

# “The inventory of possible realities” – Structures seen from above: Contemporary Hungarian literature and the epimodern theory of Emmanuel Bouju

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

Received: October 4, 2022 • Accepted: February 16, 2023

Published online: March 7, 2023

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### ABSTRACT

After the fall of Communism a new generation started its career in Hungarian literature. They invented a new literary concept based on the experience that modernity had liquidated the language and postmodernity dispersed meaning. The most important feature of this concept was that realistic and postmodern expectations should not be confronted as opposites. This perspective appears in many books and many articles by Emmanuel Bouju, offering a possibility to link the three consecutive steps of a continuity through six epimodern values that can be perceived as a bridge overarching the different periods of art and literature.

Several authors and works of contemporary Hungarian literature show strong parallels with the international literary process. *Tranquility* by Attila Bartis, *The White King* by György Dragomán and *Pixel* by Krisztina Tóth can be linked to Bouju’s theory. In my approach the aforementioned novels use different branches of art as a sort of prism in order to understand the “preposterous aspects of the present and the past” (Boym).

As Emmanuel Bouju’s essay enables us to define the trinity of Modernism, Post-modernism and contemporary After-Postmodernism as a whole in which ruptures may be considered as three steps of the same continuity, the Hungarian books examined here are works that have re-claimed the validity of the coherence of the story whilst, as a heritage of the postmodern, they have also preserved skepticism regarding master narratives.

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## KEYWORDS

contemporary Hungarian literature, post-postmodern, epimodern, Emmanuel Bouju, *Tranquility* by Attila Bartis, *The White King* by György Dragomán, *Pixel* by Krisztina Tóth

## I.

The philosophy of art is based on the idea that besides the subject matter of the work of art, its manner of representation is also profoundly rooted in the conditions of the economic-historical situation in which they were conceived. After the fall of Communism in Hungary in 1990, a new concept of literature appeared that altered earlier modes of writing. This renewal may be linked to a whole literary generation, whose best known members are Attila Bartis, György Dragomán and Krisztina Tóth.

These authors started their career at a young age. Their early twenties coincided exactly with the political changes that took place after the end of the Cold War in Central-Europe, including in Hungary. In the new social and intellectual framework, a new group of writers grew up who spent their “Lehrenjahre” reading literary forerunners such as Péter Esterházy or Péter Nádas, but they themselves went on to invent a literary approach of their own. However, in order to shed light on this process it is necessary to shed some light on the Postmodern in Hungarian literature.

The shift described above finds its parallel in world literature in the phenomenon when postmodernism gave way a new trend which was more perceptive to storytelling, to a sort of re-emerging representation of the “out-of-text” reality (Kundera) and which, by getting closer to the readers, redefined the postmodernist context connecting writer and reader.

The present paper focuses on the possible parallelism between the above mentioned phenomenon in Hungarian literature and the epimodernist theory of French literary theoretician Emmanuel Bouju. Bouju argues in his related works that the three eras of modernist and postmodernist literature, followed by the contemporary condition of art, may be seen as constitutive parts of one possible unity. Moreover, the six epimodernist values may, besides defining each of the books examined here, also turn out to be real organizing elements of the texts.

*Tranquility* by Attila Bartis, *The White King* by György Dragomán and *Pixel* by Krisztina Tóth may all be linked to Bouju’s theory. Moreover, the new literary approach based on the new concept of storytelling, with its different structures, its higher perspectives, its alternating use of metaphors and metonyms, similarly to other branches of art which all act as a sort of prism through which to represent the reality, fits perfectly into the events of contemporary post-postmodernist Western literature.

## II.

“*The Trabant grips the road exceptionally well. Its acceleration is first-rate. This, however, must not encourage reckless and irresponsible driving.*”<sup>1</sup> This famous sentence from Péter Esterházy’s *Little Hungarian Pornography*, taken as verbatim transtextual allusion to the Trabant Users’

<sup>1</sup>A Little Hungarian Pornography, by Péter Esterházy, Judith Sollosy, Northwestern University Press, 1997.



