

REVIEW

HUTCHEON, Linda. *Narcissistic Narrative: the metafictional paradox*. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1980.

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Linda Hutcheon is a distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto, Canada. She has been a prominent contributor to the Cultural Studies Field with books like *Narcissistic Narrative: the metafictional paradox* (1980), *A theory of parody: the teachings of twentieth-century art forms* (1985), *A poetics of postmodernism: history, theory, fiction* (1988), *The politics of postmodernism* (1989), *Irony's edge: the theory and politics of irony* (1995), *Opera: desire, disease, death* (1996), and, most recently, *A theory of adaptation* (2006).

Metafiction “is fiction about fiction – that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity” (p. 1). With these words, Hutcheon opens the introduction of *Narcissistic Narrative*, first published in 1980 and “conceived as a defence” (p. 1) of a type of fiction that proliferates everywhere in the sixties. A defence that comes out appropriately due to the negative reviews on the metafictional practice in the early seventies, as a result of the so called “death of the novel”, lamented by some writers and critics of the time. However, Hutcheon’s proposed definition still remains up-to-date, when we have been facing a variety of metafictional works, ranging from ‘purely’ self-reflexive narratives to multifaceted modes of metafiction within a single text. Undoubtedly, this book contains a pioneering systematic study on metafiction and its importance can be testified by the frequency with which it has been quoted in significant researches throughout the world. In fact, whenever metafictional works are investigated, it seems to be a need to turn to *Narcissistic Narrative* for substantial theoretical support.

Though conscious of the many terms used to describe metafictional narratives, some with pejorative bias, Hutcheon suggests a figurative adjective, ‘narcissistic’, to name this kind of fiction, mainly for its descriptive and suggestive character. Indeed, it is an “ironic allegorical reading of the Ovidian Narcissus myth” (p.1), elaborated as an answer to the ‘Ovidian’ mourners of the novel’s death. Hutcheon says that The Narcissus myth was first used by Freud to refer to the “universal original condition” of man. When transposed to the metafictional context, narcissistic narrative “is process made visible” (p. 6); in other words, a process-oriented mode of self-reflexive and auto-representational narrative. It is the sort of narrative that contains its own critical commentary in itself, what determines, according to Hutcheon, the theoretical framework of reference for its investigation. Hutcheon argues that metafiction moves the focus from the reader and the author as individual historical agents to the processes of reception and production of language (1984, p. xiv).

In the introduction, Hutcheon explains her option for an eclectic methodology to cope with the requirements of the metafictional work. Thus, two methods are particularly elected – Saussurian structuralism and Iserian hermeneutics – guided by the two major focuses of metafiction: its linguistic and narrative structure and the role of

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the reader. Hutcheon emphasizes that her main concern is on the literary text and on the consequent implications for the reader (p. 3). She defends that in metafictional narratives the art-life connection is not “severed completely or resolutely denied” (p.3); on the contrary, it is “reforged on the new level – on that of the imaginative process (of storytelling), instead of on that of the product (the story told). And it is the new role of the reader that is the vehicle of this change.” (p. 3).

Diverging from Robert Alter’s proposition in *Partial magic: the novel as a self-conscious genre* (1975), considered the first critical work to focus on the critical implications of metafictional narrative, Hutcheon assumes that the novel has undergone dialectical transformations in literary and ontological terms, but this does not point to a rupture in the novelistic auto-representational mode, supposed to have occurred in the nineteenth century with Realism; instead, the strategy indicates a gradual and continuous evolution of reflexivity within the novel as a genre that culminates in metafiction, for “auto-representation is still representation” (p. 6). She, then, traces a parallel between her allegorical reading of the Narcissus myth and the development of self-consciousness in fiction, considering the parodic novel *Don Quixote*, by Cervantes, as the origin of the self-consciousness novelistic tradition.

Chapter I of the book is named “Modes and forms of narrative narcissism: introduction of a typology”. By analyzing many metafictional texts, Hutcheon observes that some are diegetically self-conscious (conscious of their narrative processes) and others are linguistically self-reflexive (present themselves as language). These two modes are presented in two forms: an overt and a covert form. In the overt form, the text’s self-reflexivity is explicitly thematized or allegorized within the fiction, while in the covert form the self-reflexivity process is “structuralized, internalized or actualized” (p. 23). Each form is, then, subdivided into two different levels, so that the proposed typology is four-folded: a self-conscious diegetically overt form, a linguistically self-reflexive overt form, a self-conscious diegetically covert form, and a linguistically self-reflexive covert form. In the overt mode, the most used techniques in self-conscious diegetically forms are parody, *mise en abyme* and allegorical narratives, while the linguistically self-reflexive forms operate through the creation of an imaginative world by the reader, who shares with the writer codes that are recognizable in the act of reading. On the other hand, the most recurrent structural models in the self-conscious diegetically covert form are the detective stories, fantasy, games, and the erotic; in the linguistically self-reflexive covert form, the narrative structural models are formed by the use of riddles, jokes, puns or anagrams, which “directs the reader’s attention to language itself, to its potential for semantic duplicity” (p. 34).

