, we find the small-scale cultural production, where large sales figures are equivalent to aesthetic scarcity, whose aim is the accumulation of symbolic capital, proper to the field of literary production. The time interval necessary for the recuperation of capital – be it economic or symbolic – defines the length of the production cycle which, in turn, positions a cultural endeavour inside the

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field. The long production cycle authors adhere to the art for art's sake principle and regain their investments in the future. The short production cycle members, on the other hand, rapidly recuperate profits as their policy is to obey consumers summons and minimise risks. These two production modalities are underpinned by the opposition between a short-term bestseller (a book which sells a lot immediately and is soon forgotten) and a long-term bestseller (a book which becomes a classic, although it is not successful right away).

Success of long production cycle endeavours depends on the action of critics, who invest value in cultural objects and who assigns them to a literary tradition. Thus, legitimising actions become a part of the cultural production process, without which symbolic success remains uncertain. (Bourdieu, 1996, pp. 141-175)

The literary critics analysing Daniela Zeca's novels try to extract profit from the status of these books as bestsellers and at the same time, critics intend to dissipate the preconception that bestsellers lack qualities of authentic art. In doing so, they contrive a reception scheme based on the opposition Pierre Bourdieu detected between short-time bestsellers and long-time bestsellers. They transform these short-time bestsellers, constantly at the peril of forgetfulness, into long-time bestsellers, into classic books, without neglecting the immediate library success they have enjoyed.

2. The Emergence of an Aesthetic Recuperation Scheme

The two poles structuring the field of cultural production in Pierre Bourdieu's theory do not function as unyielding limits to cultural spaces; rather, they represent indicators to the analysis of literary works. Commercial success is not to be reduced to mere economic exchange and it is in this sense that the novels of Daniela Zeca are analysed. Not only is success compatible with aesthetic value, but the critics also claim that the Oriental Trilogy forms an ideal synthesis of market demand and aesthetic elitism – to be encountered only in the case of such masterpieces of world literature as Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night* (Rouvillois, 2013, pp. 14-15). The premise of the majority of the reviews I have analysed is that the readers falsely perceive that the novels *Istoria romanţată a unui safari* [*The Romancing History of a Safari*], *Demonii vântului* [*Demons of the Wind*] and *Omar cel orb* [*Omar the Blind*] are exotic or love stories.

The latter, we are told, constitute the pretext for the literary theme of failed initiations, for the unveiling of Daniela Zeca's unmistakable style and for the scrutiny of a tradition different from the European one. Nine years her debut, this author makes a comeback with *Istoria romanţată a unui safari*, which confounds sceptics' claims that a television director moulds into the demand of the general public and, as such, her writing turns out to be of poor quality. As critics claim, these novels are underpinned by a symbolic structure. The writer masterfully approaches the romancing literary form, „with no strident concession to the public” (Pecican, 2010) and the possibilities the theme of love across cultures may still offer. In her analysis of the novel, Bianca Burţa-Cernat emphasises the skill with which the writer inverts „somewhat of a conventional narrative situation: exoticism is usually associated with femininity, with the Western character, the one venturing into an exotic civilization, being a male; in this case, the perspective belongs to a female traveller” (Burţa-Cernat, 2009).

In the article entitled „Nu doar un bestseller” [“Not just a bestseller”], Daniel Cristea-Enache (2012) claims that Daniela Zeca's popularity resides in her narrative force – a

quality seldom encountered among contemporary writers – and also in her ability to thoroughly explore the ever more modern theme of encounters between the Occident and the Orient. Daniela Zeca does not superficially resume exoticism, but she engages in a „palpable” representation of different cultural and temporal spaces. The literary critic Gabriel Rusu (2010) castigates, perhaps in the most explicit manner, the reductive nature of characterising the novel *Demonii vântului* as trivial literature:

At a first... statistical sight, one may think that the author was eager to exploit the top position recently acquired in the readers’ preferences chart, counting on, once again, the fascination the Arab world holds over the European sensitivity. Utterly false! We are not talking about the „industrial” exploitation of the same reservoir, but its exploitation in the paradigm of spirituality.²

The aesthetic recuperation I have just presented anticipates the configuration of a two-fold reading grid. In a superficial sense, the reader may just follow the threads in the plot. The second level of reading is that of the deep structure which sustains and completes the novels. The plot is concurrent with a series of failed initiations, with the major conflict between cultures, with the theme of the otherness, with the theme of the orphan or with the theme of „the world which dissolves itself from the inside”. (Firescu, 2011)³

Simona Sora observes that „*Istoria romantata a unui safari* is a beautiful maghrebian love story, but most especially a history of oriental-occidental hypostases of femininity” and that *Demonii vântului* may be perceived as a novel centring on „the subterranean connection between the European world and the Oriental world, guided by gems, precious stones, energetic deposits of love and hate, of big history and personal histories, of destiny and failure”⁴. *Demonii vântului*, the most commented upon novel of the trilogy, unfolds the stories of the Pucioasa treasure and that of Saiyed the jeweller, the backdrops for the mysterious power precious stones have over people.