Manual might act as a motto for the whole of the Hungarian postmodernist era. In the prologue to the English version of the book Esterházy wrote:

Life in a dictatorship is not the same as life in a democracy. You live in a different way. And you write in a different way, too. You also read in a different way... The dictatorship of time was a real dictatorship, though it was neither bloody nor crude. For all practical purposes it meant the potential threat of dictatorship. A ubiquitous and unavoidable threat that tainted every moment of your life. (Esterházy)<sup>2</sup>

The Postmodern had problematized the debt of language and made essential the role of irony. The loss of the master narrative has made the problem more complex: the mockery about the acceleration of the Trabant is not far from Kertész's irony when he makes the protagonist of *Faithlessness* say "I would like to live a little bit longer in this nice concentration camp." (Imre Kertész, *Fatelessness*)<sup>3</sup>

With the political changes of 1990, postmodernism in Hungary was gradually replaced by a new concept of literature professed by a generation that didn't want to abide by Wittgenstein's axiom: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."<sup>4</sup> (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*).

This maxim was one of the most often quoted in the Hungarian literature of the 90's, mainly as an ironically twisted allusion to censorship. After the political changes there was no more censorship to mock, but the earlier illusions of Hungarian postmodernism had also been lost.

Postmodernism arrived belatedly and ambiguously to Hungarian literature in the late 1970's, just as the Enlightenment and Romanticism had done in the 19th century or Symbolism and the modern literary trends at the turn of the 19th/20th centuries. One consequence of this was the mixed appearance of motifs and styles; while it also proved unfeasible to establish the precise delineation of the intellectual background of the various periods in art and literary history.

Such a hybrid and ambivalent position of this intellectual and cultural current held sway until the very end of the 20th. century. Prominent Hungarian philosopher Béla Bacsó characterised Hungarian postmodernism as follows

"the very fact that there is a discussion, an argument about the Postmodern in a country which has never gone through Modernism is a postmodern phenomenon in itself. It is like speaking about the dehumanizing aspects of economical rationalisation in a Hungary that lacks economic rationalism; or simulating alternative political movements in the political force field; to live in an era after the an avant-garde art which never ended – all of these are postmodernist symptoms." (Questionnaire about the Postmodern, Medvetánc, 1987/2, 233.)<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Esterhazy Péter's prologue in *Little Hungarian Pornography*, Corvina, 1995, trad. By J. Sollosy.

<sup>3</sup>szeretnék kicsit még élni ebben a szép koncentrációs táborban", Kertész Imre, *Sorsalanság*, [https://konyvtar.dia.hu/html/muvek/KERTESZ/kerteszo0004\\_kv.html](https://konyvtar.dia.hu/html/muvek/KERTESZ/kerteszo0004_kv.html), *Fatelessness*, Harvill, Vintage, New York, 2004, translated by Tim Wilkinson.

<sup>4</sup>*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (TLP), 1922, C. K. Ogden (trans.), London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. Originally published as "Logisch-Philosophische Abhandlung", in *Annalen der Naturphilosophische*, XIV (3/4), 1921).

<sup>5</sup>„Már maga a tény is, hogy egy, a modernizációt soha végig nem vivő országban vitatkoznak a posztmodernről: posztmodern jelenség. Éppígy: az ökonomiai túlracionalitást nélkülöző Magyarországon a gazdasági racionalizáció dehumanizáló hatásairól beszélni, a politika erőterében alternatív mozgalmakat szimulálni, valamint a soha be nem fejezett avant-garde művészet esetében egy azt követő korszakot élni – mind-mind posztmodern tünet Questionnaire about the Postmodern (*Körkérdés a posztmodernről*), Medvetánc 1987/2, 233.



One of the most significant characteristics of Postmodernism in Central Europe was the illusion that the end of political totalitarianism would simultaneously open the gates to a liberal market economy, the rule of law, democracy and social justice. Moreover, while the Western-European Postmodern entailed the relativisation and sidelining of the Western canon, its Hungarian version interpreted Postmodernism as a chance to re-join modernity as represented by Western culture. After the fall of communism, most of these illusions became more multifaceted or disappeared completely. A complicated world appeared both inside and outside the borders: the new Balkan wars, political and economic disillusionment in Central Europe and the authoritarian and hybrid political regimes that emerged after the new millennium showed that the “order of the discourse” had changed once more. The Postmodern was over, the “end of history” was not. A new world needed to be represented by a new language, a new style – and perhaps by new authors.

### III.

The modifications that Hungarian literature underwent after the fall of Communism were rather similar to the way in which writing changed in North American literature in the mid-1980s. In his essay “*A Few Words about Minimalism*” (NYT Book Review, 1986) John Barth celebrates Raymond Carver and his generation. These authors had left behind word-games, intellectual allusions, hypertexts and so on, and had reached a “post-literary” situation representing “K-Mart realism,” “hick chic,” “Diet-Pepsi minimalism” and “post-Vietnam, post-literary, postmodernist blue-collar neo-early-Hemingwayism”.<sup>6</sup> (Barth, 28)

After Günther Leypoldt, in the late seventies David Lodge gave a definition of this new sort of realism in literature: “the realism, the representation of experience in a manner closely approximating descriptions of similar experience in non-literary texts of the same culture” (Leypoldt, 25.) This new language-concept creates texts that aim not only to depict the “experience in non-literary texts of the same culture”, but at the same time reflect on themselves as literary texts made up of toposes, language shapes and paraphrases.

