„ALEXANDRU IOAN CUZA" UNIVERSITY IAŞI

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A POSTMODERN URBAN POETICS:

PERSPECTIVES ON

THE AMERICAN METROPOLIS IN

THE WORKS OF PAUL AUSTER

– Phd Thesis –

SUMMARY

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KEY WORDS: postmodernism, urban consciousness, metropolis, alienation, urban labyrinth, writer turned detective, urban uncanny, metropolitan redemption, urban destiny, metropolitan identity, flâneur.

SUMMARY

The motivation for choosing this particular theme for my doctoral thesis is justified by the interest I have had along my college years for the concepts of postmodernism, urban studies, urban literature, but also by my passion for unconventional writers such as Paul Auster. Consequently, this thesis comprises all the above mentioned academic interests, resulting in an attempt at a postmodern urban poetics.

This doctoral thesis has as its premise the idea that the postmodern city is a work of art, a manifestation of the collective consciousness, but also a free form of expressing the urban destiny of the individual. In a constantly shifting social, cultural and economic context, the individual's identity undergoes a series of ontological uncertainties which manifest themselves as a fragmentation of time, space and language, thus engendering the emergence of a compromised sense of self, marked by profound feeling of alienation and uncanniness, amplified by the ambiguous manifestations of the metropolitan environment. Through out my thesis I noticed that the postmodern city is nothing more than an accumulation of disparate and contingent narratives, which questions the idea of existence itself.

In such a space, the individual's inner structure is destabilized, favoring the process of fragmentation and implicitly, of multiplication of the self. Postmodernism supposes the compression of the categories of time and space, in an attempt to intensify the individual's sensory experience; however, the consequences of such a process are disastrous: the postmodern subject becomes a fragmented being, undermined by his/her environment and by the situational context, incapable of negotiating and determining his/her place in society. For theoreticians such as Jean Baudrillard, Frederic Jameson or David Harvey, the discontinuity and instability of the self, as well as the blurring of boundaries between 'the interior space' and 'the exterior space' are determined by the representational processes

of the mass-media which condition the individual to internalize and appropriate a series of fluctuating, volatile images and texts, so that, for the individual, the construction of an identity becomes a performative act, a part which is to be played in a continuous present. As a consequence, the two spaces, the interior one, of the self, and the exterior one, of the metropolis, become interchangeable; the concept of inner life gradually disappears, as the postmodern individual, unstable and incoherent, loses himself/herself in the assimilation process of the urban environment.

What is inciting about Paul Auster's works, is that the fear of the other, the blurring of fact and fiction or the ontological uncertainty bring about a feeling of urban uncanniness, defined as an anxiety originated in the unfamiliar, unstable space of the city, in the distorted perception of time, in the overstimulation of the senses by bringing together unusual images, as well as by the unfavorable influence of the anonymous crowd on the individual's psyche, perceived as a confrontation between self and the other. In the postmodern metropolis, time is irrelevant, thus engendering the supremacy of space as consequence of the globalization and mass-media mechanisms: the postmodern American city, best represented by New York, becomes a fragmented, illusory space where nothing is what it seems, a place haunted by bizarre processes of replication, revealing the disconcerting presence of the other. The majority of Auster's works are set against a metropolitan background, and this particular fact, conditions the characters' fate by confining them to the labyrinthine space of the streets or of the prison like rooms.

Through out this thesis, I highlighted the thematic correspondences in Auster's novels and films, remarking their redundant character: Auster's city creates a feeling of uncanniness and uncertainty, focusing almost obsessively on themes as the erasure of the individual from the urban text, the disintegration of language, the fear of the double, a compromised sense of identity determined by the characters' inability to adapt to the metropolitan text and, thus, position themselves in the

urban space. The entire literary and film works have as reference point, the City of New York, a space both real and imagined, towards which the majority of the Auterian narratives converge: on one hand, it is a space of despondency, of dislocation of self, in which chaos becomes an universal coordinate and, on the other hand, it is a space which allows for renewal and redemption. The complexity of this space brings about a series of questions to which I tried to offer pertinent answers: what does it mean to live in a self-sufficient metropolis, which belongs to no one, in which anonymity and loneliness are not only essential traits of the individual's personality, but also strategies for urban survival. What arises from my research is that Auster represents New York as an urban paradox, 'a living being' which both captivates and repulses the individual, by creating an existential tension intrinsic to this particular postmodern space.

In spite of this pessimistic vision, Auster manages to offer a more optimistic perspective on the American metropolis, as it is evident in his films, *Smoke* and *Blue in the Face*, where one discovers a powerful sense of solidarity between individuals, and the theme of urban dislocation is replaced by that of a consolidated community. In addition, the same desire for salvation is also found within the characters of *Moon Palace* and *Leviathan*, where the erasure from the urban text is not a viable option; here, the characters use the family and friendship relations as coherent urban strategies in establishing a stable identity.