An exotic novel in appearance, as Evelina Oprea (2011) claims in her review published in *Vatra* literary magazine, *Demonii vântului* „sinks” into a symbolic history which „may be deciphered with the help of an oneiric intermezzo, meant to create the impression that the depicted world sinks into the magic inspired by precious stones”⁵.

Literary critics operate a subtle distinction between writers amenable to any kind of compromise in the name of literary glory and writers’ fair expectation of a public. As the two-fold reading grid implies, critics distinguish between mass and elitist audiences. This is not meant to imply that Daniela Zeca’s novels are not sympathetic to the demand of a general public; rather, the critics are conversant with the audience volume and quality, as an adequate reception of a work of art depends upon the disposition and the competence

² “La o primă privire... statistică, s-ar putea crede că autorul s-a grăbit să exploateze poziția de top recent dobândită în preferințele cititorilor, mizând, încă o dată, pe fascinația exercitată de lumea arabă asupra sensibilității europene. Nimic mai fals! Nu este vorba despre exploatarea «industrială» a unui aceluiași filon, ci de exploatarea acestuia într-o paradigmă a spiritualității”.

³ „lunii care se dizolvă din interior”

⁴ „este o frumoasă poveste de dragoste maghrebiană, dar mai ales o istorie a ipostazelor oriental-occidentale ale feminității”; „legătura subterană a lumii europene cu cea orientală sub semnul gemelor, al pietrelor prețioase, depozite energetice ale iubirii și urii, ale istoriei mari și istoriilor personale, ale destinului și eșecului”.

⁵ „poate fi decodată printr-un intermezzo oniric, menit să creeze impresia scufundării lumii descrise în magia inspirată de nestemate”.

of its audience. The role of the literary review is to recruit competent readers, the only ones who can appreciate and, if necessary, consecrate the aesthetic value of the novels. A review may also anticipate and undo polemics against novels, invoking inadequate interpretation or lack of education.

A reader in haste and “a critic with an obsession for the immediate”, not patient enough or not having sufficient competence to cope with the density and the rhythm of Daniela Zeca’s novels, coexist with the detachment of the aesthete who “gives in to the seduction, but is not blinded by its charm” (Romanciuc, 2010, p. 12). Andreea Răuceanu (2010) notes in the literary magazine *Observator cultural* that the syncopated act of reading misses the “musicality”, the unique rhythm of the sentences and does not tolerably decrypt the book or comprehend the efficacy of its metaphors. “The attentive reader detects those barely perceptible counterpoints [which] address the yet awake reason of the listener, unveiling unexpected meanings”⁶. The third novel of the Oriental Trilogy in which “the cultural-historical layering (footnotes which translate terms, phrases, word meanings from the text itself) has an exciting masterfully built rising action, contrasting dictions and temporal planes slips”, together with a style which is “replete with «poetic» similies”⁷ (Cristea-Enache, 2012). Bianca Burţa-Cernat brings forth “the symbolic scenery of great depth” the reader detects behind the imagistic and stylistic spectacle of the “callophile sentence”, the “sapiental-parable” construction, the novel which is “metaphysical born of a (quasi-guenonist) meditation upon the crisis of the modern world”. In the same review, Bianca Burţa-Cernat (2010) gestures towards the two kinds of readers the novels of Daniela Zeca may engage. The plurality of the narrative and the symbolic simultaneously satisfies

the need for story and for escape of the non-philological reader (or of a reader who, although specialised, still enjoys, once in a while, to rediscover the innocent reader he carries inside him...) and the refined pleasure of the contemplator who knows how to treasure artistic ecriture or intelligent metatextual games, and the taste of the amateur for metaphysical parables or for epic sceneries marked by occult symbols.⁸

The excerpts above outline two categories of audience, establish the complexity of the exhaustive interpretation endeavour and point to the fact that the habits of a reader in haste do not absorb the profound implication and the originality of a writing of this calibre.

Strangeness, originality and aesthetic power constitute those qualities which, in Harold Bloom’s view, open up the canon. These are to be observed solely by the educated readers, whose ample interpretive “palette” detects pertinent strangeness: “[the] difference between the ordinary reader and the members of the elite resides in the fact

⁶“Cititorul atent reperează acele abia perceptibile contrapuncte [care] se adresează raţiunii încă neadormite a ascultătorului, dezvoltându-i înţelesuri neaşteptate”.

⁷„stratificarea cultural-istorică (note de subsol traducând termeni, sintagme, accepţii din epicul propriu-zis), o intrigă palpitană, bine condusă, rupturi de registre şi alunecări de planuri temporale”.

⁸„simultan şi nevoia de poveste şi de evaziune a cititorului nefilolog (sau a cititorului care, avizat fiind, se bucură totuşi, din când în când, să-l regăsească în sine pe cititorul inocent...), şi plăcerea rafinată a contemplativului care ştie să preţuiască scriitura artistă ori inteligentele jocuri metatextuale, şi gustul amatorului de parabile metafizice sau de scenarii epice jalonate de simboluri oculte”.

that while the former cannot surpass their expectations [...] the insiders, owners of a much larger aesthetic disposition, can adopt more attitudes, can mobilise and react differently”⁹ (Martin, 2007, p. 14).