The new generation that began its career in the late eighties in Hungarian literature seems to parallel these phenomena of the 1970’s. This group of writers had grown up reading the great Hungarian postmodernist authors such as Esterházy and Nádas and went on to invent a new concept of literature from the ‘90s onwards. They had to face the problems of the possibility of speaking after postmodernism while they also needed to resuscitate the drive for storytelling. Moreover, these renewed ways of the narrative storytelling had to get closer to the readers and redefine the previous, rather elitist writer-reader context that had emerged during the postmodern.

A whole new language concept had to be created after accepting that modernity had liquidated language and postmodernity had dispersed meaning. Nevertheless this new concept evidently could not reproduce the certainties afforded by the traditions and conceptions of earlier narratives.<sup>7</sup> Given that the high degree of irony, the intertextual allusions, the word games, the

<sup>6</sup>„(...) praised and damned under such labels as „K-Mart realism,” „hick chic,” „Diet-Pepsi minimalism” and „post-Vietnam, post-literary, postmodernist blue-collar neo-early-Hemingway-ism” John Barth: *A Few Words about Minimalism*, NYT Book Review, 1986, 28.

<sup>7</sup>see: Csaba Horvath, *Megtalált szavak, L\_Harmattan- Károli könyvek*, 2018.



cultural references or the mixture of fiction and reality used in modernism no longer represented the world in an adequate way, the new generation had to create a new mode of expression, while all the time bearing in mind Wittgenstein's fundamental assumption. They had to reconcile the problems of modernism and the problems of postmodernism, yet rise above both.

For this generation, the postmodernist concept of language, also referred to as "the linguistic turn" was no longer a goal to reach, but rather a starting point. The most important feature of the literary concept of this generation is that realistic and postmodernist expectations should not be confronted as opposites. Their most remarkable innovation was the re-building of reality in literary texts. They did not consider the representation of reality and the internal logic of language to be a contradiction. The new kind of correspondence between the literary text and the represented reality rises above traditional mimesis, because the linguistic logic was just as primary as the so-called "subject of representation". The text creates, holds, and represents reality at the same time.

The Greek prefix "epi" implies an approach to modernism-postmodernism and to post-post-modernism as a unity. The idea of this possible higher perspective appears in Emmanuel Bouju's book and many of his articles, proposing a way to link the three consecutive steps of a continuity. The most important part of his theory is the list of the six epimodern values, "six different relations to the heritage of modernism, by reorienting its postmodern critique and rebooting, with all due irony, its ambition of new forms of anti-late-capitalist engagement and paradoxical empowerment."<sup>8</sup>

Several authors and works of contemporary Hungarian literature have actively taken part the international literary process – this essay explores three of them. The books examined, *Tranquility*<sup>9</sup> by Attila Bartis (*A Nyugalom*, 2001), *The White King*<sup>10</sup> by György Dragomán (*A Fehér Király*, 2005), and *Pixel*<sup>11</sup> by Krisztina Tóth (2011; English translation 2020, with the same title as the Hungarian original version) can be linked to Bouju's theory, and provide positive proof that literary success does not depend on the original language of the work. All three books contain strong allusions to other branches of art. The representation of reality is also linked to the objects of art, placed, like a prism, between reality and its representation, while the prism itself can also become a sort of reality.

Following Svetlana Boym, we may state that the points of view of the post-postmodern arts can be seen not as a classifiable trend, but rather a prism:

The off-modern is not an "ism." Rather, it is an alternative prism for vision and a way of understanding the preposterous aspects of the present and the past. The off-modern can be lighthearted, but it requires a deep conviction. This particular sensibility—really a *Weltanschauung*—crystallized and came to the foreground in the first decade of the 21st century, but we might discover some trans-historical elective affinities for it in earlier times. It is also a form of thinking through logos and pathos, memory and imagination, expanding the regimes of the sensible. (Boym)<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup>see Bouju Emmanuel, Search for Tomorrow., An Epimodernist Future for Literature, Dibur literary journal, Issue 6, Fall 2018.