Because metafiction has serious implications for the theory of the novel as a mimetic genre, Hutcheon revisits the Aristotelian concept of mimesis in order to deal with the characteristics of this fiction and the development of the novelistic genre in literary history. Considering that “[f]or Aristotle, diegesis was part of mimesis” (p. 50), Hutcheon points to a dialectic relation between what she calls ‘mimesis of process’ (the storytelling) and ‘mimesis of product’ (the story told) in the novelistic tradition. As a consequence, the concept of Realism, understood by many as the paradigm of a literary genre, with its period-description nature, is taken simply as “a reductive limitation of novelistic mimesis” (p. 5), since the self-reflexivity practice is a constant in literature and can already be seen in Homer. To Hutcheon, as the concept of the mimesis of process is recurrent in literature, its insertion in the literary history is legitimized, once it denotes the evolution of a mode of representation in art. Thus, after establishing the basis for understanding the implications of metafiction for the theory of the novel as a

mimetic genre, subject of Chapter II, Hutcheon argues that in metafiction there is a parallel between the acts of writing and of reading, which results in a paradox for the reader, from whom the responsibility of freedom is required. In fact, the parallelism between the acts of writing and of reading is axiomatic in all reading as far as the process of meaning production is concerned, but the reader of a metafictional work is caught in a paradoxical position of being co-participant with the writer in making the text mean and, simultaneously, made conscious of the fictionality of the world he is creating imaginatively while reading. As the reader plays an active role, his responsibility rests on the act of decoding during the act of reading. Besides, the reader's freedom "operates inside, of course, the bounds of that internalized grammar or code that genre expectations establish" (p. 30). Hutcheon comes to the conclusion that "metafictions remain mimetic" (p. 47), for they are "still fiction, despite the shift in focus of narration from the product it presents to the process it is" (p. 39).

In Chapter III, the discussion turns to the self-conscious diegetically form of metafictional narratives, stressing the thematization of narrative artifice through parody, allegory, and the *mise en abyme*. According to Hutcheon, both parody and self-reflexive narratives cause an effect on the reader, similar to Brecht's alienation effect, and "[i]n forcing recognition of a literary code, parody seems to be one important means to this paradoxical kind of narcissistic extramural involvement" (p. 49). Moreover, parody brings awareness of literary conventions, because it unveils the form as well as the content of the creative process within the narrative. In reality, what is central to these types of metafictional works is the thematization of the storytelling conventions within the story by means of a parodic narrative structure, as seen in *Tristram Shandy*, by Laurence Sterne, *Lost in the funhouse*, by John Barth and *The French lieutenant's woman*, by John Fowles, for instance. In addition to parody, the *mise en abyme* is pointed out as the most frequent device in the overt mode of metafictional narratives. Hutcheon outlines the importance of Lucien Dällenbach's study on the mirroring *mise en abyme* in his book, *Le récit spéculaire* (1977), in which at least three different kinds of this reflexive device are discussed. Finally, in the literary thematization process, according to Hutcheon, there may occur a point when "the *mise en abyme* becomes so extended *in size* that is better described as a kind of allegory" (p. 56).

For one of the best examples of thematized allegory, Hutcheon introduces in Chapter IV an analysis of the novel *The French Lieutenant's woman* (1968), by John Fowles. The novel is famous for its parody on Victorian literature and its *mise en abyme* structure, where fantasy and imagination as well as present and past are embroidered in constant tension, in such a way that "the reader of this novel is never allowed to abstain from judging and questioning himself by condemning or writing off the novel's world as "just" Victorian (as well as "just" fiction)" (p. 60). The novel explores the creative process of fiction-making, by thematizing the acts of writing and of reading. In reality, the protagonist Sarah stands for the fiction-maker, while Charles is engaged in a process of learning how to 'read' (her), as the reader outside the novel is being instructed on how to read (the novel). Indeed, according to Hutcheon, this is "the most straightforward and the most instructive of the four types" (p. 48). By analyzing the use of parody in the novel, Hutcheon observes that "moral worth is inseparable from action and events" (p. 63) and perceives that "[t]he existential theme of freedom takes shapes in the aesthetic level" (p. 63)", which means that freedom is attained through fiction. About the surprising double endings, Hutcheon notices that both Charles and the reader are manipulated and "controlled within the coherent world of the text" (p. 69), so that

the connection between art and life are by no means broken, but reestablished through self-reflexive devices such as parody, *mise en abyme*, and allegory.