It is obvious that Paul Auster embraces the contradictory nature of the postmodern metropolis, his writings juxtapose the images illustrating the tight relations of the individuals in an urban community, with those of extreme suffering, fragmentation and annihilation of self. Thus, Auster's perspective on the American metropolis seems to be realistic, as he manages to accurately describe what he experiences within this space. However, I must emphasize that Auster has renewed and improved the concept of urban experience by going beyond the simple urban narratives, investing the metropolitan space with

mythical and phantasmagorical elements, thus contributing to the revitalization of the individual metropolitan experience and creating an urban poetics relevant for today's society.

The research I undertook, relying on postmodern and urban studies theories, and modeled on the American argumentative pattern, combines both analytical and synthetic methods with theoretical and empirical approaches.

The structure of the thesis comprises an **Introduction**, followed by five chapters: Ch.I **Approaching the City**, Ch.II **Postmodern Discourses**, Ch.III **The Postmodern Metropolis,** Ch.IV **The Metropolis of the Austerian Consciousness**, Ch.V **The City Through the Camera Lens**, and **Conclusions.**

In the first chapter, *Approaching the City*, I tried to understand and explain the concept of 'city' as it was envisaged by theoreticians such as Georg Simmel, Max Weber, Louis Wirth, Robert Park or Walter Benjamin. In this section, I selected and synthethised the most relevant urban theories for this study, able to offer a comprehensive perspective on the metropolitan environment. Consequently, the two research schools, respectively, the German School and the Chicago School, with their classical approach on the city, represent the starting point for this thesis: in *The Metropolis and Mental Life,* Simmel considers the metropolis a space which liberates one from the constant surveillance one is exposed to in villages or small towns; furthermore, he also states that the personality of the urban individual is dominated by a powerful sense of reason and indifference, abilities that help him cope with 'the excess of psychic stimulation' characteristic of this type of space. Simmel's theories will influence Robert Park and Walter Benjamin in their academic research. Park, by emphasizing the structural and human characteristics of the city, acknowledges the metropolis not only as a physical construct, but also as a human community organized according to different hierarchies, where the relations among its members will occur at a functional level, thus ensuring the viability of the system. Another interesting theory of 'reading the city' is introduced by Walter Benjamin, who advances the

concept of the *flâneur*, an eccentric figure who tries to reinterpret the 'lost time' by establishing a connection between memory, past and space; for him, the urban experience is a never-ending quest for a language meant to accurately decipher the metropolitan text.

Chapter II, *Postmodern Discourses*, examines the concept of postmodernism from a social and literary perspective, in an attempt to establish a valid theoretical framework for the subsequent analysis of the Austerian works. In addition, within the same chapter, the investigation and comparison of the modern identity with the postmodern identity was taken into account, with the purpose of understanding the intrinsic mechanisms of transformation of the Austerian heroes' individual identity, as well as the consequences of the postmodern metropolitan environment has on the individual whose decentred sense of self remains enclosed in a multicursal labyrinth. From a social standpoint, for Robert G. Dunn, postmodernism is an intensification of the consequences of modernism, a new form of consciousness, adapted to the invasion of sensory stimuli and divergent experiences; while Mark Poster notices a generalized destabilization of the individual in the postmodern age, generated by an aggressive process of fragmentation of self caused by the overflowing visual representations of mass-media. In the postmodern context, the individual is forced to negotiate his/her own identity in an attempt to balance and reintegrate the broken pieces of his shattered self. An interesting perspective on the postmodern self is introduced by W.T. Anderson, who uses the terms of *multiphrenia*, *protean*, *decentered self* and *self-in-relation* in order to investigate and describe the identity of the postmodern subject. The conclusion he reaches is disconcerting: this particular individual, lacking a coherent sense of self, is in a state of constant transformation caused by the artificial social and cultural relations he builds for himself/herself. From a literary standpoint, postmodernism becomes the act of creation of a new world (Steven Connor, Brian McHale); another alternative, (dominated by anxiety and doubt), to the certainties of the modern experience, illustrating the supremacy of multiple

narrative voices, chaos and a propensity for a state of alienation (Ihab Hassan). Although the concept of postmodernism is under constant debate, a series of characteristics relevant for the present study were established: dislocation and urban entropy, ontological uncertainty generated by the metropolitan experience, the individual's divided identity, or the inadequacy of language within the urban environment.