The analyses of Daniela Zeca’s work have emphasised the qualities that allow a place for it in the Romanian literary tradition. The originality and ease with which she shifts between dictions has been largely debated. “The stylistic print of sensuality”, the talent with which she acutely evokes the Arab scenery and the lyricism of her novel recur in almost all reviews. The value of the Oriental Trilogy lies within the minutely reconstructed atmosphere, within the accumulation of “life or mindset” (Burța-Cernat, 2009) details which portray the picturesque of the Oriental civilization. Paul Cernat (2010) emphasizes the artistic subtlety and the almost “scientific” preciseness of details when gems are evoked”. The innovative imaginary” (Pecican, 2010) and the gratuity of Daniela Zeca’s images, as states Bianca Burța-Cernat in the above-mentioned article, imprint on the imagination of the readers the highly intense metaphors, those distinct and immediate images which represent a condition to access the literary canon, according to Harold Bloom (2007, p. 51).

The critics assign a place for Daniela Zeca’s novels in the Romanian literary tradition when they choose her predecessors. The influences they detect are diverse and they sustain this important shift in the canon. Ovidiu Pecican (2010) connects the novelist with the “poet novelists of our literary culture – especially Macedonski in *Thalassa*, but also Eminescu in *Geniu pustiu*” adding that like Harold Bloom’s canonized writers, Daniela Zeca owns that intuition which allows her to detach herself from her precursors by inserting plots in her metaphysical novels. This critic recuperates further still an influence from the Western literary canon, as the writer conceives her book from the metaphor of the demonic wind, following James Joyce’s model. Bogdan Romaniuc (2010) claims that the novels of the Oriental Trilogy are reminiscent of Salman Rushdie’s *The Enchantress of Florence*. Saiyed, the central character in *Demonii vântului*, brings to mind the abandoned child in *One Thousand and One Nights*, whereas the rich olfactory ecriture is a reminder of Patrick Süskind’s *Perfume* (Ștefănescu, 2010). Daniela Zeca may be connected to recent Romanian literature, such is the case with Ioana Pârvulescu’s *Viața începe vineri*, or Filip Florian’s *Zilele Regelui* (Burța-Cernat, 2010).

In his classic study, Pierre Bourdieu (1996, p. 77) observes that producers pertaining to the subfield of cultural production “art for art’s sake” dedicate themselves to an intellectual project whose amplitude is measured in effort and sacrifices of all kinds and in the degree in which they deliver their work ethic. There exists in Daniela Zeca’s work a conspicuous evolution regarding delineating her personal theme and the growing compositional complexity. *Demonii vântului* “consolidates a project”, as Horia-Roman Patapievici claims on the back cover of the book. In Bianca Burța-Cernat’s opinion, the same novel manages to maintain a steady amount of “poetic reverie and narrative thrill” (Burța-Cernat, 2010) and refines the narrative stake. According to Daniel Cristea-Enache (2010), Daniela Zeca possesses an incredible capacity for reinvention, which can be seen in the fact that the three novels are alike, but that they are “sufficiently different to be

⁹ „[d]iferența dintre cititorul comun și reprezentanții elitei constă în faptul că în vreme ce primul nu își poate depăși așteptările *insider*-ii deținători ai unei disponibilități estetice mult mai mari pot adopta mai multe atitudini, se pot mobiliza și reacționa diferit”.

read by themselves”. It is thus that Daniela Zeca’s trilogy is promising and appears to be a revelation in the domain of prose (Burţa-Cernat, 2010).

Daniela Zeca’s image as a writer is confirmed by the strictness by which she conceives her novels. Her five journeys of documentation in Northern Africa and in Iran have been preceded by ample research sessions on the psychology of the exiled. All this effort translates, according to Alex Ştefănescu (2010) into precise terminology and in scientific depiction of gems.

3. Conclusion

This paper aimed to analyse the overwhelmingly positive critical reception of Daniela Zeca’s novels and to demonstrate that the shift critics operate from a successful book which has large sales figures to a book that is not only a library success, but an upcoming classic, with its rightful place in the canon, is in itself kitsch. Any attempt to deceit and self-deceit, be it consciously or unconsciously performed, categorizes as kitsch.

Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of production cycles offers a comprehensive overview of the literary field and emphasises the significance critics have in the cultural production process. Moreover, it functions as an aid to the researcher who tries to position cultural objects, their consumers and their producers relative to the demands of the literary market.

It is this theory of the polarized literary field and its consequent opposition between short-time bestsellers and long-time bestsellers that acts as the liaison between a theory of kitsch as forgery and the shift of these novels to an elevated aesthetic level. It is thus possible to understand the recurring themes and the structures of the reviews analysed in this paper. We have identified a pattern of the analyses of Daniela Zeca’s novels which all motivate its insertion in the canon. Be it that the novels of the Oriental Trilogy are doubled by a symbolic structure, or that they devise a two-fold reading grid which allows for different levels of interpretation or for distinct categories of readers, they all manifest qualities necessary to the accession to the Romanian literary tradition. Strangeness, originality and aesthetic power associate Daniela Zeca with important autochthonous or international writers.

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