Following the schema drawn from the proposed typology, in Chapter V, Hutcheon moves the focus to the self-conscious diegetically covert form, in which the instructions are incorporated in the text, the act of reading is actualized and the reader is supposed to know the story-making rules. As internalized narrative structures, the most frequent models of this type of metafiction are the detective story, fantasy, games and the erotic. The detective stories are characterized by “the self-consciousness of the form itself, its strong conventions, and the important textual function of the hermeneutic act of reading” (p. 71). The fictiveness of the referents in fantasy is axiomatic, which means that “time and space of such narratives need not correspond to those of the reader’s experience” (p. 76), but the act of reading requires much more than just interpreting the clues and the building-up of an ordered plot. It self-evidently involves “the very act of imagining the world, of giving shape to the referents of the words” (p. 76), that are used in the construction of the text itself. The game structures force the reader into “a free creative activity within self-evolving rules” (p. 82), usually learned rules, in order to effectively actualize the reading, as in the case of *The universal baseball association, Inc. J. Henry Waugh, prop* (1968), by Robert Coover. And, finally, the erotic, also called the sexual metaphor, is related to the idea that “all novels are erotic in another way – they seek to lure, tantalize, seduce the reader into a world other than his own” (p. 86). In this type of self-conscious covert form, both reading and fiction-making are seen as acts of possession, of controlling. In all these narrative devices, the creative processes are on concern, for the act of reading is made into an active act of “constructing the literary universe through the fictive referents of the words” (p. 86).

In Chapter VI, Hutcheon discusses the power and limits of the language of fiction as the instrument of the fictive world, applying mainly Saussurian structuralism and Iserian hermeneutics. First of all, Hutcheon points out that the referents of fiction are all fictive, not real, and assures that these referents gradually accumulate during the act of reading to create a heterocosm, which she defines as “a coherent autonomous whole of forms and content” (p. 42), constructed by the reader from the language, while reading. The fictive linguistic heterocosm has its own motivation, validity and rules, so it has an ontological nature as an independent artifact to be actualized by the reader. Hutcheon explains that the reader is made conscious of the fictiveness of the literary text referents, “once he accepts the fact that what he is reading is an imaginative construct” (p. 94). In this sense, it is relevant to quote that “[i]n fiction the fictive referent and the signified must not be confused, for the former lies *outside* the linguistic sign and in the imagination of the reader” (p. 95). Moreover, Hutcheon classifies the linguistically self-reflexive novel in at least three ways: stylistic parody, static and dynamic awareness of the textual medium, and the thematized word play (puns or anagrams), “which call the reader’s attention to the fertile in creative suggestiveness” (p. 101). In short, though language has the power to make the reader create meaning and imaginary worlds, it has limitations in its inadequacy to convey feelings and simultaneous thoughts, for instance.

In order to exemplify a linguistically self-reflexive overt form, in Chapter VII, Hutcheon chooses an Italian novel named *La macchina mondiale* (1965), by Paolo Volponi, for its explicit thematization of the linguistic identity. The novel parodies “the nature of creativity and the constructing through language of autonomous fictive world” (p. 104). By using a complex *mise en abyme* structure, Volponi creates a self-taught peasant character, called Anteo Crocioni, whose double writing consists of a journal,

which contains quotations of his “treatise on his own mechanical theory of the creation of the world and its implications in the forming of an academy of friendship” (p. 105). Following intuitively Wittgenstein’s concept of the link between language, creation and reality, Anteo understands that language is inherently an ordering autonomous system from which man can apprehend his world and create new worlds. In fact, the narrative of *La macchina mondiale* thematized the aesthetic and social (even moral) functions of language, by showing Anteo’s use of language as a social protest against “the rigid, static *status actualis* of society and its language” (p. 110). Hutcheon states that “[a]s a metafictionist, Volponi prefers to reform from inside conventions, experimenting linguistically and stylistically through parody in a very self-reflexive manner” (p. 110-111). In fact, dealing with what language to use for the creation of a fictive world is bound to “a larger concern for the nature of creativity, a concern shared by most metafiction.” (p. 113). Hutcheon closes the chapter by referring back to William H. Glass’s words on the two-folded contradictory impulses concerned the language of fiction: “the impulse to communicate and so to treat the medium of communication [language] as a means, and the impulse to make an artifact out of the [linguistic] materials of the medium and so to treat the medium as an end” (1989, p. 94).