Chapter III, *The Postmodern Metropolis*, investigates the concept of the uncanny, introduced by Sigmund Freud, and acknowledged from a spatio-temporal relationship inherent to postmodernism. Basing my research on Bakhtin, Smethurst and Eckhard's theories, I explore the concept of the urban uncanny in the context of the postmodern metropolis. Taking into account the fact that the postmodern city is a space haunted by the forces of the unconscious, Eckhard asserts that the uncanny is an urban phenomenon emerging from the affinity established between the metropolitan space and the individual's inner life. What both modernist and postmodernist writers have in common is the dark manner in which they describe the city, but the difference between them is given by the fact that postmodernists accept the supremacy of illusion and of the unconscious forces over the metropolitan space. This terror of the postmodern manifests itself as language inadequacy, intertextuality, blurring of the boundaries between reality and fiction, thus creating certain uncanny feelings, which are, in their turn, amplified by the mutations of the urban environment. In this respect, Auster's novels reveal the trauma generated by the breakdown between word and meaning, the characters gradually realizing that the urban identity is built upon the lack of a stable urban sanctuary but also upon a state of utter dislocation which facilitates the dominance of inner chaos. Auster's protagonists can begin their healing process only when they accept that spatial and temporal fragmentation are inerent to their psychic life.

Chapter IV, *The Metropolis of the Austerian Consciousness*, comprises a transversal analysis of Paul Auster's works: beginning with the metaphysical detective novel, *The New*

York Trilogy, continuing with the apocalyptic perspective on the city in *In the Country of Last Things*, and concluding the chapter with a more optimist approach on the American metropolis in novels such as *Moon Palace* and *Leviathan*. In the city filtered through the Austerian consciousness, the individuals' stability is temporary and inconsistent, conditioned by their ability to adapt to the metropolitan environment: Auster's characters are in a constant process of negotiation between their own representation of the city and the reality of the urban space they live in. What facilitates this negotiation is language; however, in most cases, it becomes an hermetic system which prevents or encumbers communication, resulting in the deterioration of the individual's language as well as his/her identity; the characters suffer from what Mark Brown terms as an aphasic episode: correspondences can no longer be established between things and words. Furthermore, these aphasic symptoms are amplified by the individuals' isolation and solitude and, as the breakdown between word and world becomes even greater, the individual is constrained to represent the complexity and contradictions of the city by using an inadequate code, so that, eventually, the urban experience becomes an ontological uncertainty. Consequently, characters such as Daniel Quinn, Peter Stillman Sr. or Blue conceive New York as a series of illegible spaces which prevent understanding. In *In the Country of Last Things*, Auster introduces the concept of entropic space in order to analyze the extremes of the human experience, but also to illustrate the modalities through which ontological stability is undermined by the mutations occurring within the urban fabric. This novel presents a dystopic perspective of the urban possibilities and explores the individual's ability to survive in the harshest conditions by making use of certain urban strategies such as utopian thinking in creating, organizing and representing the metropolitan space. Of course, Auster manages to provide a more optimistic perspective on the city. In *Moon Palace* and *Leviathan*, I investigate the manner in which the protagonists descend into an abyss of social and linguistic failure, as well as

the urban strategies they use to escape this existential vacuum. The two narratives present the possibility of achieving a fragile metropolitan stability and coherence with the help of friends or lovers. 'The urban rescuers', that are part of networks of artists (writers, dancers, photographers), contribute to the recovery of a social and spiritual balance of the 'fallen individuals', who manage to secure (temporarily) their relationship with language and with their environment. Marco Fogg's, Benjamin Sachs' and Paul Aaron's metropolitan experiences illustrate a sometimes chaotic and paradoxical perspective on metropolitan life, as they only succeed in obtaining a provisional balance; however, a full acknowledgement of their own lives, as well as a coherent adjustment to their urban space prove to be illusory.

Chapter V, *The City through The Camera Lens*, investigates the optimistic vision on the American metropolis in the films *Smoke* and *Blue in the Face*.

In these films, Auster uses the concepts of friendship and community as strategies for relating to others, but also as means of understanding the complexity of the postmodern urban environment. If for Fogg or Quinn, New York is an unstable, illegible space, the film characters profit from a more humane urban experience due to the particular space they find themselves in, namely, Brooklyn. Once more, I highlight the relationship established between the individual and the space he inhabits, as means of acquiring a stable and coherent identity.

This study presented the idea of how Auster's urban poetics can overlay the physical metropolis with the purpose of revitalizing the concept of urban living: his fiction explores the boundaries between the material and the imaginary, going beyond the realistic narratives of urban life and demonstrating how art, literature and storytelling can invest space with illusory and imaginary elements. These practices can provide the metropolis with a dreamlike and even mythical quality which might re-enchant the contemporary experience of the American City, and ultimately merge into a 'poetics of place'.

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