<sup>9</sup>Attila Bartis, *Tranquility*, translated by Imre Goldstein, Archipelago books, 2008.

<sup>10</sup>György Dragomán, *The white king*, translated by Paul Olchváry, London: Black Swan, 2015.

<sup>11</sup>Krisztina Tóth, *Pixel*, translated by Owen Good, Seagull, 2019.

<sup>12</sup><http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/o/off-modern/off-modern-svetlana-boym.html>.



The different branches of art can be taken as prisms not only in this theoretical sense. The practical use of any particular art form gives a lens through which we can understand the “preposterous aspects of the present and the past”, but it remains particularly linked to post-postmodern literature.

#### IV.

The heroes of Bartis’s novel are artists: a young man, a budding writer, his mother, a former actress and his sister, an emigrated musician. This motif evokes the “authority of art” and makes it essentially valuable in the representation of the world. In one hand it could be taken as the fifth epimodern value, the *credit*:

[the credit] corresponds to epi- according to the idea of authority. The credit given to the authority of literature and art tries to counterbalance the discredit of fossilized institutions, vain discourses, and unequal economies; it aims to expose the overall debt contracted by political, economic, and social organizations and owed to the citizens of the world and the nonhuman components of the earth; it has to imagine the possibility of a future rescued from the succession of debt inheritance and the re-enactment of the past. This means credit as credibility of narratives and art representations: placed at the heart of the “dead pledges” (mort-gages) of debt economies. (Bouju)

On the other hand, one of the great questions of the book is whether the function of art is to reveal or to hide the truth. Presumably it is both, but it is up to the protagonists – and the reader – to discern the difference between the two. A relevant example of this ambiguity is that the flat where the protagonist lives with his family is furnished with pieces of theatre scenery which are declared to be the parts of the real family legacy. But in fact they are not: instead, they turn out to be surrounded by a range of false stories about the family’ history, while this temporary furnishing is masqueraded as a true heritage in the physical space of the flat.

“This is a very nice apartment,” said the stocky one when I put out the cigarette butt. “It is,” I said. “And it’s furnished very prettily, too.” “It’s mainly scenery,” I said, and only then realized that we had done this before, and I doubted very much that we were there to discuss the scenery Mother called her Weér inheritance. (Bartis, 57)

The young writer lives under the oppression of the once-famous actress who became *persona non grata* in the theatre world of the seventies and eighties for purely political reasons. But the unfolding of the plot makes the reader realise that, just like their material environment, every character’s life is full of concealment and dishonesty. “Not a blessed line is true in the whole thing!” – as Bartis puts it. (Bartis, 266.) This applies even to the origin of the protagonist, whose father is as uncertain as his moment of conception. A simple calculation of month shows us the identity crises that can be linked to the category of the secrecy of epimodern theory: every important person in the young man’s past had in fact belonged to the dreaded Communist Secret Service. Moreover, as it turns out, he was in fact conceived during the very time when the revolution of 1956 was being trampled underfoot.

„If my math is correct, it was thirty-six years ago today that Andor Darvas, Rebeka Weér and Éva Jordán got in the rear seat of an official Volga so that regrettable events would not upset their



romance. I received a photo from Jordán; it was taken in the hunting lodge of the Interior Ministry, roughly in the days when my father's classmates in the Hungarian/History Faculty were making Molotov cocktails out of Kőbányai beer bottles"<sup>13</sup> (...) „And if I figure it right, at the end of November, when they headed back to Budapest, there were five people sitting on the back seat.” (Bartis, 291.)

The hidden truth of personal lives corresponds to the role of the secret in epimodernism, including instances of uncertain, refused or denied origin:

“The *secrecy*. It corresponds to *epi-* according to the idea of *origin*. Secret stories mingle family and historical lineages of disappearance or treason and reinterpret genealogies as a kind of *epigenetic* practice—as an imaginary *epidrug* reading of (or talking about) the secret genetic code of experience. This epigenetic secret in literature confronts virtual-reality schemes and transhumanist fantasies: it deals with the *phantom pain* of a lost past and a possible future „(BOUJU)

The novels in question represent a transition between two – or perhaps three – political regimes. The task is often to decipher the mysteries of the past, but the represented present is also seen as dynamic and uncertain. Most of the texts make an effort to describe the transition from democracy to dictatorship. According to Canetti's opinion there is a strong connection between political power and the concept of secret. Moreover “the concept of secret is hidden in the depth of power”, as long as “democracy has got no secrets”. (Canetti)<sup>14</sup>