Chapter VIII investigates the implications of a linguistically self-reflexive covert form for the novel genre. It starts by observing that this type of narrative presents an implicit, actualized process, in which reading and writing require similar active, creative efforts with language, so that “[t]he act of reading words becomes one of structuring fictive worlds” (p. 118). A good example of this self-reflexive narrative is the novel *Ada* (1969), by Vladimir Nabokov, with its immanent linguistic structure imbedded in the text, as seen in the parodic interlanguage play to ridicule the translations into English of the Russian novel *Anna Karenina*. By comparing this metafictional practice with the one used by the *nouveau nouveau roman*, Hutcheon raises questions on the outer limits of the novel as a mimetic genre. Before coming to a plausible answer, she traces a historical and theoretical account on the work developed by the French group involved in the *Tel Quel* journal, with the aim at investigating the implication of this group for a study on the limits of the genre, and compares the *Tel Quel* group with the Italian *Gruppo 63*.

As Hutcheon observes that the reader plays an essential role in the four types of narcissistic narratives, she brings to the fore a brief debate on several theories of reader aesthetics. Recognizing that no critical model is ever complete, Hutcheon selects the Freudian, the phenomenological, and the rhetorical approaches to deal with the paradoxical position of the reader in metafictional work. In addition, Hutcheon affirms that in metafictional work the reader is an element of the narrative that has both a diegetic identity and an active diegetic function. In the overt forms, the reader is taught, while, in the covert forms, “teaching is done by disruption and discontinuity, by disturbing the comfortable habits of the actual act of reading” (p. 139). Moreover, the reader-character identification is usually broken, but the reader consciously bridges “the gap between his own world and the potential fictional universe” (p. 140). As for the writer, besides being pushed into a new social position, from where he has the collaborative work of his reader, his authorial consciousness on the need of co-participation with the reader is increased by phenomenological awareness. Since metafiction incorporates its own critical reference as part of its theme and often its form, the critic “is freed from the restrictions of any single methodology” (p. 152). By the end of this chapter (IX), Hutcheon argues that the self-reflexive narrative has a

composite identity with “the amalgamation of the functions of reader, writer, critic in the single and demanding experience of reading” (p. 152).

In her Conclusion and speculations, Hutcheon reassures the aim of her critical work: “to investigate the modes, forms, and techniques of narrative narcissism” and “to study the implications of these formal observations both for the theory of the novel as a representational genre and also for the theory of the interpretative and creative functions of the act of reading” (p. 155). As for the defence confessed at the beginning of the book, the answer comes through comments on the novels by two Montreal writers, Hubert Aquin and Leonard Cohen, whose political engagement is reflected in their narcissistic novels, written “as incitement to revolutionary activity” (p. 155), thus proving that claims on introversion art or on the death of the novel are no longer acceptable. Based on the metafictional texts themselves, Hutcheon’s investigation makes it possible to look closely on this literary phenomenon to come to the conclusion that “[t]he problems raised by these works were then brought to bear on existing theories (both of the novel and of reading), not to provide a survey of modern criticism, but to investigate the changes in *theory* which the *practice* of fiction itself suggest, if not demands” (p. 155).

Undeniably, a strong structuralistic influence can be noticed in Hutcheon’s typology, proper to the time it was formulated. However, the most relevant aspect in her study is the discussion on the parodic intertextuality that characterizes the metafictional text even today and that installs the ontological and epistemological debate between fiction and reality as well as past and present, stressing somehow the intersection zone where different discourses meet under tension. The understanding of a parodic nature as a paradigm for the self-reflexive narrative is a key-point in Hutcheon’s argument, since it sets the foundation of a theoretical support for this self-reflexive novelistic tradition, though Hutcheon herself confesses she had no intention of proposing a theory of metafiction. In addition, metafiction takes many different forms and, as any aesthetic phenomenon, it is in constant mutation. Unlike the metafictional practice of the sixties, the contemporary metafictional works do not show the radical rejection of the realistic literature. On the contrary, metafiction today tends to embody old conventions and rework them to re-evaluate and renew literary art in a parodic way that is ironical, but serious, and even respectful of the text parodied. In fact, the seeds of such a contemporary discussion are found in *Narcissistic Narrative*. Undoubtedly, *Narcissistic Narrative* brings a valuable contribution to the study of contemporary literature, as a stimulating guide into the complexities of narcissistic or metafictional narratives.

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