The hero of Attila Bartis's latest novel, *The End*, published in 2015, is a photographer who declares a sort of *ars poetica* in one of the monologues of the book: „If once I really become a photographer, I want take pictures of what is not visible” (Bartis, *A vége*, 24)<sup>15</sup> The non-visible is the unspeakable secret itself, but the photo leads us not only to the problem of medium, but also to the problem of poetic figures. Bartis's picture about the “not-visible” may be taken as a metonymy: although it can be understood metaphorically, its embedding in the reality of the past makes it metonymical. As Roland Barthes has remarked:

“The name of Photography's noeme will therefore be: “That-has-been,” or again: the Intractable. In Latin (a pedantry necessary because it illuminates certain nuances), this would doubtless be said: interfuit: \_what I see has been here, in this place which extends between infinity and the subject (operator or spectator); it has been here, and yet immediately separated; and it has been absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet already deferred. [BARTHES: CAMERA LUCIDA]<sup>16</sup>

This example shows that the former, highly dominant role of the metaphor had changed. In fragment No. 274 of *Harmonia Caelestis*, Esterházy wrote: “My father is just like Piero della Francesca's father: metaphorical.”<sup>17</sup> Although it would be hard to deny that in Esterházy's family novel the father's image is metonymic, being that “in classical rhetoric, a metonymy substitutes one thing for another that it bears some relationship to,”<sup>18</sup> the predominant mode of

<sup>13</sup>Bartis.

<sup>14</sup>Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, Translated from the German by Carol Stewart New York, Viking Press, 1962.

<sup>15</sup>Bartis Attila, *A vége*, 2015, Magvető.

<sup>16</sup>Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, *Reflections\_on\_Photography.pdf*77.

<sup>17</sup>*Harmonia Caelestis*, translated by Judit Sollosy, Ecco, 2003.

<sup>18</sup><https://jackbalkin.yale.edu/11-metaphor-metonymy-and-cognitive-models>.



interpretation in the late twentieth century was metaphorical. The texts of the new generation are entirely open to a new sort of reading where the metonymic interpretation can be as strong as the metaphorical. Moreover, it would seem more fruitful to prefer cognitive models that use a less stringent separation between metaphor and metonymy.

The last sentences of Bartis's *Tranquility* come from the well-known vocabulary of European melancholy: mountains, sky, stars, night, loneliness, art and creating. But it also leads us to Kant and to the "flamboyant" in modernity.

„If I were sitting somewhere outdoors, say, in the yard of a lakeshore house, somewhere in the middle of nowhere, in the Carpathians, even then I could write nothing but that the only thing that fills me with wonder is the starry sky above me. And that is indeed very little.” [Bartis, 292]

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily we reflect upon them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me. I do not seek or conjecture either of them as if they were veiled obscurities or extravagances beyond the horizon of my vision; I see them before me and connect them immediately with the consciousness of my existence.” (Kant, Critique of Practical Reason, 129)<sup>19</sup>

After the problem of the prism, this is a good example of the superficiality of the epimodernism that “corresponds to epi- according to the idea of surface contact.” The cross between ordinary vocabulary and philosophical allusion is also a sort of surface contact, being that it “symbolizes the idea of an epigraphy as surface writing in literature (and art) of the in-depth possible reality in the present future” (Bouju)

## V.

The protagonist of *White King* by György Dragoman is a boy telling his story as his present, although – similarly to Bartis's books – the text is also constantly engaged with hidden elements in that present,

“And then the colonel said that last night there was an accident in an atomic power plant in the Great Soviet Union and that the wind brought the radioactivity here” (Dragomán, 39)

or in the past.

What is this, you haven't even told the kid? “And then my mother shook her head and said, “That's none of your business,” but the tall silver-haired man said, “Well, that was a mistake because he'll find out sooner or later, anyway, best to get this sort of thing over with from the start, because lies breed only lies,” and then Mother gave a laugh and said, “Yes, of course, you two gentlemen are the guardian angels of truth,” and then the shorter one told Mother to shut her trap, and Mother really did turn all quiet, and the silver-haired man stepped in front of me and asked, “Hey, son, do you still believe that we're your father's colleagues?” (...) he's in a labor camp, and as scrawny as he is, he won't be able to take it for long, and he'll never come back from there ever again, maybe he's not even alive anymore, who knows” (Dragomán, 16)

<sup>19</sup>Immanuel Kant, Critique of Practical Reason, Cambridge University Press, 2015, Translated and Edited by Mary Gregor.





The secrets are hidden also in the parents' lives:

Mother got on her smartest red suit coat and matching skirt together with a pair of high-heeled shoes I'd never seen on her before, and as we headed down the stairs she stumbled and had to grab hold of the railing right when I was about to ask if we were going somewhere to sort things out so Father would be allowed to come home or only because Mother wanted to find out exactly what happened to him,(...) I flung open a door and there I was, back in the living room, and there was Mother, standing on one leg next to one of the leather armchairs, laughing hysterically, the little table was toppled over and the cherry liqueur had spilled all over the zebra skins, oozing among the crystal shot glasses and slivers of glass scattered on the floor, and one of the antelope heads had fallen off the wall, and even that big lion's head had half come off, the ambassador was standing underneath it, clutching it with one hand to keep it from plopping into the puddle of cherry liqueur while he was trying to put his shirt back on using his other hand, and when he saw me he shouted, "So then, finally you're here, it's high time you cleared out of here once and for all, and you'd better take along your whore of a mother with you," and he said he didn't even know why he'd let us into the apartment in the first place when he might have recognized our sort, not even my grandfather was ever worth a piece of flying shit, and it would be best if I just forgot that my father ever existed, never in this stinking life would we ever see him again because he for one could guarantee that my father would rot away right where he was, at the Danube Canal, and my father could thank his lucky stars if he didn't wind up in a reeducation camp, no, we would never see him again. (Dragomán, 183)

It is important to realize that prisms transmit, but also transform reality. The different branches of art in Bartis's book have the same role as the boys' role-plays, wargames and the football in Dragoman's novel. Even the title, *The White King*, is an allusion to chess. The world is modelled through games:

"We all are Indians: I placed even that right in the box, and then my slingshot and my blowgun too, and my Indian books and hunting books, one after another, and I went over to my desk and pulled out the matchbox drawer and poured all my cars into the box, but then one of the cars, the red Ford with the doors you could open, accidentally fell on the floor, so I leaned down and picked it up before putting it in the box by the other cars, and then I set the drawer on the floor and I stood up on my bed and tried taking my posters off the wall (...) those double-page soccer team posters I'd gotten from an illustrated magazine and about my movie posters with Indians on them," (Dragomán, 190)

In Central Europe, the stories about American Indians featuring in literature written for children and young adults have established a tradition of heroic, exotic, romantic and nostalgic narratives for many generations. Boy readers had learnt how to change heroic defeat or temporary victories into an imagined and desired triumph and how to turn failure into glory by the force of the tale. The struggle of the small and feeble Indian tribes against white people superior in strength, number and guns taught the readers how to build an alternative history reflecting what they wished to attain in reality. The readers of these "red Indian" stories hoped that the ethical dimension of a non-existing reality could become more powerful than the proven narrative structures. This may again be linked to *superficiality* - the first epimodern category in Bouju's theory. The red Indian stories aim to „make apparent that which is hidden in the depth. (...) Therefore, it symbolizes the idea of an *epigraphy* as surface writing in literature (and art) of the in-depth possible reality in the present future." [BOUJU] American Indians are not simply the noble savages of European literature, but are holders of total and almost unreachable freedom. As Kafka wrote in his short piece:



If one were only an Indian, instantly alert, and on a racing horse, leaning against the wind, kept on quivering jerkily over the quivering ground, until one shed one's spurs, for there needed no spurs, threw away the reins, for there needed no reins, and hardly saw that the land before one was smoothly shorn heath when horse's neck and head would be already gone." [ KAFKA, THE WISH TO BE A RED INDIAN ]<sup>20</sup>

The value and the active experience of freedom are linked in Dragoman's book to *acceleration*. The act of running recurs throughout the plot of the *White king*, but is especially significant in the book's closing sentences:

[...] but then a gray prison van turned out from behind the mortuary and began snaking its way down the main promenade, and I cried out for them to stop, to wait, and I started running after the van, and I knew it was about to speed up, but when I then glimpsed Father's bone-white face behind the bars of the rear window, I also knew that the prison van could go as fast as it wanted, I'd catch up anyway, and raising the crowbar above my head, I took off after the van, faster and faster, faster and faster and faster I ran. (Dragomán, 316)

Speed as an absolute value is more important than its goal or its direction: it becomes the will of freedom. According to Bouju, acceleration

"corresponds to epi- according to the idea of duration. The new energetic vividness of literature seeks to confront the "acceleration" of time through new forms of experiences of temporality: of detemporalization—conceived as a form of resistance to this acceleration and as the heuristic exercise of anachronism and uchronism (in narratives of counterfactual or alternate history(...)) or anticipatory." [BOUJU].

Indeed, acceleration is encoded in the structure of *The White King* by the presence of an ongoing run. The final chapter contains the closing sentences about Djata's escape, but this action harks back to the plot of chapter three, "*End of the world*". Although the last chapter represents his long and ecstatic run, his life can't end like that, as his last run at the end of the book is but a simple episode. The permanent presence of slow and fast running sets the pace – the acceleration – of the reading, as well.

## VI.

The coexistence of a ruptured plot and the need for a coherent story is also a common trait of all three novels examined here. We may fairly assume that the new forms and possibilities of lost and regained story-telling differ both from the past, unproblematized continuity of narration, and from the total withdrawal of the coherent story.

Krisztina Tóth's *Pixel* (Pixel) is well suited to showcase the epimodern condition of literature. The title "pixel" intensely demonstrates fragmentation, though it supposes the existence of totality: in the process of reading we see how apparently unconnected dots unify into one big picture. As the title suggests, the chapters of *Pixel* are independent digital picture points that jointly construct the entirety of an image. The chapter titles of the book are the names of the

<sup>20</sup>Kafka The Wish To Be A Red Indian, Translated by Willa and Edwin Muir, <https://www.yeyebook.com/en/franz-kafka-short-story-the-wish-to-be-a-red-indian-text-eng/>.



human body (The Neck's story, The Head's story, The Knee's story, The Penis's story, The Vagina's story and so on). These sub-units make up a totality, but this totality is shaped by the reader's drive and attention. The reading offers this possibility, but the text is based on a questionable coherence, moreover it raises awareness to its problematic nature.

Nevertheless, we have to understand that the picture created by the pixels is not identical to the reality but to another picture about the reality which we deem to be real. However, it is a picture, an work of art once again, which is situated between the reader and reality. Moreover, it requires the activity of the receptive interpreter who needs to realize that this sort of reality, created in the autonomous and independent work of art, is permanently open to new interpretations.

Tóth's book clearly represents the "epi" character described above: the description of the snapshots of the city is a good example of the perspective of "seeing from above".

The purple-haired teacher flips down the sun visor and turns on the radio in the car. She's worried she'll be late. We can see the tailback from above, so we know she will: the blue Suzuki has no chance whatsoever of reaching her next lesson. Miles up the road at the bridge approach there's been a three-way accident, as a result, all of the lanes are at a standstill. (Tóth, 9)

The text doesn't seek to represent a referential reality of modernism, nor yet the pure universe of literature of Postmodern. It rises above both in order to find a higher perspective from which the contradictory conjunction between modernity and postmodernity can be unified.

The paragraph below shows a scene where an artist is making a contemporary work of art out of teabags arranged to depict a part of a human body.

"The Work is a man's body from the knee up, lying face down. His arms are cut off, or you could say they reach beyond the studio walls. He has no head either; the north wall slices it off at the neck like some sort of guillotine. His back is a sad, hulking slope of muscle. His buttocks are two neat, young hemispheres. The body lies slightly askew, if he'd had legs, one would've certainly been drawn up. A sleeping Corpus between white walls. The skin is brown. If we look closer, we can see every existing hue of the human skin. But the overall effect is something indefinable, a velvety dark. From a couple of meters away all you can see are pixels, dried-out teabags, but from further away they blur into a single body. Were the studio roof made of glass, we would see something else from above. But of course for that, for a full bird's-eye view, we would need to be much higher. Nevertheless, if there were an external eye, say if there was a God, who could see through walls as He can through people's skin, from up there He would see the writing on the sleeping male torso. From the buttocks to the shoulders the darker teabags fuse into a barely legible phrase. Like some sort of bygone, fading tattoo. Written across the male body lying prone is *Thirty Years*." (Tóth, 36)

The direction of seeing is reversed. The point of view shows this peculiar work of art as a torso to be completed before it can become a human body, or a work of art in the same sense as book itself – a puzzle-world hinting at the possibility of a coherent universe. This perspective prevails throughout the world of *Pixel*. The point of view is created *in* the text and *by* the text. It reveals a represented torso that cannot be perceived in its entirety through the ceilings and the roofs, but can be formed in the imagination as the starting point of a complex process.

The shape formed by the teabags becomes a torso to be completed. It expresses the love and sorrow of the artist – and the receiver. So this is a metonymy at first sight: the silhouette and the colour of the tea-bags used represent a metonymical similarity connected to the form of the



human body. On the next level, this semi-formed fragment, made up of a peculiar material, appears as a metaphor: it must be reflected as a human body that is able to carry and represent the complexity of feelings – sorrow, lost love, the defining moments of human life.

It is important to realize that the metaphorical and the metonymical approaches can be synthesized when viewed from above. The imagined observer can see right through the cellars and the roofs, seeing everything that is hidden to the eye. In this sense, the above extract makes a strong allusion to cultural and religious attributes of God. The metonymy of the human body and the metaphor of human faith do not simply rise to a religious level, but construct a point of view from which different human lives all look similar, while the differences are less important. This may reduce the individuality, but it certainly increases the sense of the universality of human faith.

This universality of human faith can attain a higher, historically determined level, as we can see in an example from the first chapter:

“The little boy is called Dawid by the way, he lives in the Warsaw Ghetto with his mother, Bozena, and her sisters. Someone kicks in the door, the three people in the room press into the corner. (...) He dies in Treblinka. Sorry, wait. He doesn’t die in Treblinka. And he’s not even a boy, but a little girl. But then all these children are so alike: nails all chewed down and pudgy, stubby fingers. The hand belongs to a little girl, and the girl’s name is Irena. She’s Lithuanian, from Vilna. Wait, I’m talking nonsense, I’m trying to tell you everything at once. How could she be Lithuanian! She only looked blonde at first glance. Yes, she looked blonde, but her hair is actually rather dark and curly. In fact—and this is the truth—her name is Gavriela. She was born in Thessaloniki, and arrives at Auschwitz in February 1943. She survives the war, but loses her mother and her home. Later, she’ll settle in Paris and become a French accountant. Yes, it can happen.” (Tóth, 5)

Although the past, according to Pierre Nora, is a site of memory and forgetting, in Krisztina Tóth’s text the problems of remembering also appear in the permanent ruptures of the structure. This approach, on the one hand, renders impossible the continuity of storytelling, but on the other hand it is helpful in that it does not satisfy and maintain the curiosity of the reader. The desire for consistency doesn’t simply take one closer to the missing links of the story – in fact the absence of coherence, the acceptance of deficiency turns out to be a method for understanding. However, it is more fundamental to note that this phenomenon may be observed not only in the protagonist’s private past, as in the collective history itself, but is also shown to be an essential function of being. Although at first sight the text of *Pixel* seems to be oriented by the supposed rules of the out-of-text world: “change these things, though your narrator would be happy to do it, especially after this bathroom scene. Fate offered several different possibilities, and reality pointed to the worst one: alright, let’s have this one.” Tóth constantly makes the reader realize that the story in the text is not equivalent to reality:

An old-fashioned curtain hung in the seventh floor window, the kind which is shorter in the middle, like a pregnant woman’s skirt. If the readers could fly they’d be able to see into the room. But they can’t, so once again the readers will have to rely on me, your narrator, who saw an old woman called Klárka through the tunnel-shaped opening.” (Tóth, 37)

The aim of the author is to make absolutely clear that the narrator pilots only the reality of text, even though it shows similarities with the principles of the world. She has almost absolute freedom in the continuous changing of reality; furthermore, she claims the right to make mistakes or even to lie.



Here's a good place for me to stop, because it's true, reality usually points towards the worst possibility, I on the other hand could quite easily steer the story in another direction. But I simply don't have the time to pause for a second. I can't determine which door suddenly to open into the semi-darkness of that moment. (Tóth, 44)

I'm delighted with myself, like an inspector who's just realised there's one tiny frame in the story that doesn't fit the whole picture." (...) „That's a lie, but somehow it seemed right to me like this. (Tóth, 12)

## VII.

Emmanuel Bouju's theory marks a particular starting point to show that the consecutive and antithetical values of modernity and postmodernity can form a compound. His essay makes enables an approach which defines the trinity of Modernism, Post-modernism and contemporary After-Postmodernism as a whole in which ruptures may be considered as but three steps within the same continuity. György Dragomán's *The White King* (2005), Attila Bartis's *Tranquility* (2001) and Krisztina Tóth's *Pixel* (2018) clearly show that this generation of authors has reclaimed the validity of the coherent story, whilst as a heritage of the postmodern they have preserved scepticism regarding master narratives. From a higher, more philosophical perspective, they have regained the rationality of modernity while holding on to the scepticism of the postmodern. The perspective of the Epimodern sees the paradoxical contradictions of the modern and the postmodern from above in order to accept them as the constitutive parts of a possible unity.

## NOTE

This paper is the written version of lecture given on the Workshop on the Epimodern Condition, Budapest, 07. September 2020.

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